Identity, Agency, and Uncertainty: Exploring Dynamic Mobile Gaming Practices within the Regulatory Context of China

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I confirm that the work submitted is my own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Executive Summary

Identity, Agency, and Uncertainty: Exploring Dynamic Mobile Gaming Practices within the Regulatory Context of China explores the unique mobile game *Onmyoji* using mixed and digital methods. The project makes a number of significant contributions to knowledge with regard to methods and approach, which have further implications for game studies as a disciplinary field. These are detailed below.

1. My research clearly advocates for mixed methods approaches when researching gaming, not only to best represent the complexity of gaming in its many contexts but also to foster iteration and reflexivity for both gamers and the researcher. I adopted four distinct yet interwoven methods in this project: Formal Analysis provided a structured framework to dissect the game mechanics and narrative; Digital Diaries offered an intimate view of gamers' ongoing experiences and reflections; In-depth Interviews facilitated nuanced exploration of gamers' perspectives and deeper meanings; and Discourse Analysis scrutinized the language and symbols within the game design and community, revealing underlying themes and ideologies. Together, these methods functioned as a cohesive ensemble, with each complementing the others to examine the complexity of gaming phenomena. More importantly, these methods served not only as tools for data acquisition and analysis but were also integral to the project, interacting dynamically with the research themes and the specific context, and stimulating ongoing reflection throughout the research journey.

2. The mobile game *Onmyoji* stands out for several reasons: It is a popular game in China but represents Japanese culture through narrative and visual aesthetics. Played by Chinese gamers within a specific regulatory framework, the game encompasses many derivative elements which are in person and online, including fan fiction and fan cultures that sometimes

shape the Onmyoji franchise. Onmyoji is a terrain through which transnational culture communication, transmedia narrative, media regulation, identity, agency, power, uncertainty, pleasure (to name a few) can be complexly studied. At the same time, the arguments derived from this project are applicable to broader media studies, particularly in relation to the diverse and intricate meanings and pleasure interaction and engagement offers.

3. The three themes of identity, agency and uncertainty that structure the thesis are umbrella concepts under which a myriad of complex issues are located. Of these three themes, uncertainty is the most prevalent, feeding into the game design and functions as well as gamers' experiences. Uncertainty also framed the research methods, particularly the WeChat mini-programme, which I designed and built in negotiation with Tencent and the wider regulatory powers in China. This method was exploratory and uncertain, and the richness of it is perhaps also connected to its own uncertainty. As a central theme, then, uncertainty seems closest to gamers and my own experiences, as well as the game dynamics and interactions. As a result, I argue that uncertainty should be much more prevalent in games (or any) research.

4. Finally, I argue that context is the most important framework for understanding gaming culture and that this is under explored within contemporary game studies. Context emerges as the central framework for this project, inextricably intertwined with every theme. It significantly influences the game design and gamers' experiences and, from a methodological standpoint, shapes the research design and affects participants' expressions. This insight contributes to future game studies by emphasizing the importance of considering the context—whether cultural or political—in which games and gamers are situated.

Abstract

This project examines the mobile game *Onmyoji* and gamers' practices within the media regulatory context of China. It explores the values and qualities expressed by gamers and relates to issues of processes of identity construction and identification, agency negotiation, and the concept of uncertainty, which underpins gameplay, transmedia gaming, and broader socio-cultural contexts of this project. This project employs Formal Analysis, Digital Diaries, In-depth Interviews, and Discourse Analysis to complement each other. It formally analyses the narrative structure, character representation, and sources of uncertainty within *Onmyoji* as a game system and then contrasts these with gamers' comments from digital diaries via a custom WeChat mini-programme. Individual diary-related interviews add depth to these diary entries. These methods maintain constantly iterative in operation to respond to changing research dynamics. My study draws upon narrative identity and identification theory (e.g. Hall,1989, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Shaw, 2013, 2015) to examine how gamers constructed and expressed identities and how these resonated with characters and narratives in the game. Gamer-game agency negotiation discussed by Malaby (2007), Davis (2012), and Muriel and Crawford (2020) also underpin my exploration of how gamers exercise their agency and interact with the game system within regulated contexts. Finally, arguments around uncertainty by Costikyan (2013), Power et al. (2019), and Kumari et al. (2019) facilitate the investigation of gamers' attitudes and strategies toward uncertainty in gaming and how uncertainty affected their discourse practices. Building on empirical research, I ultimately argue that video games should be understood as an important cultural form in which gamers actively engage with and influence the in-game value systems; in which un/conscious power relations are lived; and through which uncertainty is always being felt at an embodied level, negotiated at a discursive level, and lived at a political level.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The Game Matters

This project began in 2018. It was in that same year's Autumn that I stepped into a fantastical world that had previously only appeared on my phone screen. As a dedicated gamer of the mobile game *Onmyoji*, I had always held deep emotions for the characters and stories within the game. However, it wasn't until I had the opportunity to participate in the offline carnival of *Onmyoji* that I truly realized, as gaming scholars such as Newman (2008, p.24; 2013, p.25), Taylor (2006, p.20) and Ash (2015, p.122) have long argued, the world constructed by this game was not confined to the virtual space alone. It ingeniously intertwined reality and virtuality. This experience held significant meaning, laying the foundation for my subsequent research.

The mobile game *Onmyoji*, produced by the Chinese game company NetEase, has become globally acclaimed (Minotti, 2017; Zhayne, 2018). What is significant for my project is that it blends Japanese traditional Yokai/monsters and fantasy elements within a Chinese gaming culture, highlighting interesting issues around identification and gaming culture per se. In the game, gamers assume the role of 'onmyojis', a profession in ancient Japan, engaging in battles, collection, and nurturing of various mystical monsters to build their teams. The game has gained widespread recognition for its visuals, storyline, and strategically intense turn-based combat (Minotti, 2017; Zhayne, 2018). It is also a mobile game, played in guilds, with demands or expectations on time and commitment. This for me also asks critical issues around the everydayness of gaming and the creep of the gaming worlds into onsite worlds. The gamers participating in my project point not only to the game aesthetics

and storylines (see Chapter 4) as motivations for play, but also to the levels of social interaction, which as they tell me offer them rich and immersive multiplayer gameplay through alliance systems, combat competitions, and diverse events (see Chapter 5).

Withing gaming literature, *Onmyoji* stands out for its distinctive gameplay, rich cultural background, and diverse monsters' universe (Noh, 2020, p.862; Wang and Hao, 2022, p.491). As of September 2022, the game's global downloads exceeded 200 million (Gasca, 2022), attesting to its popularity. Within the game, character deign and storyline have consistently been focal points for the development team (Jiemian News, 2020), offering gamers layers of identification in terms of both characters and narrative (see Chapter 4). *Onmyoji* also extends to derivative works such as animations, novels, comics, musicals, music radio and online fan cultures (e.g. NGA, NetEase Game Master, Onmyoji Wiki and so on), where the game's universe and character journeys are extended through more direct interaction from the gamer and fan communities (see Chapter 4). As my project details, these collaborative creations add significant depth to the game, blurring the edges of professional and fan productions and positioning *Onmyoji* very much within playbour culture (Kuchlich, 2005; Ferrer-Conill, 2018, pp.197-199; Foxman, 2022, p.228). *Onmyoji* highlights many issues in relation to the blurred edges of what constitutes a game (see for example Newman, 2008, p.71; Thornham, 2008, p.131), resonating gaming research that argues for a wider understanding of gaming practices in the constitution of gameplay (Atkins, 2003, pp.43-44; Juul, 2010a, p.78; Juul, 2010b, p.265). The long running productions and merging of both Gamer-Generated Content (PGC) and User-Generated Content (UGC) make the game world colourful and enriched, strengthening the emotional bond between gamers and the game world (see Chapter 4 and 5). As the gamers involved in this project argue, this has been one of the key factors contributing to *Onmyoji*'s sustained popularity over the years. Indeed, as one

participant noted, ‘there is much more to *Onmyoji* than is presented in the game’ (Participant 4). Therefore, in this project, my focus of interest extends not only on *Onmyoji* itself but also on its transmedia franchise.

The carnival event held in Shanghai, China, in 2018 brought together gamers from various provinces and cities across China (Bai, 2018). For me, this was a rare opportunity that not only allowed me to engage in face-to-face interactions with other gamers but also to recognise genuine and unique gamer identities. To a certain extent this was performative; prior to entering the main venue, for example, the staff referred to all participants as ‘Seme’ (in Chinese, ‘大人’, just like gamers are called in the game) and distributed a set of yukata, masks, and prop jades (prop of the in-game currency). Similarly, the venue’s setup recreated the courtyard from the game, including taverns, snack stalls, and various game tasks awaiting gamers’ completion. Some of the tasks were synchronized in real-time with the tasks in gamers’ mobile game. Within the venue, professionals/cosers portraying game characters roamed around, bringing the game’s world into reality (Newman, 2008, p.88; Lamerichs, 2011; Rahman et al., p.334; Nichols, 2019, p.271).

Although these elements were constructed and performative, visiting gamers cheered or screamed with delight upon contact with the cosers, demonstrating affective and emotional impact (see Clough, 2008, p.8) that demonstrated tangible identification and pleasure. Gamers who were previously strangers, came together under this shared interest, sharing discourse, knowledge, and conversation, creating shared communities of interest (Fischer, 2001, p.4) while talking about character lists and levels within the game. I witnessed many exchanges of social media IDs, expressing the desire to stay connected. Standing amidst this crowd of individuals who shared my emotional connection to the game, I gradually realized, as scholars like Shaw (2013, pp.14-15), De

Grove et al. (2015, p.347), and Grooten and Kowert (2015, p.73) have discussed, that the gamer identity is also increasingly an integral part of emotions, behaviours, and social connections, constructed within a specific context (Kaye et al., 2017, p.221). This construction of identity not only reflects inner emotions but also forms a closely-knit community through resonance and understanding with the game world.

At the carnival, I witnessed how gamers, through their personal choices and actions, created an experience intricately intertwined with the game world. This was a unique sensation that blended with the game. For instance, just like in the mobile game, gamers showcased their gaming skills and strategies in various challenges and engaged in creative interactions to demonstrate their understanding and interpretation of the game's content. As Brock and Johnson (2022, p.602) argue, gamers are not simply game consumers: they are creators and active participants. This form of gamers' subjectivity is widely discussed in the field of game studies and is considered a key embodiment of the agency gamers possess (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.58; Anderson, 2018, p.12; Anderson, 2019, p.78; Stang, 2019; Lassila, 2022, p.142).

Throughout this event I was also clearly aware that the structure, aesthetics, and activities of *Onmyoji* was actively shaping the events during the carnival, which were reproduced in keeping with the principles of the game. During the carnival, the game's development team orchestrated developer symposiums and game design sharing sessions. In these interactive events, developers shared their game world concepts and dropped hints about upcoming new characters, piquing the interest of attending gamers in unravelling these mysteries. This interaction between developers and gamers highlights the presence of what I discuss in Chapter 5 as the game's 'agency' and elucidates how gamers are invited – in carefully orchestrated ways - to engage with the intentions and designs of the game developers. In many ways, this extends

the ludology of the game (Huizinga, 1950, p.9; Frasca, 2013, pp.229-230) beyond the gameplay and into a wider lived experience. Indeed, the interaction between the gaming system and gamers have long been discussed as a pivotal facet of the gaming experience (Charles, 2009, p. 289; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009, p.3; Harrell and Zhu, 2009, p.45), but through my firsthand encounter at the carnival, I gradually comprehended that gamer agency and game agency are not isolated entities; rather, they mutually influence and evolve through their interaction, collectively shaping a multifaceted and dynamic gaming ecosystem.

Participating in the carnival also directed me to think about the third major theme of this thesis: that of uncertainty (see Chapter 6). Throughout the carnival, gamers engaged in animated discussions regarding the in-game characters and items. Discussions spanned topics such as the unpredictability and difficulty associated with obtaining rare in-game characters or items, or the admiration directed towards fellow gamers who possessed distinct characters or items. What became clear from these observations during the carnival was the close relationship between pleasure and uncertainty, as gamers clearly enjoyed speculating on future game elements and comparing different experiences of the game world in ways that drew on deep knowledge and immersion. As gaming scholars have discussed, uncertainty shapes gamers' gaming encounters in terms of not knowing what will happen next, and this has often been discussed in relation to a pleasurable suspense and heightened expectation (Murray, 1998, pp.132-134; Caillois, 2001, p.173; Malaby, 2007, pp.107-109; Juul, 2010b, p.258; Moshirnia, 2018, p.87). But what was clear from the carnival, was that these uncertainties were also grounds for emotional social exchanges and interactions in which deep knowledge could be expressed (Hodkinson, 2007, p.3; Kaye and Pennington, 2018, pp.3-4; Woods, 2022, p.828). Moreover, my own conversations with gamers during the carnival demonstrated that despite our mutual gaming interests and shared knowledge

and experiences, the connection between us was also full of unknowns. This echoes Taylor's (2006, p.9) observations of her encounters in offline gaming activities, where she argued that both the face-to-face social interactions and online gaming interactions continually forged fresh connections that, in turn, reshape the game (ibid., p.43). The experience of forming new friendships, encountering unforeseen interactions, and navigating the intricate flux of identities all significantly heightened my awareness of the pivotal role that uncertainty plays in the realm of gaming practice.

Furthermore, the carnival event served as a poignant reminder that uncertainty also relates to the wider social, economic, and political context in which the game is continually positioned. For example, a poignant memory from the carnival relates to the way gamers engaged with the Japanese voice actress Park Romi in terms of the intense excitement and emotions it stirred. But two years later (in 2020), I discovered that this same, once adored, voice actress, had been barred by the production team due to national political reasons (Xiaojianjian Anime, 2021). This is not an isolated incident: several other Japanese voice actors (e.g., Ai Kayano, Toshiki Masuda, Okiayu Ryoutarou) have also been prohibited from participating in the game (Erbing Games, 2018; Liang, 2021). This incident highlighted the importance of external (political, economic, legislative) factors, which I discuss in Chapter 5 and 6 in relation to the concept on uncertainty. It should also be noted here of course that the extensive and enduring impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, has given a new socio-political context for the notion of uncertainty too. The carnival for example was an annually anticipated social event for *Onmyoji* gamers, which stopped in 2019 and has not continued.

This experience deeply impressed upon me that even the most meticulously planned endeavours can be shattered by unforeseen factors. It provoked reflection on the extent to which our orchestrated arrangements and

anticipations lie within our control and how much they are susceptible to external influences. Whether in recreational pursuits or daily life, unpredictability is infused with a host of unknown variables. These observations underscore (as discussed in Chapter 5 and 6) that gaming, as a social phenomenon, is extensively and diversely shaped, with the impact of uncertainty stemming from political, cultural, and social contexts being an undeniable and pivotal element. With this in mind, the following section elucidates the media regulatory context of *Onmyoji*, which of course is a further layer to both the wider gaming experience of *Onmyoji*, and overlaps significantly with the notion of uncertainty not least because of the enforced changes that have reshaped the game over periods of legislation.

Context Matters

Developed by a Chinese gaming company, the mobile game *Onmyoji* is uniquely positioned, with its storyline set in Japan's Heian period. It intricately intertwines traditional Japanese monsters and fantasy elements to build an exclusive gaming universe for gamers. The narrative revolves around Abe no Seimei, an onmyoji navigating the boundaries between the mortal realm and the spirit world, striving to maintain equilibrium and tranquillity in both domains (Minotti, 2017). Drawing from Japanese mythologies, the game features an array of characters and is complemented by the contribution of distinguished Japanese voice actors for the Japanese dubbing, thereby represents Japan's ancient Yokai culture (ERCYFB, 2016). We could discuss these amalgamations as indicative of the game company's inclusive approach towards multiculturalism, which resonate remarkably with a considerable cohort of Chinese gamers represented by my participants who are captivated by this transnational culture. At the same time, the existence of this distinct gaming world within the context of Chinese cultural politics and internet and media regulation policies, is worth commenting on in some depth not least

because the manner in which popular game content navigates and coexists in this context is a critical issue.

In China, media and entertainment content censorship and regulation have consistently stood as crucial concerns (discussed in more depth on page 210 of Chapter 5). Video games, as a form of entertainment, have also faced stringent oversight. In the early 1980s, video games were questioned in China due to their high interactivity and immersive nature. In the public discourse, there is often a prevailing notion that the value system of young people remains in flux, leading to concerns that they may excessively rely on digital games (Cao and Downing, 2008, p.518; Zhang, 2013). This perception aligns with David Buckingham (2007, p.75)'s observation that 'the internet, computer games and mobile communication technologies are often seen to present unique opportunities-and indeed dangers-for the young'. As Buckingham argues, it is widely perceived within policy and popular media that these new media consumptions 'give children access to things which used to be kept hidden from them, and which they really ought not to know' (ibid., p.86). This often feeds into forms of 'moral panic' which as Martin Barker (1984, p.38; 2001, p.29) long argued, can be cyclically traced throughout contemporary culture. It is worth highlighting here that these characterizations of youth often become entangled in media effects arguments proposing that video games wield a deeper and potentially affective and detrimental influence (Thornton, 1994, p.182; Crowe and Bradford, 2007, p.217; Hodkinson, 2007, p.4). The Chinese government has increasingly linked the development of the gaming industry to the country's political, social and cultural issues, and has taken a tough stance in its regulation. In 2004, the government issued a new policy to control the online game industry, banning the broadcasting of online game programmes in radio and television, and increasing propaganda in corresponding programmes to promote the negative effects of online games on minors (Chinalawedu, 2004). Subsequently, the Chinese government

issued a series of regulations on software production from 2007 to 2010, such as the supervision of parents on online games for minors (under the age of 18), and the participation of minors in health consultation on online games (Fung, 2014, p.57). In May 2009, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology issued a notice requiring computers manufactured in China to be pre-installed with Internet filtering software called Green Dam, which blocks pornography, filters 'bad' websites, controls the time spent online, and checks Internet records (Hu, 2009, p.66). This move, argues Fung (2014, p.58), reveals the country's real motive: to tighten its grip on the industry to prevent any dissent from mainstream values from permeating it. It can be seen from the series of regulatory actions of the government that the government has the power to influence people's behaviours.

These extensive legislative changes have implications for *Onmyoji* and this project. Firstly, they serve as a reminder that games of this nature operate within a socio-political context. The active involvement of the government in the gaming industry indicates that games are no longer isolated forms of entertainment but have integrated into broader societal and cultural agendas. This suggests that games, beyond being a source of amusement, also carry a wider set of social and cultural values that can influence gamers' gaming experiences, including experiences of uncertainty. Secondly, the regulatory measures implemented by the Chinese government underscore the idea that external factors can significantly impact gamers' gaming experiences. These regulations have the potential to alter the game's content, accessibility, and social dynamics, as well as how gamers construct their identities and exercise agency during gaming. These changes further affect gamers' overall experiences of uncertainty, as they must adapt to new rules and conditions.

Content censorship has always been an important part of online media regulation in China (Fung, 2014, p.57). According to the official statement, any

game that contains content that threatens national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, national honour; that disturbs social order and violates the legitimate rights of others will be banned (Ahmad, 2017). In 2016, The China Netcasting Services Association issued a policy requiring content on Internet platforms to adhere to ‘correct political, value and aesthetic standards’. Abnormal sexual content, including homosexuality, was required to be removed (Yang, 2016). After the regulation was issued, the content of films, TV dramas, cartoons and games began to be ‘cleaned up’, but also Weibo, one of China’s largest social networking sites, began to ‘clean up’ related content in response to the regulation. Content that was subsequently removed included graphic and short videos that promote blood and violence, gay themes, illegal games with violent content (e.g., Grand Theft Auto, Mafia, Mercenaries) and related GIFs and short videos (Filmmaker, 2018).

Audiences tried to circumvent the censorship rules by adopting multiple accounts and using multiple aliases, but soon the government demanded that all online gaming accounts be registered with real names and ID numbers (Jenkins, 2006a). Later, the rules extend online platforms for real-name registration to online forums and social media software. Internet service providers are required to delete, keep records, and report inappropriate comments to the government (Chin, 2015). This responds to the earlier requirement proposed by the Ministry of Culture, where Internet companies should establish a self-regulation system and be responsible for self-regulation and management of the content and activities of Internet cultural products. In this way, China adopts a regulatory model dominated by government regulation and assisted by enterprise self-regulation (Zhang, 2012, p.340). These contexts are important to note for my project not only because they shape the wider context of gaming to which my participants speak (Chapters 4 and 5), but these contexts also frame my methods as I go on to explore when I designed and released a WeChat mini-programme, which went through

rigorous moderation processes ultimately shaping my findings (see Chapter 3).

This context resonates Foucault's (1995, p.27) argument that, 'power produces knowledge'. Foucault's point is that governments can strengthen control over individuals and groups by manipulating the creation and dissemination of information. This control can influence people to operate in ways that align with the government's intentions, ultimately consolidating political authority and unifying societal values (ibid., p.138). Therefore, Foucault argues that power can 'produce subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies' (ibid.). For my project, this implies that government regulation and control over game content are not merely surface interventions; they reflect the government's efforts to shape gamers' identities and behaviours by manipulating information content and flow. In this process, the government seeks to incorporate gamers into its predetermined social and cultural categories through the formulation and enforcement of regulations, guidance of media content, and control of information dissemination. This is not just about regulating media or games; it is about shaping individual and collective behaviours and identity formation in a specific social context. In this context, government intervention shapes gamers' gaming experiences. Content censorship and filtering may restrict gamers' creative expression, increase uncertainty in games, and alter the social nature of gaming. This is crucial for my project because these measures impact how gamers establish their identities, negotiate and exercise agency in gaming, and even increase the uncertainty felt from power dynamics during gameplay.

The self-regulation of Internet companies is a more subtle control method alongside the disclosed control strategy, which is not known but is more effective (Weber and Jia, 2007, p.786). In order to make their games pass the censor successfully, game companies strive to make the content of games conform to the requirements of policies and meet the expectations of the

country in the early stage of production. For example, *Onmyoji* launched a charity campaign to save stray animals for three consecutive years, calling on gamers to donate money through the game. In addition, it organizes rescue vehicles offline to provide stray animals with health examination, diagnosis, treatment, and other services (Youth.cn, 2017). The move also awarded *Onmyoji* the recognition of the Chinese government and was awarded as one of the 'Top Ten Popular Online Games in 2018 of China' by the government and becomes the standing model digital game (9Game, 2018). The reason for the award is that *Onmyoji* shows a high sense of social responsibility and guides gamers from the virtual world to the real world through a series of public welfare activities (ibid.). In fact, this is not the first time *Onmyoji* has tried to respond to the realities of political and cultural life. In 2018, NetEase Games announced that *Onmyoji* would partner with P&G group and that Yuki Onna, a character in the game, would serve as P&G's brand ambassador, using AR technology to cheer on athletes at the Winter Olympics (China.com, 2018).

The proactive response of *Onmyoji* to political and cultural realities not only represents a strategic adaptation by the gaming company to the prevailing context but is also influenced by the government's guidance in shaping the direction of the gaming industry. This situation further extends to my project topic. In *Onmyoji*, gamers are not merely users of the game but also integral participants in social and cultural events. The extension of agency allows gamers to establish more complex interactive relationships between the gaming and real-world contexts. Also, the gaming company's self-regulation measures continually respond to changes in government regulatory policies, introducing an element of uncertainty into the gamer experience. Gamers must not only adapt to the game world but also understand and acclimate to the new rules and conditions imposed by everyday life discourses. The evident impact of policy context in this process provides an intriguing perspective for my project, exploring how power dynamics among the government, gaming

companies, and gamers shape and influence the experiences and behaviours of gamers within the game.

Internet and media regulation in China has created a particular environment that places the Party's political interests overtly above those of game developers. Such political influence indirectly creates a preference for specific types of games (Chung and Fung, 2013, p.241). For example, the government has encouraged game companies to put 'healthy' commercial games on the market and announced plans to develop patriotic games related to Chinese history in the future (Jenkins, 2006a; Wang et al., 2016). In the face of major social or political events on the national agenda, all entertainment should be stopped at any time. For example, in order to express deep condolences to the martyrs who lost their lives fighting with COVID-19, the State Council of China issued a notice, deciding to hold national mourning on 4 April 2020, and to suspend public recreational activities across the country. Game companies like NetEase Games and Tencent also suspended their services on that day.

The Chinese government's efforts to regulate video games and make them part of its national culture have highlighted the close connections between politics/legislation and experience/leisure insofar as these manoeuvres remind us that media interactions area always-already shaped (overtly and covertly) by and through political and economic factors that filter through to our everyday engagements. It is the overt involvement of politics in popular culture that marks China as unique (Ernkvist and Ström, 2008, pp.106-107). Despite the rapid development of China's online game industry, conflicts between politics and economics have been exposed accordingly. The government supports the development of Chinese game companies, but the restriction imposed by the government limits the innovation and diversity of games, and gamers seem to constantly be questioning and resisting the control mechanism (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the contradiction between the top-down media regulation trying

to control the ideological and cultural aesthetics and audiences' questioning and resistance to the control raises ongoing questions around identity, agency, and uncertainty which emerge throughout this thesis.

Taken together then, *Onmyoji* should not just be understood as a popular mobile game through which insights around pleasure and agency can be studied. *Onmyoji* is a complex multi- and hyper-media environment that extends beyond the game and therefore also offers insights around time, leisure, identity and the social. At the same time, *Onmyoji* is shaped by overt legislative and economic imperatives in which both game developers and gamers are positioned and negotiate in a myriad of ways. In studying *Onmyoji*, then, my objective is to provide perspectives to the domain of game studies and a more profound comprehension of gamers' gaming experiences embedded in these distinct cultural contexts.

Research Questions and Objects

Onmyoji serves as a multi-faceted subject for study. It encompasses a spectrum of significant themes, including identity construction, the dynamic interaction between gamers and games, and the reverberations of uncertainty within the gaming experience. Studying *Onmyoji* enables explorations into gamers' identities in gaming—how they construct game identities and how these digital personas exert everyday life influence; how gamers negotiate and engage with game developers within the confines of game rules and design. This transcends mere gaming actions and delves into complex interactive processes involving social engagement and power dynamics. Studying *Onmyoji* also directs us to think more about themes such as uncertainty, which is threaded within the gaming process and contextualises gamers' encounters, decision-making, and behaviours. Uncertainty is inherent in the gaming sphere, echoing everyday situations and connecting gaming to wider unpredict abilities

of legislative, economic, and political contexts.

Based on the exploration of *Onmyoji* and its gamers, my aim is to delve deeper into the motivations of gamers' engagement and the unique characteristics they exhibit within their gaming practices. I intend to approach this through three key perspectives: gamer identity, agency negotiation, and uncertainty. To achieve this goal, I formulated specific research questions that present more critical exploratory viewpoints. First and foremost, the primary question I am addressing is: **What do gamers' self-expressions tell us about what they value and promote in relation to their own gaming identities?** This question serves as the starting point of my project. I use this question as a guiding force to investigate how gamers choose to express themselves within the gaming environment. My aim here is to explore how gamers express themselves as gamers, in order to reveal the values they articulate, and the qualities they admire. This in turn offers insight into wider ideological negotiations and subjectivities that in turn speak to the unique context of Chinese gaming.

Secondly, my investigation is guided by my second research question: **How do gamers negotiate and balance power relationships within their interactions with the video game?** Approaching this with a critical lens, I scrutinized how gamers explain their gaming interactions and how they negotiate these interactions within the confines of game rules and design frameworks to realize their expectations for the game within gameplay itself. This agency negotiation effectively unveils the power dynamics within the diegetic gaming world, offering an opportunity for me to deepen the understanding of gamer autonomy within gameplay and comparably, the sociability of games. Analysing agency negotiation enables me to argue along with scholars such as Newman (2013, p.65), Juul (2005, p.17) and Taylor (2006, p.95), that games are not isolated forms of entertainment; rather, they

encompass intricate cultural dynamics, social relationships, and political factors. The way gamers interact within the game with developers mirrors power struggles and cooperation mechanisms prevalent in societal discourse. This introduces a more critical perspective to the field of game studies, unveiling how gamers seek autonomy within power relationships and shape the sociable essence of gaming experiences through interactions.

The third research question I pose is: **How important is uncertainty in game design and play? To what extent does thinking of games in relation to uncertainty help us understand the motivational and pleasurable aspects of gaming?** This question not only involves an analysis of gaming experiences but also prompts a reflection on how humans in the digital age approach uncertainty in emotions and behaviours. Uncertainty in economics, politics, and other domains impacts both individuals and societies (Malaby, 2007, p.107). Hence, I adopted a more critical perspective to deepen the comprehension of uncertainty's broader implications in both gaming and life. I delved into the emotional and behavioural patterns that humans adopt in the face of uncertainty and how they strive for emotional fulfilment and self-realization within these uncertain contexts.

Although my project focuses on the game *Onmyoji*, it extends beyond the scope of a single game, serving as a reflection on the multifaceted relationship between games and reality. Through a thorough examination of these research questions, I introduce fresh perspectives and insights to the field of game studies. Mobile games, as digital entertainment, have significantly influenced human social life (Pink et al., 2018, p.28). However, delving deeper into the intricate interactions between gamers and games provides a more comprehensive understanding, enabling us to grasp human behaviours and emotions more holistically in the intertwined digital and real environments of the digital age.

The Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured into 7 chapters, with each chapter playing a specific role throughout the research, collectively constructing an understanding of gaming practices from the key perspectives of gamer identity and identification, agency negotiation, and uncertainty.

Chapter 2 contextualises this project in relation to the wider context and history of the game itself and the influence of Japanese culture in China before engaging with wider literature on identity, agency negotiation, and uncertainty, that specifically speak to the themes of this project. Chapter 3 introduces my project methods and explains their importance in addressing the research questions. Chapter 4, 5 and 6 each explore one of the research questions discussed above. In these chapters, I provide a detailed presentation of the collected data, conduct in-depth analyses, and present my research findings. I delve into how gamers construct their identity identification within games, how their agency negotiation with game developers influences gaming experiences, and how uncertainty triggers emotional and behavioural changes within games. Chapter 7 reflects on the entire research process. It summarizes the research findings and discusses the journey of the entire thesis as a research endeavour. I address the challenges faced, accomplishments achieved, and the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology. This chapter presents my growth and learning throughout the research and offers insights into future research directions to the readers.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

In what follows, I firstly offer a wider context of *Onmyoji* as a Chinese game with Japanese characters and stories before discussing the specific literature to contextualise the central themes of the project. It is important to understand the uniqueness of this game because it unveils the close connection between Japanese and Chinese cultures, helping us to understand at the outset why video games like *Onmyoji* evoke such strong interest and resonance among young gamers in China.

Three Wider Contexts of *Onmyoji*

The Communication of Japanese Yokai Culture in China

Despite being developed by the Chinese game company NetEase, *Onmyoji* is set against the backdrop of Japan's Heian period, revolving around the famous Japanese onmyoji (an ancient profession), Abe no Seimei, and Japanese monsters who are in turn, based on historical and folk legends. This kind of cultural convergence is considered a significant feature of the game as it reinterprets and represents Japan's ancient Yokai culture (Qian, 2016, p.36). Indeed, there is a high appeal for Japanese cultural knowledge in China as indicated through the 2018 survey of 122 *Onmyoji* gamers across China, which revealed that over 80% of respondents expressed a desire to know more about Japanese Yokai culture through modern media (Xu et al., 2018, p.53).

Yokai is typically explained in Japanese folklore as 'a supernatural entity' (Ryūhei, 2021, p.322), existing within 'a realm of narrative in which laws of nature are challenged', becoming a source of material for many popular culture narratives in both Western and Eastern cultures (Foster, 2015, p.8). Li (2009) and Chen (2012) link Japanese Yokai culture closely to Japan's unique natural

environment. They argue that frequent natural disasters, such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis, pose threats to lives and evoke a fear of nature. Consequently, as they argue, Yokai are classified as phenomena beyond the scope of human knowledge or entities causing these phenomena through supernatural abilities (Li, 2009, p.164; Chen, 2012, p.172). Chen (2012, p.173) also points out that, despite being labelled as 'Yokai', ancient Japanese people regarded them as 'deities relegated to the mortal realm', thus becoming objects of worship and reverence for local residents. However, with changing times, Yokai culture gradually evolved into a leisure culture, continuing to be updated and developed with more interesting, cute, beautiful, or kind images in anime and other audiovisual works. Ji and Seo (2017, p.1654) suggest that this might be why contemporary individuals are fond of Yokai. Yet, as Chen (2012, p.173) suggests, the unchanging aspect of Japanese Yokai culture is its conveyed spiritual essence – the Japanese reverence for nature and lives (also observed in Yan and Li, 2016, p.121).

Before *Onmyoji* emerged, Japanese Yokai culture was already present in China through various mediums such as films, television, books, and games. Examples include animated works like *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*, literary work like *Hyakki Yakoushou*, as well as video game like *Yokai Hyakkitan*. These works once sparked enthusiasm among the young Chinese population for Japanese Yokai culture (Wu, 2012, p.113-140). The introduction of these cultural elements not only enriched the cultural experiences of the young Chinese but also perhaps laid the cultural foundation for the subsequent success of video games like *Onmyoji* in the Chinese market.

The widespread dissemination of Japanese Yokai culture in China has also been accompanied by critical discussion among Chinese scholars, many of whom believe conversely that it is Chinese culture that has played a crucial role in shaping Japanese Yokai culture (and not vice versa). For instance, Wu

and Yu (2020, p.223) emphasize the records in the Chinese ancient book *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* (in Chinese, '山海经'), which includes detailed descriptions of over 400 monsters related to ancient Chinese mythology, geography, flora, fauna, folklore, and more. Wu and Yu (ibid.) argue that during the Heian period in Japan (which corresponded with China's Tang Dynasty), numerous Japanese envoys visited China to study its culture, facilitating frequent exchanges between the two countries. Qin and Hu (2013, p.77) suggest that the images of Chinese monsters described in *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* were disseminated to Japan, gradually becoming known and accepted by the Japanese people. In fact, according to their research, about seventy percent of the Yokai legends circulating in Japan can be traced back to China (ibid.). This argument is supported by both Chinese and Japanese scholars (see for example Chen, 2012; Li, 2009; Pan and Zhen, 2019). However, with the advent of the Heian period, these legends were gradually influenced by Buddhism, Taoism, as well as daily lives of normal Japanese and social historical events, resulting in more diverse and colourful Yokai images and stories (Ji and Seo, 2017, p.1654; Yan and Li, 2016, p.121). Regardless of the accuracy of these historical narratives, what remains clear is the mutual influence and interaction of Yokai culture between China and Japan, which has extended to *Onmyoji* and offers a complex and rich cultural and historical context into which I locate my project.

Criticism of Japanese Yokai/Anime Culture

The growing interest of Chinese for Japanese Yokai/anime culture has attracted widespread attention from Chinese scholars. Much scholarship has focused on researching the impact of this affection on the cultural identity and values of the young Chinese (see for example: Sun, 2018 and Yao, 2010). Sun's (2018, p.90) study, for example, indicates that the fondness of Chinese adolescents for Japanese anime extends beyond the superficial level and

permeates into the realm of cultural identity. For instance, Chinese youth often internalize universal values emphasized in Japanese anime, such as friendship, adventure, innovation, integrity, and love, incorporating them into their own cultural identity, and integrating these values into their lives and behaviours. This finding aligns with Yao's (2010) previous research, which suggested that Japanese anime cleverly caters to the spiritual needs of Chinese adolescents during their formative years, positively influencing their perspectives on friendship, life, and ideals (ibid., pp.55-56). Moreover, as Sun (2018, p.93) argues, these positive beliefs can transform into a protective mechanism for all other sociocultural interactions, enabling them to confront life challenges more positively.

However, scholarship also highlights negative impacts brought about by the widespread dissemination of Japanese Yokai/anime culture in China, too (see for examples: Wang, 2012; Fei; 2016; Liu, 2012a; Yang, 2014; Guo, 2016; and Hu, 2008). These perspectives can be broadly summarized into three points that ultimately also help contextualise *Onmyoji* today. Firstly, there is criticism regarding the violent, pornographic, and other content that not align with Chinese traditional values found in Japanese anime. For instance, Wang (2012, pp.154-155) argues that Japanese anime contains numerous sexually explicit and violent elements. Fei (2016), Liu (2012a), Yang (2014) and Guo (2016) highlight the potential harm caused by the widespread violence, explicit sexual themes, and non-mainstream representations in Japanese anime on the formation of values among adolescents. Hu (2008, pp.59-62) also analysed the latent bombs in Japanese anime in his study: militaristic undertones, vulgarized content, and contempt for and subversion of ethical morals.

According to Hu's (2008, p.31) research, when people confront multiple value systems and moral standards, existing social moral concepts and cultural traditions are overturned and distorted, leading many individuals to exhibit

contradictory and bewildered attitudes, plunging them into an identity crisis. There are notable resonances here with media effects arguments discussed both within videogame research (Newman, 2013, p.68; see also Anderson and Dill, 2000, p.782; Buckingham, 2006, p.9; Poole, 2004, p.356) and wider media forms (Buckingham, 2002, p.77, 2007, p.75; Barker, 1984, p.38, 2001, p.29; Harris, 2014, p.52; Livingstone, 2007, p.6), where a moral panic is combined with a particular representation of young people as both innocent victims and 'the avant-garde' (Buckingham, 2002, p.77). Whilst I do not endorse this oversimplified argument, it is nevertheless worth noting here because of the pervasiveness of it.

The second criticism within Chinese scholarship relates to what is discussed as a malicious caricature of China in Japanese anime (see for examples: Wang, 2012; Cheng and Pang, 2015). Influenced by factors such as ideology and national sentiment, they argue that certain Japanese anime incorrectly portray Chinese culture, characters, and elements, negatively impacting the formation of values and national identity among Chinese adolescents. For instance, Wang (2012, p.155) contends that some Japanese anime products contribute to the denigration and dissemination of China's excellent traditional culture. Similarly, Cheng and Pang (2015, p.84) discover in the Japanese anime named *Chūka Ichiban!* that the ordinary Chinese is portrayed as individuals with long hair, wearing mandarin robes, and appearing languid, embodying a stereotypical image of the late Qing Dynasty opium addicts. This characterization, argued by Cheng and Pang (ibid., p.83), imparts a stereotype of Chinese people as greedy, evil, and cunning, leading to what they perceive as an 'insult and disrespect to the entire Chinese nation'.

The third concern to note here is what is considered as an erosion of national culture resulting from the infiltration of Japanese culture (see for example Wang, 2007; Wang, 2012; and Li and Li, 2007). Li and Li (2007, pp.123-124)

posit that the harm and impact on the youth are not limited to a few extreme works but extend to the entire Japanese Yokai/anime culture. This popular and entertaining form subtly instils Japanese thought patterns, values, and moral concepts into young people worldwide (ibid.). Wang (2012, p.155) also notes that cultural infiltration is one of the most easily overlooked aspects of the impact of Japanese anime culture in China, which is ‘difficult to detect and therefore more challenging to prevent’. He believes that this cultural infiltration is manifested through Japan’s utilization of its robust economic support, solid political backing, and effective propaganda strategies to export culture to China, especially targeting the youth (ibid.). It can easily take root in the minds of Chinese young people, ‘even turning them into defenders of Japanese culture’ without their awareness (ibid., see also in Wang, 2007).

It can be observed that discussions about the cultural identity crisis arising from Japanese anime culture have been ongoing in China. In response, scholars have proposed corresponding recommendations (see for example, Wang, 2012; Li and Li, 2007; Wang, 2018; Cheng and Pang, 2015; and Gong, 2021). Wang (2012, p.156), for instance, calls to develop the original Chinese anime industry, and deepen Chinese youths’ understanding and support for domestic cultural products. Other scholars such as Li and Li (2007, p.125) have suggested that major promotion of mainstream values of Chinese society should be undertaken (see also in Wang, 2018, p.126). Cheng and Pang (2015, p.86) argue that what is needed is a wider embrace and promotion of patriotic ideals from traditional Chinese culture in order to nurture patriotic sentiments and national pride among young people (see also in Gong, 2021, p.95). Scholars have also proposed that the national government should further strengthen the scrutiny and regulation of the online cultural market, prohibiting the entry of Japanese culture that promotes violence, explicit content, and distorts Chinese elements into China (Li and Li, 2007, p.125; Wang, 2012, p.156; Wang, 2018, p.126). This, according to Wang (2012, p.156), would

prevent Chinese youth from ‘falling into the abyss unknowingly’, avoiding ‘moral corruption, psychological distortion, and self-forgetfulness in entertainment’.

What is interesting about the arguments detailed above within the context of my project lies in the parallels with discussions among scholars debating videogame effects, particularly in relation to the perpetuation of moral panics (as discussed above, see also Anderson and Dill, 2000, p.782; Buckingham, 2006, p.9; Buckingham, 2007, pp.4-5; Poole, 2004, p.356), who have persistently argued for the pervasiveness of these discourses. Such moral panics often overlook the subtle dynamics between gamers and games. This oversimplification is notably evident in contemporary Chinese scholarship as well, similarly revolving around the three concerns such as media effects, national identity, and cultural creep. *Onmyoji* is not detached from these contexts; its significance is further underscored by the fact that it is a mobile game subject to contemporary Chinese legislation. However, as demonstrated in Chapters 4, 5, and 6 (and consistent with the broader scholarship discussed here), gamers of *Onmyoji* seldom articulate these concerns or relate them to their own gaming experiences or observations. The empirical data from gamers reveal a much more intricate and negotiated understanding of gaming, which, at the very least, forces us to critique the over simplicity of the aforementioned arguments.

The Evolving Media Regulation in China

The scholarly criticism of Japanese Yokai/anime culture by Chinese scholars, is accompanied, as suggested above, by continued regulation by the Chinese government, which continues to implement corresponding censor and regulatory policies regarding its dissemination in China. It is worth briefly detailing this regulatory context not least because it both contextualises the

academic literature above, but also the findings and discussions throughout this thesis.

According to Chen's research (2017, p.55), in the late 1980s to the early 1990s, China was in the period of economic reform, and Japanese Yokai/anime culture began to enter China and gradually gained popularity. But by the early 21st century, China had begun to experience anxiety about the invasion of Japanese culture. As previously suggested by one of the scholars, China had also initiated efforts to cultivate its own original animation cultural products (Wang, 2012, p.156), with the '5155 Project' standing out as a prominent example. Launched in 1995, the 5155 Project aimed to establish 5 comic publishers within two to three years, focusing on releasing 15 series of children's comic books and creating 5 children's comic periodicals (Chew, 2023, p.43). These officially published comic products provided guidance for parents and teenagers on how to avoid the negative impact of Japanese comic (Yang, 2011, p.116), considering themselves as 'media for the dissemination of spiritual civilization, the mouthpiece for promoting the principles and policies of the party, and the bond connecting young people in different regions' (Youth Comics Magazine, 1997, cited in Chen, 2017, p.57).

Following the increased production of Chinese comics, from 1998, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television of China (SAPPRFT) published a series of regulations concerning the importation of foreign animation, including requirements for reporting and approval, as well as restrictions on prime-time broadcasting. As a result, the quantity and scale of imported Japanese anime began to decline in China, leading to a shift in the original audience of some Japanese anime, who transformed into active disseminators (Wang, 2018, p.125). Chen (2017, p.60) suggests that during this phase, one of the primary channels for the dissemination of Japanese anime was info-magazines. Info-magazines, emerging in 1998, were

publications founded by ardent fans. These magazines consisted of half content derived from the latest Japanese publications and the other half comprised comments from Chinese fans, along with information about Japanese television dramas and music. Info-magazines generally held a tolerant stance on controversial issues present in Japanese anime, such as sexuality, homosexuality, and violence, thereby mitigating the influence of patriotic magazine s from the 5155 Project to some extent and fostering a better understanding of Japan among fan communities (ibid., pp.60-61).

By 2003, with the widespread popularity of the internet and personal computers, Chinese anime enthusiasts had begun to download anime works online. Concurrently, the government's bans, censorship, and restrictions on Japanese products reached their peak. The dependence of Chinese anime fans on the internet led to a resistance against the relevant censorship policies imposed by the government. The anti-online addiction movement that began in 2004 directly prompted the government to decide in 2009 to mandate the installation of the Green Dam filtering software on personal computers (Branigan, 2009). This move was accompanied by an increased scrutiny of explicit content on the internet. As Chen (2017, pp.61-64) observes, many fan-established websites that could not obtain an internet video and audio service license from SAPPRFT had to shut down. Foreign anime websites became inaccessible. And those surviving sites compromised with censorship by suppressing fan dissent (ibid.). Consequently, criticism of censorship became a common aspect of Chinese anime culture thereafter (Fung, 2014, pp.57-58; see also Saito, 2017, p.143).

With the rapid development of the Internet and new media technologies, the dissemination of Japanese Yokai/anime culture in today's China exhibits characteristics of increased interactivity, broader dissemination scope, and faster transmission speed (Wang, 2018, p.125). This is prominent on Chinese

online forums and social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo, where numerous public accounts and communities centred around Japanese anime culture have rapidly gained popularity (ibid.). This trend indicates a strong interest among the younger generation in China toward Japanese anime, actively engaging in discussions and sharing content. It seems that the dissemination environment for anime culture in China is becoming more favourable, as many mainstream media platforms have begun actively acquiring broadcasting rights for Japanese anime works (Global Times, 2021; DTcaijing, 2023; Lei and Xiao, 2023). However, at the same time, the Chinese government's regulatory policies on media and entertainment content continue to evolve. Especially in the field of video games, content regulation has become more stringent (Chinalawedu, 2004; SAPPRFT, 2016; Yu, 2017; Sybil, 2021). Game developers must continually engage in internal self-regulation (Zhang, 2012, p.343, Knockel et al., 2015, p.2) to ensure that game content does not violate regulations or lead to unnecessary delays. These policy changes also somewhat influence gamers' exposure to and understanding of Japanese Yokai/anime culture and the content they experienced in games (Zhang, 2006, p.280, Liang and Lu, 2010, p.109). Further exploration of these aspects will be presented in subsequent chapters of my thesis.

In summary, China's dissemination and reception of Japanese anime culture has undergone contradictory developments in the digital era. While new media technologies have provided certain opportunities for cultural exchange, the frequent fluctuations in regulatory policies have simultaneously imposed constraints. This complex background serves as a crucial contextual factor in my project to aid in understanding how China's digital generation accepts and responds to *Onmyoji* and how the evolving regulation profoundly influences their gaming experience and identity (see Chapter 4). I examine how gamers navigate interactions with Japanese Yokai/anime culture amid this turbulent context and address the challenges posed by government regulation (see

Chapter 5). This also allows me to delve into the study of how the younger generation in China copes with the uncertainty in cultural dissemination brought about by government censorship of media and entertainment content in such an environment (see Chapter 6).

Having outlined the wider cultural context of Japanese Yokai/anime and Chinese regulatory context, I now turn to significant literature pertaining to my three central themes of identity, agency, and uncertainty. Starting with identity and identification, I explore both contemporary gaming literature and wider media theories to explain how I am approaching this theme.

Identity and Identification

Identity Matters

In order to understand the ways my participants construct and articulate gaming identities within my project, I review some compelling identity theories, providing theoretical guidance for exploring gamer identity construction in mobile gaming. It reminds me that, while focusing on the positive role of mobile media technology in shaping the space for gamers to express identity and identification, it is crucial to recognize that the construction of identity is complex and diverse. Indeed, as Stuart Hall argues (1989, 1994), identity construction is complex and dynamic, whilst also resonating with past narratives and discourses of self (1989, p.70). Hall defines identity as ‘the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’ (1989, p.70). This definition emphasises that our positioning within a specific social and cultural context could shape our self-awareness and influence how others perceive and interact with us (ibid.). The historical discourses and narratives we inherit also impact how we understand ourselves, our place in the world, and our broader

social and cultural context (1989, p.71). Recognizing the significant influence of these ‘powers from the other’ (Hall, 1994, p.400) allows us to see that identity is not merely an individual concern but is shaped by broader social and cultural factors. It also highlights that identity is continually re-negotiated and re-expressed through discursive practices and social interactions to adapt to ever-changing social and cultural conditions. This is why Hall considers identity as ‘a “production” which is never complete, always in process’ (1994, p.392). This complexity contributes to my interpretation of how young Chinese gamers shape their identities through gaming interactions in my project.

Otherness is considered to play a crucial role in the process of identity construction (Hall, 1994; Grossberg, 1996). Differences in culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other factors dynamically shape individuals’ experiences and perspectives, contributing to the formation of their identities (Hall, 1994, p.397). Grossberg (1996, p.93) further points out that these differences encompass internal differences within individuals (such as variations in identity across different periods) and differences in the social categories that individuals occupied (for example, distinctions between personal and other identities within the same discursive mechanism). In such a differentiated structure, individuals understand their relationship with others (or communities) and negotiate their position in the social structure (ibid.).

This perspective also involves the dual aspects of identity at both the individual and societal levels, as scholars (Fearon, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 2010; Vignoles, 2017) argue that individual and social identities are interconnected and dynamically interact. Being placed in or placing someone in a particular social category implies that they are subject to specific social discursive rules and can be understood through a set of characteristics (Vignoles, 2017, pp.13-14). Importantly, the social identity, especially contextual and power relations, as emphasized by Yuval-Davis (2010, p.267), can have a significant impact on

the potential shaping of individual behaviour and beliefs, which, in turn, may influence the construction of personal identities (Fearon, 1999, p.16). These perspectives underpin my later discussions of how young Chinese gamers construct and negotiate identities in relation to the wider social discourses of gaming against which they position themselves, and their own experiences which they articulate on a more individual level.

If we draw on videogame theory here too, we can understand the significance of exploring and shaping identity in gamers' gaming experiences. Taylor (2003, p.26) introduced the concept of 'identity play' in her study, emphasizing that gamers have the opportunity to explore and construct various identities in games, which may align with their real-life identities or be entirely different. This becomes one of the ways through which they derive enjoyment from gaming. For instance, Kidder (2002, p.630) argues that games provide gamers with a new experience and a sense of fulfilment, enabling them to express aspects of themselves in the game that may differ from their everyday selves (see also Malcom, 2003; Taylor, 2006, p.97).

During gaming, gamers recognize and reflect on themselves, fostering personal social and emotional development. In fact, some games actively encourage gamers to engage in such self-exploration. As Squire (2006, p.21) asserts, many game designers consider games as 'vehicles for gamer expression' and design them as 'contexts in which gamers can generate meaning'. In other words, gamers engage in gaming, treating video games as contexts, and express themselves through interpretations and choices (Pereira and Roque, 2013, p.9). This viewpoint has been supported by specific research cases, especially in recent years, focusing on marginalized groups. For instance, Ringland et al. (2017) find that adolescents with autism creatively and freely explore new ideas and enjoy or relieve stress in a relatively safe and less stressful way in Minecraft (a game that allows free building blocks in the

game world) (ibid. p. 341). Similarly, Baird (2021) explores the process of self-expression and identity exploration in a role-playing game, which providing a safe space for transgender individuals like him to ‘become’ those roles they play, and receive recognition from others (ibid., p.100).

Identity is a key theme in understanding human experiences and social relationships, shaping people’s ways of thinking, behaviours, and interactions in different cultural and social contexts (McCarthey and Moje, 2002, p.228). The construction and maintenance of identity have undergone numerous changes in the digital era, and videogames, as a significant part of the digital domain, provide a unique environment that allows for an in-depth exploration of how identity evolves with technological, cultural, and even political developments. Against this backdrop, the first part of my project focuses on how gamers construct their gaming identities through articulations of gameplay (Chapter 4). This, in turn, adds a further dimension of narrative and discourse to my project, as I explore the gaming identity narratives of my participants.

The Dialogic Nature of Identity Construction

If games offer terrains through which identities can be explored, I am interested in how gamers articulate this in relation to themselves and how they construct themselves as gamers (or not) within the various wider contexts I have been discussing so far (the wider gaming context, Yokai culture, regulation, etc). Yuval-Davis (2010, p.272) defines identity construction as ‘narratives regarding the self and its boundaries’. This suggests in keeping with the literature above then, that gamers construct themselves in relation to wider social parameters (the boundaries between self and other/not self). Yuval-Davis (2010, p.267) argues that identity narratives can be both verbal and embodied practices, revealing individuals’ diverse, complex, contentious, or contradictory understandings, constructions, and reinterpretations of self and

others' identities in various social contexts. Inspired by this perspective, my project explores the construction of gamer identity and identification through gamers' articulations, specifically their self-expressions in gaming practices. This leads to the first research question of my project: **What do gamers' self-expressions tell us about what they value and promote in relation to their own gaming identities?**

Individual self-expression, defined as the act of 'showing thought, affect, or experience' (Green, 2007, p.15), can be employed to analyse the construction of one's identity. Through self-expression, individuals articulate a sense of agency and empowerment, allowing them to challenge and 're-imagine the self' in novel and creative ways (Burger, 2015, p.281). Self-expression in the context of identity construction takes on new characteristics in the digital age. For instance, as demonstrated in Davis's (2016, p.141) study, individuals on social media platforms constantly engage in a conscious process of balancing and negotiating among numerous identities. They carefully select and craft information about themselves on social media based on standards that best align with their specific identities.

We can also understand gaming itself as a form of identity narrative, in which and through which gamers must align or divest from normative practices (those offered through the game for example). Seen here, the behavioural patterns (Consalvo, 2005, pp.4-5), and the adoption of gaming strategies (Malaby, 2007, pp.103-104) could be understood as alignments with or negotiations with wider social norms in relation to identity. Similarly, dedicating time, energy, and even financial resources to gaming (Woods, 2022, p.8), or consuming related cultural products (Hills, 2002, p.123) are activities that are typically influenced by wider cultural and social factors, requiring negotiation and adjustment to fit the specific environments within gameplay (Kim and Drolet, 2003, p.380). These identity narratives involve complex and nuanced ways of engaging with

gaming culture, challenging stereotypes, maintaining authentic selves, and negotiating one's identity within broader communities (Shaw, 2013, p.10). In a similar vein to articulations of identity, gameplay also incorporates certain situations where individuals may conform to dominant gaming culture at the expense of their own desires, values, or practices.

Yuval-Davis (2010, p.271) considers identity narrative as a dialogic activity (see also in Moje and Luke, 2009, p.434). Individuals are consistently engaged in dialogues with others about identity, reflecting, negotiating, and reconstructing their self-identities in the process of constructing their selves based on feedback and relationships with others (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p.271). This viewpoint is endorsed by Ybema et al. (2009, p.271) and Owens et al. (2010, p.481), whose discussions emphasize that personal identity is an evolving and changing process, not a rigid and fixed state. Individuals engage in identity construction through dialogue in various social environments and attempt to maintain a coherent self-identity, while simultaneously reconciling the tension between personal desires, expressions, and societal expectations through dialogue with others and evaluation against social norms (Ybema et al., 2009, p.313; Owens et al., 2010, p.481). This further illustrates the complexity of identity narratives, as they involve not only individual self-identification but also the shaping of the image perceived by others and the coordination with societal expectations.

In game studies, scholars also regard gamers' interactive gaming practices as a form of dialogue, emphasizing the collaborative negotiation of meaning and understanding among gamers, game developers, and the broader gaming community. These works provide a robust theoretical foundation for my exploration of the identity construction of young Chinese gamers in *Onmyoji* starting from the perspective of self-expression. For instance, Payne (2005) emphasizes the interactive nature of gamers' online gaming activities,

considering various activities such as creating and controlling characters, text or voice chatting, sharing knowledge, etc., as dialogues among gamers from diverse backgrounds and between gamers and the artificial intelligence. Through such dialogues, gamers can exchange ideas, strategize, build relationships, and participate in gaming communities (ibid.). Taylor (2006, p.334) employs the concept of ‘dialogue’ to describe interactions among gamers, game developers, and the broader gaming community, particularly in relation to the utilization of gamer-created modifications (mods). This highlights the continuous debates and discussions taking place between the community and the game. It underscores the significance of interactions between them, as these interactions mirror the ongoing negotiation within the gaming environment regarding what is deemed legitimate (ibid.).

Interestingly, Brock and Fraser (2018, p.1222) liken the dialogue between gamers’ gaming actions and cognitive processes to that of a craftsman engaged in a conversation between practice and thought. They posit that gamers engage in a dialogue between their gaming actions (manipulating controllers, pressing buttons, and making in-game decisions, etc.) and cognitive processes (strategizing, problem-solving, decision-making, and adapting to game challenges, etc.) (ibid). This dialogue constitutes the gameplay of digital games (Brock and Johnson, 2022, p.603) and provides gamers with a sense of achievement in practice and identity, playing a crucial role in identity construction (Brock and Fraser, 2018, pp.1230-1245). Stang (2019), in studying the dialogue between fan communities and game developers in video games, suggests that gamers exercise agency by making choices and taking actions in the game world. This form of dialogue creates a sense of empowerment and involvement, turning gamers into decision-makers and guides in the game narrative, rather than mere executors. This transformation can even subvert power structures (see also in Grooten and Kowert, 2015, p.73). These studies are significant for my project as they allow

me to connect the focus on identity with the negotiation of power between gamers as subjects and the game system as another agent in gaming practices (Chapter 5).

Additionally, these studies remind us that the dialogic construction of gamer identity takes place within specific contexts, extending beyond an internal, individual process. This point is emphasized in Shaw's (2013, p.2) perspective, which posits that the construction of gamer identity 'exists as a conversation between the individual and social, structural discourses, leading to the ongoing evolution and changes in identity formation. Consequently, expressions of identity are often ephemeral (ibid., p.8). De Grove et al. (2015, pp.350-351) also echo this viewpoint, contending that individuals who identify as gamers engage in a dialogue about their roles and positions at the social and cultural levels. This dialogue encompasses discussions about societal perceptions of the gamer image, cultural values, labels, and the impact of societal discourse and stereotypes on gamers. Throughout the process of self-identification, gamers contemplate and explore their relationship with the broader cultural environment, defining and expressing their identity as gamers through such dialogues (ibid.). This once again underscores the complexity and continuity of dialogic identity construction. These crucial theoretical perspectives provide key guidance and theoretical supports for exploring the identity construction of young Chinese gamers in *Onmyoji* in my project.

When exploring gamer identity construction, I also focus on the specific language use among gamers. In online gaming communities, language acts as both a symbol of identity and a source of individual and group identity differences (Malisi et al., 2017, p.621). For instance, Crystal's (2001) study revealed unique linguistic features and norms on the Internet, particularly how the use of netspeak or slang shaped online communication. Netspeak has its vocabulary exclusive to the Internet, subverting traditional grammar and

spelling rules, and even redefining punctuation as a primary means of expression (ibid., pp. 81-89). This specific linguistic code, as noted by Crystal (2001, p.68), facilitates the connection of individuals from different geographical locations and cultural backgrounds who share similar experiences and values, allowing them to collectively express their thoughts and experiences. Turner (2011) emphasized the use of 'digitalk', especially among teenagers, as a unique language code in the digital environment for self-expression (p.265). Although these specific language conventions may seem restrictive or limiting, setting boundaries that exclude those who do not meet their standards (p.276), they actually provide a framework for individuals to understand and integrate into the social dynamics of the community. This aids in establishing meaningful communication and community building, offering support for individuals to shape a sense of identity and belonging (p.271). Therefore, in my project, understanding how gamers use language to express themselves, engage with specific community language norms, and construct their identity through these language practices is crucial for a deep understanding of their gaming experiences and identity construction processes.

Understanding these intricate dynamics is crucial in addressing the first research question concerning the construction of identities among young Chinese gamers in *Onmyoji*. Identity is not a static entity but an evolving concept within diverse contexts and interactions. Understanding this can help uncover how gamers shape their distinct identities in the game and interconnect them with their wider sociocultural and everyday identities (Chapter 4). Moreover, understanding the complexity of identity allows for insights into the negotiated interactions between gamers and game systems (Chapter 5). It also aids in comprehending the uncertainty nature of the context of gaming practices (Chapter 6).

The Role of Identification in Identity Construction

It is important to note that identification is not separate from identity construction, but rather that it forms one way through which identity can be both articulated. Identification, as a process of identity construction, aids individuals or groups in establishing associations with specific cultures, historical environments, and symbolic systems (Hall, 1994, p.392; 1966, p.2). These associations are both at a social level as Hall indications (ibid.) and at an individual level, where these associations may manifest through pleasure, play and narrative – in other words through identification and the various elements discussed already in this chapter. As an individual process (Hall, 1966, p.2; Cohen, 2001, p.250; Shaw, 2012, p.2), thinking of identification in this way enables me to understand how individuals act in ways that align with interpreted or represented identity categories on screen (through gaming) and through discourse (through self-identification as a gamer for example), and also reveals the relationship between individuals and external categorizations imposed upon them (Shaw, 2012, p.30). Therefore, exploring identification is pivotal in addressing my first research question not least because it reveals the intricacies of gamers immersing themselves in the game narrative and establishing connections between their identities and in-game characters and between themselves and other gamers. Additionally, it scrutinizes how social interactions within the gaming community influence the construction of gamers' identities. This in turn explores the influence of digital games on the identity and cultural experiences of gamers. In what follows I explore various elements of identification as they emerge in my project.

Identification with Game Characters

Previous studies have delved into audience identification with media characters in films and television (see for example: Ang, 1989, p.28; Kotz,

1993, p.102; Gillis, 2004, p.98; Mulvey, 2011, p.61) and within videogame theory (Carr, 2002, p.171; Burn, 2006, p.141; Rehak, 2003, p.104; Wolf, 2001, p.97). These insights can provide a valuable background and perspective for a more in-depth understanding of how gamers construct identity in gaming. For instance, Cohen (2001, p.249) believes that through watching films and television, audiences 'experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them'. The experiences, whether similar or dissimilar to the characters, enable audiences to expand their 'emotional horizons and social perspectives' (ibid.). Echoing this perspective, Hoffner and Buchanan (2005, p.342) suggest that audiences are often drawn to the images and charisma portrayed by television characters, and their attitudes, behaviours, and values are influenced in the long term, fostering a desire to become part of these characters. Within videogame theory too, early scholarship (e.g. Carr, 2002, p.171; Rehak, 2003, p.104) explored identification with avatars, and this quickly became more nuanced through a wider exploration of theories of immersion and gameplay (see for example: Mactavish, 2002, pp.40-42; Wolf, 2001, p.4; King and Krzywinska, 2006, p.55).

T.L Taylor (2003, p.35), for example, argues that avatars controlled by gamers play a role as 'mediators between personal identity and social life'. This suggests that gameplay is itself an active negotiation with identity construction through mediations with avatars and is connected to her discussion about the relationship between virtual characters and the body, where she argues that the body is shaped within specific socio-cultural contexts and expresses the self through engagement in socio-cultural practices (Taylor, 2003. p. 38). Such a viewpoint implies that characters in games are endowed with specific meanings within a wider social and cultural context, and gameplay enables a negotiation of these relations (ibid., p.39). Similarly, Bartle (2004, p.206) considers avatars controlled by gamers as extensions of individual selves, serving as the link between gamers, the game world, and other gamers. These

digital bodies not only represent the movement of gamers in the game worlds but also form the core of the gaming experience through interactions with others and the game world (ibid.). Such arguments are important for my study not least because they diversify what we might understand as ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ contexts and experiences, to include gameplay, discourse of gameplay, and the wider socio-cultural context of *Onmyoji* as I have explored it earlier in this chapter (see page 18). Arguments around immersion also direct us to consider the importance of avatars as visual and aesthetic representations with whom gamers identify through processes of identification. This in turn reminds us conversely that gaming practices are not only immersive, embodied, and narrative experiences, they are also visual representations. In what follows I briefly unpack these arguments.

Visual images are omnipresent in the digital environments we encounter in our daily lives. They ‘are indeed part of how we experience, learn, and know as well as how we communicate and represent knowledge’ (Pink, 2013, p.1). Games present the virtual world to gamers through representation, encompassing elements such as characters, environments, objects, and plots. Information is conveyed through graphics, sound, text, and other means, creating an immersive gaming experience (Crawford, 1984, pp.5-6; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.58; Squire, 2006, p.21; Tronstad, 2008, p.259; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2008, p.230; Trepte and Peinecke, 2010, p.171). Representation also contributes to establishing the meaning and narrative of the game, conveying information about plots, themes, and values, thus creating a rich and meaningful story world (Shaw, 2015, p.70; Cheng, 2007, p.18). These factors collectively influence gamers’ perception of the gaming world and emotional connections, aiding gamers in constructing identity and a sense of belonging in the game (Weber and Mitchell, 2008, p.41). Therefore, when studying gamers’ identification with characters, visual representation is often a key factor.

Previous research has also extensively explored how the visual representation of characters influences gamers' identification, providing robust support and exemplars for my project. Studies by Ducheneaut et al. (2009), Sibilla and Mancini (2018), and Szolin et al. (2023) collectively explored how the presentation of characters in visual initially connects gamers with the virtual avatars, thereby shaping the foundation of identification. Specifically, Ducheneaut et al. (2009, p.1151) discovered that gamers invest significant time in personalizing their gaming avatars, including modifying hair or skin colour, gender settings, controlling height or weight, and even choosing clothing styles. When gamers perceive a 'perceived similarity' with their gaming avatars, this visual resemblance to a certain extent allows gamers to perceive their ideal selves, influencing their attitudes in the virtual world (Sibilla and Mancini, 2018, pp.4-5). Furthermore, these studies highlight how visual design evokes specific emotional responses and moral judgments in gamers. Experiments by Tronstad (2008, p.250) and Pradantyo et al. (2021, p.2) reveal that the visual appearance of game characters also significantly impacts gamers' perceptions of whether a particular character is an antagonist or hero, exerting a crucial influence on moral judgments of the characters. These insights are not only meaningful in understanding the relationship between gamers and in-game characters but also provides robust theoretical support for studying how gamers shape and express their identities in gaming.

I am not suggesting of course that identification during gaming is solely based on visual representation, but rather than we should include this as an important element of games research. In keeping with scholars such as Tronstad (2008, pp.253-254) and Pradantyo et al. (2021, pp.13-15), who put forth a crucial perspective, it is important to remember that gamers do not solely rely on the visual presentation of characters to form their perceptions. Instead, they comprehensively consider the physical appearance along with the characters' abilities (such as equipment, or various skills) and associated narrative

elements (such as background stories or game events) to achieve a more coherent understanding. Shaw (2015, p.102) further reminds us that characters within games are never all encompassing: they are often stereotypical (visually and narratively) and elided with a particular set of skills or uses that may limit identification. ‘Set Characters’, for example may lack or possess incomplete background stories, although gamers often complete these narratives as part of processes of or for identification (Shaw, 2015, pp.131-133; Thornham, 2011, pp.62-63). ‘Character Options’, are characters who have particular background stories where gamers can strategically choose and create narratives beyond the game text to some extent. However, the existence of these characters may not necessarily have a practical impact on the gameplay (Shaw, 2015, p.134) reducing the possibilities of narrative identification for example. Similarly, ‘Customizable Avatars’, are those that gamers can create aesthetic and expressive needs, rather than for ‘functional or identificatory purposes’ (ibid., p.139). These arguments provide valuable insights for understanding gamer identity construction in *Onmyoji*, as it reminds me to carefully consider not just how characters are represented in the game, but also how gamers are connecting themselves to these characters. It also emphasizes the complexity and multidimensionality of identification, highlighting that the construction of identity goes far beyond surface cognition relying solely on visual representation.

Identification with Wider Gaming Communities

In my project, I also explore manifestations and articulations of identification with and for the wider gaming community in which my participants position themselves. While I do not treat identification with the gaming community as a separate section in the thesis, it emerges throughout the project. Community here can be understood as groups with shared interests and interactions, establishing connections through a common passion for and engagement with

gaming (Van Dijck, 2009, p.45). This concept has previously found widespread application in fan culture studies (Hills, 2002, p.142; Jenkins, 2006a, p.131; Jenkins, 2006b, pp.1-2; Jenkins, 2013, pp.6-15), where individuals participate in fan communities to share, discuss, and create content related to their beloved media works (Hills, 2002, p.142). Similarly, online gaming communities provide gamers with opportunities to interact with others, encompassing a broader range of social interactions such as joint participation in activities, content creation, and engagement in community governance and decision-making (Taylor, 2003, pp.24-25; Taylor, 2007, p.116). These social interactions not only help gamers demonstrate their value and skills but also provide richer and more meaningful gaming experiences and opportunities for identity construction. They can also enhance community cohesion (Taylor, 2003, p.24; see also in Taylor, 2006, p.32).

Chamberlin (2007, p.198) argues that online communities, including gaming communities, provide a sense of belonging, particularly for young individuals who may feel marginalized or excluded in offline environments. Within these digital spaces, young website users actively shape community norms, practices, and collective identities through their interactions, creative expressions, and active participation. They establish robust social connections, adhere to distinct value systems, and demonstrate a strong identification with both each other and the website itself (ibid.). Significantly, Chamberlin (2007, p.198) discovered that young people’s online interactions are closely intertwined with their daily lives, suggesting that the construction of identity in virtual and real communities is not separate. This implies that the identification with virtual communities is intricately interwoven and mutually influential with social identification in everyday life.

Furthermore, Grooten and Kowert (2015) further emphasize the necessity of considering gamers’ interactions, discussions, and expressions in both gaming

communities and the broader society to better comprehend their identity construction. Gamers position themselves within the gaming community using specific symbols, which can be objects, icons, or common labels. These symbols represent specific identities and a sense of belonging within the gaming community. Interaction and the shared use of symbols and practices among gamers can facilitate connections, strengthen a sense of identification, and establish a shared culture and social consensus within the gaming community (ibid., pp.76-77). Similar to Chamberlin (2007)'s viewpoint, Grooten and Kowert (2015, p.77) argue that gamer interactions create an overlap between the virtual and physical societal worlds. When gamers establish strong connections and shared experiences within virtual communities, they may extend this social identification into their real-life communities. This may manifest as the adoption of similar language and behaviours, sharing symbols and practices from the virtual community, or establishing closer connections and interactions with other gamers in real-life communities (ibid.). Thus, Grooten and Kowert (2015, p.77) suggest that 'identification with the virtual community this way may reach into the individual's out-of-game community'. This phenomenon highlights the importance of virtual communities in personal social identity and social interaction, as well as the mutual permeation and influence between the virtual and real worlds.

However, the concept of 'disembedding', as proposed by Gerrard (2017), has prompted differing perspectives on the relationship between online communities and offline social life. She argues that not all online communities are tightly integrated with offline social life. Instead, online communities provide a supportive and inclusive environment, allowing individuals to disengage from their physical and social surroundings and express themselves in ways that may be impossible or unacceptable in offline communities (ibid.). This viewpoint finds support in Baird's (2021, p.102) research, where he contends that online gaming spaces are relatively safer

than offline life, enabling individuals to express their subjectivity and attain identity verification. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge, as emphasized by scholars mentioned earlier (Hall, 1966; Fearon, 1999; Butler, 1999; Kennedy, 2006; Buckingham, 2008; Weber and Mitchell, 2008; Yuval-Davis, 2010; Shaw, 2013), that both online and offline communities occur within specific historical, cultural, and social contexts. Even for those attempting to escape real-life challenges, their experience of disengagement from physical and social surroundings is still a negotiation with mainstream discursive norms. These studies provide crucial insights for my project, emphasizing that understanding gamer identity requires an in-depth examination of the multi-layered process through which individuals develop their identities within gaming communities and navigate the broader cultural and political context.

Agency Negotiation

The Power Dynamic in Gaming Practices

The preceding literature review section elucidated how gamers express their identities in gaming practices. I recognize that such self-expression does not always occur in an unconstrained environment. Indeed, the gaming world harbours intricate and diverse power structures that shape gamers' behaviours and choices. In this section, I delve into some classic studies on power relationships to better comprehend how power operates in the interactive practices between Chinese young gamers and the mobile game *Onmyoji*. This exploration holds significant implications for my study on gamers' behaviours, attitudes, and experiences, shedding light on the nuanced influence of power dynamics in this gaming context.

I turn first to Michel Foucault (1982) who provides a broad analysis of the concept of power. He argues that power exists not only within political

institutions or in the hands of authoritative figures; it permeates various domains and practices within society and is exercised through intricate networks of social structures and relations, subtly and covertly influencing individuals within ‘the field of other possible actions’ (ibid., p.792). His argument reminds us that all the issues discussed above in relation to identity and identification are also, crucially, about power. Seen here, gaming is a domain and practice through which power is experienced, negotiated, and exercised and gamers, who negotiate ‘possible actions’ within these environments similarly express and experience power through these decisions and the cumulative impact of them within and beyond these contexts.

In the context of the *Onmyoji*, these power relations, particularly those pertaining to political or regulatory power are often decentralized and concealed. In preceding chapters, I introduced the dynamic changes in China’s internet and media regulatory system (see page 8, also see page 210). These changes encompass the formulation of laws and regulations (Chinalawedu, 2004; Jenkins, 2006a; Fung, 2014, p.57), restrictions on freedom of speech, the establishment of content censorship and review systems (Ahmad, 2017), as well as the self-regulation of online platforms and content providers (Weber and Jia, 2007, p.782; Ernkvist and Ström, 2008, p.99; Zhang, 2012, p.340; Wang et al., 2016; Sun and Zhao, 2022, pp.197-198). The government, through these means, directly exercises its legislative and enforcement powers to control the generation and dissemination of media content, dispersing power into regulatory networks, review mechanisms, and information control. This decentralized form of power allows the government to exercise control at multiple levels and domains, which is covertly experienced by gamers even within highly pleasurable and overtly apolitical gaming worlds.

Within the context of my project, the government establishes regulatory networks aimed at tracking and controlling public online discourse and actions,

effectively constituting a form of knowledge production and utilization. These regulatory networks encompass monitoring internet traffic, scrutinizing social media platforms, and tracking and surveilling internet users (Bamman et al., 2012). By acquiring and analysing information on the internet, the government gains knowledge about public behaviour and opinion, enabling more effective exercise of power. Simultaneously, the government controls the dissemination of knowledge by censoring and filtering information (Hu, 2009; King et al., 2013, p.6; Yang, 2016, p.1370; Ruan et al., 2016; Chen and Yang, 2018, p.5), thereby emphasizing the interplay between knowledge and power. Through this means, the government ensures its control over public opinion—shaping the information the public encounters, limiting their knowledge acquisition, and influencing their expression of opinions. In this sense, the exercise of power further impact the construction of identity of the public, as individuals' behaviours and thoughts remain located within power relations (Fung, 2014, pp.58-59; Zhu and Fu, 2021, p.3637). What was particularly interesting for me in my project was that ways that gamers articulated relations of power and knowledge through our interviews and within gameplay, constantly negotiating these relations (consciously but more often unconsciously).

Foucault's theory of power provides a robust framework for this study, aiding in a deeper understanding of how power operates in the interactive practices of *Onmyoji*, shaping gamers' behaviours, attitudes, and experiences. However, Foucault (1980, p.75) also prompts a consideration of individuals' autonomy and the potential for resistance within power relations. As suggested in the previous section, investigating gamers' agency in their interaction with the game system is important for me in order to argue that gamers also resist and claim agency. Following this, I turn my attention to the agency held by gamers and the game system within such a network of power relations, exploring how this theme intertwines with identity and uncertainty, collectively shaping individuals' gaming practices in the specific social and cultural context.

Understanding the Agency of Gamers

In some classic theoretical works on game studies, scholars generally perceive video games as objects that require active gamer engagement and interpretation. This means that gamers have the capacity and agency for decision making. For example, Huizinga (1950) argues that game playing is a voluntary activity for gamers with a unique disposition, even though their behaviour is constrained by rules, gamers maintain ‘a disposition all of [their] own’ (sic. p.8). Similarly, Caillois (1961, p.6) emphasizes the voluntary nature of gamers in the act of play, stating that ‘the gamer devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure, each time completely free to choose retreat, silence, mediation, idle solitude, or creative activity’. This viewpoint argues for the power of gamers in gaming practices. Gamers have the freedom to choose their level and mode of participation and exploration within the game world. This autonomy and agency empower gamers to shape the meaning of the game according to their interests and needs and find satisfaction and enjoyment within the game.

This argument has also been made through comparative research. Crawford (1984) contrasts digital games with traditional media such as television and movies to argue that gamers engage in an active and proactive manner. The gamer ‘derives the game’ and ‘controls it’ (ibid., p.14). On one hand, gamers can fully explore the game’s representation of the real world (p.7). That is, games provide a virtual environment where gamers can freely explore and experience various situations and scenarios. Gamers can interact with characters, objects, and environments within the game, discover hidden content and functionalities, and gain a deeper understanding and perception of the game world through such exploration. On the other hand, gamers are capable of creatively seeking solutions when facing challenges in the game (p.10). For instance, they can choose different strategies based on their

preferences, and continuously adjust and improve their approaches through practices. They can generate unique solutions, interact with the game, and solve problems in their own ways. These positive gaming behaviours of gamers are further emphasized in Salen and Zimmerman's (2003) research. They point out that in the process of making decisions and taking actions in gaming practices, gamers actively interact with the content provided by the game and attribute meaning to the game through their interactions (ibid., p.58). Their actions and choices not only affect their own gaming experiences but also have an impact on the further development and evolution of the game system, making it more diverse, engaging, and challenging.

In accordance with Newman (2008, p.48), who believes that the appeal of video games largely depends on the active gamer engagement, Juul's (2005, p.134) argues that gamers actively respond to challenges in the game, formulate strategies, derive pleasure in this process, and freely interpret the game world, generating imagination. He suggests that gamers not only understand the game rules but can also collectively negotiate game rules with other gamers and even freely modify or create new rules (Juul, 2003, p.266). This viewpoint is also supported by Newman (2013, p.25). This autonomy and creativity enable gamers to become shapers and controllers of the game. Through their efforts and choices, gamers influence the game's state and phrased outcomes, attributing personal values and meanings to different results (Juul, 2003, pp.257-258). Building upon these research, Aarseth and Calleja (2015) further highlight the positive interpretation of game practices by gamers, which is a crucial factor in understanding why games matter. They further explain the characteristics of games in generating new practices and meanings within the dynamic gaming process (ibid., pp.7-8). Specifically, gamers' interpretations of the game evolve throughout different stages of their gaming participations, in relation to their understanding of game rules and objectives and the transformation of their actual gameplay (ibid.).

However, participation in the game is just the starting point; gamers can also ‘think about, imagine, even dream about’ everything they experience in the game (Burn, 2006, p.88). Additionally, like audiences of novels, television, and movies, gamers can join online communities, discuss game plots and tasks with others, and contribute to transmedia narrative works based on the game text (ibid.). Burn (2006, p.89) suggests that when examining these reinterpretation and recreation activities of media content, several questions should be carefully considered: how semiotic transformation happens in fandom creation and how it represents the social interests of the fans? What will fans make of the game system? Also, what motivations drive fans in this kind of work? These questions are crucial for understanding the agency negotiation process of gamers in games and transmedia franchises.

These studies collectively emphasize the active and agential role played by gamers in gaming. As Murray (1998, p.126) argues, the agency of gamers manifests as ‘the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices’. Gamers are driven by their own intentions in behaviours such as exploration, puzzle-solving, problem-solving, interpretation, and creation within the game. Through these actions, they pursue their own goals and intentions while attributing personal meaning and value to them. Murray (1998, p.153) further points out that gamers’ subjective experiences of ‘the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials’ are filled with desire. This desire and sense of fulfilment inspire gamers’ active engagement and exploration, prompting them to sustain their involvement in the game and continuously strive to achieve personal goals and desires.

Focusing on gamer agency is a crucial aspect of the gaming research domain, emphasizing that gamers are active participants and shapers of the gaming experience. These studies provide significant insights into the roles and power dynamics of gamers in gaming practices, aiding in a deeper understanding of

how China's digital generation engages with and responds to the game, as well as how their cultural identity is shaped and influenced within gaming practices. By emphasizing gamer agency, I gain a better understanding of their active participation in gaming and the formation of dynamic power relations, providing an essential theoretical framework and background for my project.

Understanding the Agency of the Game System

In much of the above literature, human gamers are described as the sole agents and active participants in games, while the role of machines is seen as providing support and feedback to gamers. However, it is also important to acknowledge the agency of the game here: the design, rules, and affordances. Indeed, as Mitchell et al. (2020) argues, the game design may employ methods to disrupt gamers' expectations of gameplay in order to create specific game mechanics. For example, games intentionally withhold sufficient information to prevent gamers from making decisions, weaken gamers' abilities or choices, impose limitations on them, allow gamers to take actions that result in failure, or present apparent success that is actually a failure (ibid.). By setting explicit and fixed rules, the game system defines what gamers can and cannot do. In most cases, gamers follow the predetermined paths established by the game system (Juul, 2003, p.256; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.80). This perspective challenges an understanding of agency as solely located with the gamer and instead emphasizes the influence of game rules and constraints on gamers' behaviours. The autonomy and decision-making abilities of gamers are constrained by the game design and rules, rather than being entirely free to act according to personal will.

Moreover, and as Galloway (2006, pp.4-5) argues, game systems do not always simply respond to human gamers but also can act independently of them. For example, the game system may ignore gamers' actions and operate

based on their own action grammar, i.e., the underlying code of the software, which may be updated and upgraded without the gamer's knowledge (ibid.). This viewpoint is echoed by the findings of Muriel and Crawford (2020, p.142), which indicates that game systems themselves also possess agency and play a significant role in gaming practices. They not only provide feedback to gamer actions but also determine the game's development and outcomes through their algorithms and programming (ibid.). Galloway (2006, p.5) ultimately argues that the behaviour of the game system is as important as the behaviour of the gamer; they 'exist as a unified, single phenomenon, even if they are distinguishable for the purposes of analysis'.

Therefore, when analysing and understanding video games, the behaviour of gamers and game systems should not be seen as isolated entities; instead, the interaction between gamers and game systems should be recognized as complex and dynamic, where they influence each other and collectively shape the dynamism and appeal of the game. For my project, this will also contribute to a better understanding of how gamers from the digital generation construct their identity in gaming and the uncertainty that arises in situations where agency is lacking. This uncertainty may encompass aspects such as the difficulty of the game, the success or failure of strategies, and the progression of the gameplay. Gamers need to dynamically adjust their actions and strategies to cope with these uncertainties, reflecting their agency in the gaming context. Therefore, this brings us back to the understanding that the focus and discourse on agency of gamers and game systems are intricately intertwined with the theme of uncertainty.

Agency Negotiation in Gameplay

How then is agency manifested and negotiated in gameplay? Within modern digital game studies, scholars view agency as a complex and multidimensional

phenomenon involving the interaction between gamers and the game system (Harrell and Zhu, 2009; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009). On one hand, gamer agency and system agency interact and depend on each other. According to Harrell and Zhu (2009, p.49), gamer agency and system agency together form a dynamic whole that drives the game to achieve meaningful expressive effects. Specifically, within the context of the game world, gamers take meaningful actions supported by the game system, but the scope of the effects generated by their actions is limited by the system. However, gamers adjust their behaviour patterns in response to the dynamic changes of the game system to cope with its constraints or interference (ibid., pp.48-49). Similarly, Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009) describe the interaction process between gamers' agency and the game system's agency. Gamers enter the game with preconceived understandings and expectations, and the game system, through hints, presents the possibilities offered by this fictional space and encourages gamers to try various approaches. Gamer's act based on their intentions and plans, observe the results, and hope for the support of the system. However, they are constantly disrupted by the game system, and their original expectations are constantly shattered (Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009, p.7). Therefore, in the process of gamer-system interaction, gamer agency may increase or decrease depending on their game experience, and gamers adjust their intentions and try new methods based on their understanding of the system (ibid., p.8). In this sense, as proposed by Wardrip-Fruin et al. (2009, p.7), the interaction between gamer agency and system agency helps us understand games as an ongoing process.

On the other hand, gamers' agency and the system agency need to achieve a balance. Mateas (2001, p.145) argues that it is not necessarily a good thing for gamers to have more agency in games. When gamers are to some extent constrained by the material and formal aspects of the game, they may experience more agency in their actions because it is only within limited

choices that they can clearly define their ultimate gaming objectives. In other words, gamers can know what they can do and what they should do (ibid.). However, the actions of gamers and the limitations of the system must be balanced. Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2009) respond to this view by further understanding agency as ‘a committing to meaning’. They believe that when the meaning expressed in constructing the game world or storytelling process aligns with the intentions behind the choices made by gamers and the meaning expressed by the game system, gamers can fully experience agency when they actively engage in the game and make decisions. Even when gamers lose certain choices or control during the game, they still perceive those actions as meaningful (ibid.). Therefore, achieving this balance can be accomplished through clear game objectives, well-designed game mechanics, and encouraging gamers to explore and discover within the game world.

Just as games do not always meet gamers’ expectations, gamers do not always do what games expect them to do. In gamer-centric gaming participation driven by personal purposes, ‘it clearly permits forms of personal agency during the activity of play that are not confined to the achievement of a singular objective’ (Schott, 2006, p.237). Schott (ibid., p.231) points out that gamers can explore different aspects of the game world and play in their own ways, and this personal agency allows gamers to express their personalities and creativity within the game and discuss, understand, and interpret the meaning constructed by the game. Furthermore, gamers’ agency can also be enhanced through socially mediated agency and collective agency (pp. 231-232). Gamers learn and adopt successful strategies and techniques shared by other gamers, expand their gaming abilities through communication and interaction with others, and benefit from the collective wisdom and experiences. This socially mediated agency allows gamers to establish connections and collaborations with other gamers. Gamers can also co-create and modify the meaning and experience of the game by participating in fan communities and

engaging in the re-creation of game texts (ibid.). The power of this collective agency lies not only in its impact on the game but also in its reversal and redefinition of power structures (Jenkins, 2006a, p.3). These findings are of great help to the analysis of similar but more unique situations in my project.

Overall, in the practice of gaming, there exists a dynamic power relationship between gamers and the game system as a whole. This interactive dynamic power relationship establishes a mutually dependent connection between gamers and the game. The actions and choices of gamers are influenced by the game system, and their identity is shaped and affected to varying degrees by the game system. Understanding the dynamic changes in identity and agency in digital games relies crucially on grasping this interdependent relationship. Additionally, these studies highlight the presence of uncertainty in digital games. Gamers often encounter uncertainty from the game system, unable to predict the outcomes accurately. Similarly, influenced by the dynamically regulated context, changes may occur in game content, triggering their agency. Gamers must continuously adjust their strategies and behaviours to cope with the ever-changing gaming scenarios. This uncertainty interacts with the gamers' identity, influencing their understanding of and participation in the gaming world. Therefore, these studies provide a valuable theoretical framework for my project on identity, agency, and uncertainty in digital games.

Uncertainty

The final theme for this thesis is that of uncertainty, which connects to and weaves within the previous discussions on identity and agency. On the one hand, the government encounters uncertainty in exercising regulatory power. The emergence of new communication and media technologies necessitates constant adaptation to new challenges and the continuous upgrading of regulatory methods. This extends to broader digital space regulation, requiring

the government to continually adjust its strategies to balance the relationship between public participation and control over the digital space. On the other hand, frequent regulatory changes also amplify uncertainty for media companies and individuals. They must adhere to new regulations and censorship technologies to avoid legal consequences, or the risk of their content being deleted or blocked. This is translated and negotiated through gameplay, where uncertainty not only affects how gamers perceive and respond to power dynamics but is also closely tied to how they shape their identities within the context of media regulation. Thus, comprehending the role of uncertainty in this background is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of gamers' gaming practices.

In the following pages of this section, I revisit past studies about the concept of uncertainty and its manifestations in gaming. This exploration aims to acquire insights into how uncertainty influences gamers' decisions when confronting the constantly changing media environment and regulatory policies in my project, and how it shapes their identities in gaming. Ultimately, this comprehensive theoretical framework assists in revealing the multifaceted aspects of gaming practices within the Chinese media regulatory context. Moreover, it aids in a deeper understanding of the universality and significance of uncertainty in everyday life experiences.

Uncertainty Matters

The classic line from the Japanese animated film *Grave of the Fireflies* goes, 'Who knows if tomorrow or an accident comes first?' (Takahata, 1988). Although this line was originally intended to remind us to cherish our present lives, it also suggests that our lives are filled with unknown uncertainties.

Uncertainty has been explored in various disciplinary fields. The field of

mathematics offers classical definitions regarding uncertainty, often closely associated with probability. Liu (2012b, p.5) asserts that probability is a scientific terminology that represents ‘anything that can be quantified by the uncertain measure’ (ibid., p.4). When faced with situations where the sample size is too small to estimate probability distributions effectively, uncertainty is employed to express the level of confidence in events that are less likely to occur (ibid., p.5). A key characteristic of uncertainty is its emphasis on the unknown nature of events and their outcomes, signifying the uncertainty in our judgments about future states (Rowe, 1994, p.745; Teigen and Keren, 2020, p.301). Additionally, Babrow (2001, p.558) highlights the close association of uncertainty with the ‘qualities and uses of information’, particularly when information is insufficient or inconsistent, rendering us unable to determine the probability or outcome of events, thereby giving rise to uncertainty (Rowe, 1994, p.743). Moreover, in the field of economics, uncertainty is considered as a core concept in risk management, focusing on future economic conditions (Davidson, 1999; Grote, 2015; Doshi et al., 2018). While the definitions from these various fields are distinct, they collectively emphasize the relationship between uncertainty and the accuracy or measurability of probability.

While in certain situations, such as using gambling machines, uncertainty can be analysed using well-defined probabilities, the uncertainties faced in everyday social life extend far beyond this scenario. This kind of uncertainty is influenced by various factors, including the unreliability of acquired information or evidence, conflicting information, and a lack of understanding of the processes that lead to outcomes (Einhorn and Hogarth, 1986, p.227). These factors are often referred to as ambiguity or a form of ‘uncertainty about uncertainties’ (ibid.). Thus, the concept of uncertainty maintains its connection to mathematics while introducing an alternative term - ‘ambiguity’.

Kuang (2017, p.6) describes uncertainty caused by the absence or unreliability

of information as a subjective state of ambiguity that individuals may experience. This shifts the understanding of uncertainty from a broad perspective to the perception of this state. When individuals are unable to explain, predict, and understand an event with unknown probabilities, this feeling/state of uncertainty may complexly influence their interaction and communication behaviours. Previous literature has also connected uncertainty with individuals' perceptions. For instance, Norton (1975, p.608) regards uncertainty as 'the state of mind that the ambiguous created', or as a consequence. Wilson et al. (2005, p.5) associate uncertainty with emotions, suggesting that the unknown aspects of the world can trigger uncertainty and become one of the causes of anxiety. Bar-Anan et al. (2009, p.123) view uncertainty as a state similar to not knowing, stating that 'uncertainty refers to the state of an organism that lacks information about whether, where, when, how, or why an event has occurred or will occur'. The distinction with these conceptions of uncertainty lies in the term being used to discuss a subjective response or state of being that is contextualized but not necessarily contingent on a broader environment.

Whether uncertainty is regarded as an objective lack of knowledge/information, a subjective feeling/state, or interpreted from the perspectives of subjectivism and cognitivism, these definitions, while appearing distinct, are simultaneously present and interdependent. The diverse definitions from various disciplines provide robust tools for constructing a more comprehensive and complex understanding of uncertainty. By considering these different influencing factors, this comprehensive understanding allows me to analyse the various types of uncertainty perceived by gamers in gaming and how these uncertainties influence their gaming experiences and behaviours. It also aids in more accurately capturing and interpreting the intricate responses of gamers when facing uncertainty, further exploring how uncertainty relates to identity construction and game engagement.

More specifically, uncertainty permeates as an indispensable and significantly meaningful core theme in my project. Firstly, delving into the uncertainty within game design contributes to a better understanding of the essence and significance of video games. Through this exploration, I scrutinize how the game, as a system, spark gamers' curiosity, provide motivation, and create enjoyable entertainment experiences. It also allows for an in-depth understanding of how the game system guide and restrict gamer choices by introducing elements of uncertainty. Secondly, studying uncertainty aids in a better understanding of the complexity of gaming practices. Gamers often encounter various uncertainties leading to diverse emotional experiences such as excitement, tension, and frustration. Through a thorough investigation of uncertainty, I explore these emotional experiences and their impact on gamer behaviour and engagement. This enables a deeper understanding of why gamers are drawn to uncertainty and how they make choices and decisions when facing uncertainties. Lastly, uncertainty is a key theme in understanding the negotiation of agency/power between gamers and the game system, and even within the broader regulatory context.

Uncertainty in Everyday Lives

From a broader perspective, uncertainty is a highly common condition in our daily lives. As pointed out by Knight (1921, p.207), we live in a constantly changing world, which 'is made up of objects which are practically infinite in variety as aggregates of sensible qualities and modes of behaviour not immediately sensible'. The problems we encounter in lives largely stem from our limited knowledge of the facts. Babrow (2001, p.557) suggests that uncertainty is, to some extent, related to different understandings of 'knowing' among individuals. Individuals, whether within themselves or in interpersonal interactions, have diverse interpretations of 'knowing'. This implies that their

understanding of certainty and uncertainty also varies, and such cognitive differences are notably pronounced across different historical and cultural contexts (ibid., p.559).

Therefore, from this perspective, uncertainty is closely tied to how individuals understand and perceive the characteristics or essence of the world. In certain situations, uncertainty may be viewed as challenges or opportunities, encouraging proactive engagement, while in other contexts, an emphasis is placed on avoiding uncertainty in favour of stability and control. Individual responses to uncertainty vary based on cognitive abilities, information processing styles, and perceptions of risk and reward. As part of everyday experiences, game practices within the specific context also encompass challenges and risks arising from different types of uncertainty. Subsequently, I discuss into the dual evaluation of uncertainty in individuals' daily lives, aiming to comprehensively understand diverse attitudes and decision-making approaches when dealing with uncertainty.

The Negative Aspect of Uncertainty

In everyday lives, the concept of uncertainty can be subject to both negative and positive evaluations. I first review some literature that focuses on negative evaluations of uncertainty. According to Rowe (1994, p.750), as an unknown event approaches, individuals may experience anxiety about the outcome of the event. Uncertainty about past states or events arises from incomplete information or differences in interpreting historical data, which may lead to emotional responses such as recrimination. Structural uncertainty due to complexity arises from the inability to directly process all information in highly complex systems, potentially causing bewilderment. Uncertainty caused by measurement, such as empirical observations and their interpretations, can evoke feelings of frustration, disappointment, or setback. Uncertainty due to

communication is related to social diversity. Varying levels of goals, values, and perspectives among individuals contribute to cognitive differences in information, resulting in uncertainty and potentially triggering feelings of anger (ibid.). It can be observed that anxiety, recrimination, bewilderment, frustration, and anger— the five different types of uncertainties proposed by Rowe (1994)—seem to elicit negative emotional responses.

Indeed, unfamiliar, threatening, and consequential unforeseen events in personal life can shape daily routines, disrupting regular activities and presenting additional challenges (Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p.202). Research indicates that compared to positive events, uncertainty is more likely to trigger strong reactions to negative events, exacerbating already unpleasant situations (Van Den Bos, et al., 2006; Van Den Bos, et al., 2007). For instance, uncertainty may strip individuals of confidence in their behaviour and environment. Once uncertainty is highlighted, individuals may experience intense negative emotions, especially perceiving uncertainty as an ‘emotionally threatening experience’ (Van den Bos, et al., 2006, p.335).

The emotional disturbances and coping behaviours that arise from high levels of uncertainties can be understood through the concept of Intolerance of uncertainty. Intolerance of uncertainty is a psychological concept that refers to the negative emotions and negative behaviours individuals experience when faced with uncertainty and may contribute to the cognitive risk of anxiety (Koerner and Dugas, 2008, p.631; Birrell et al., 2011, p.1200). The concept of uncertainty distress mentioned by Freeston et al. (2020, p.2) shares some similarities, defining as ‘he subjective negative emotions experienced in response to the as yet unknown aspects of a given situation’. They argue that individuals strongly desire knowledge, information, and certainty that are currently unavailable. Without them, individuals may experience worry, varying degrees of anxiety, sadness, anger, and other emotions, which can lead to

behavioural changes (ibid., pp.2-3). However, it is worth noting that, as mentioned in the previous section, studies in mathematics and economics have shown that while increasing the quality or quantity of information, that is, increasing systematic knowledge, can reduce the negative effects of uncertainty, it cannot truly eliminate uncertainty (Babrow, 2001, p.558; Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p.204; Kuang, 2017, p.6).

These negative emotions are commonly experienced by many individuals when facing uncertain situations. Understanding the nature and reasons behind these emotional reactions assist me in better comprehending the emotions gamers may undergo in gaming contexts. In response to this situation, I further investigated how gamers manage these negative emotions and how these emotions influence their gaming experiences and behaviours. Additionally, studying these negative emotions help explain from a broader life experience perspective why uncertainty elements in the game design may trigger different emotional responses in gamers.

The Positive Aspect of Uncertainty

As highlighted by Birrell et al. (2011, p.1205), despite the perception of uncertainty as a negative experience, individuals still desire predictability, exhibiting a positive attitude and coping mechanisms. Indeed, uncertainty can also enhance the enjoyment of positive events. The ‘uncertainty intensification hypothesis’ proposed by Bar-Anan et al. (2009, p.123) focuses on ‘the effects of “online” uncertainty during an emotional event’. In other words, during the occurrence of an uncertain event, people’s attention is highly focused on the unfolding event, thereby intensifying their emotional response to the event. Particularly, when the ongoing event is perceived as positive in individuals’ self-concept, the uncertainty intensifies their emotional response to the positive event (ibid., p.126). Bar-Anan et al. (2009, p.123) also mention

another scenario in which uncertainty increases people's curiosity about an event, leading them to pay more attention to and become emotionally invested in the event (see also Loewenstein, 1994). These indicate that the psychological impact of uncertainty is related to individuals' perceptions. The study by Wilson et al. (2005) supports this idea, as they suggest that if people know that an event involving a certain level of uncertainty will be positive, their actual experience of the event will be more enjoyable (ibid., p.19).

However, it is important to note, as Wilson et al. (2005, p.19) point out, that there are boundary conditions to the happiness brought by uncertainty; too much uncertainty in a positive event can also lead to aversion. Moreover, when uncertainty is reduced, the various emotions elicited by uncertainty, including the positive ones, are weakened (ibid., p.5). Understanding the relationship between uncertainty and positive emotions, as well as the role of meaning construction within this context, is crucial for comprehending the role of uncertainty in gamers' gaming practices.

Both positive and negative uncertainties always prompt individuals to seek their elimination. People make efforts to gather information, seek evidence, construct meaning, and transform the unknown into the known in order to make the world more predictable. Just as we face the development of new technologies, Chun (2016a, pp.75-80) argues that the habits we have formed keep us in specific ways of living or thinking, while the people and things around us are constantly evolving and renewing. We experience a sense of crisis due to the uncertainty brought about by technological changes (ibid., p.85), and we also feel disoriented or anxious when our familiar environment and existing expectations are disrupted (Chun, 2006b, pp.1-2). However, in the face of new media, 'users have become creatures of the update' (ibid., p.2). Chun's viewpoint has greatly inspired this project. On the one hand, it highlights the impact of uncertainty caused by technological development on

individuals and society. On the other hand, it reveals that despite facing uncertainty and crisis, people tend to make efforts to keep up with technological updates and cope with uncertainties through consuming new media technologies. The focus of this project, young gamers and the uncertainty they encounter in the interactive experiences of mobile games, shares certain similarities with the uncertainty resulting from technological development discussed by Chun (2016a, 2016b). Gamers may undergo similar emotional and behavioural responses when facing uncertainties in the context of new media. Therefore, Chun's research (2016a, 2016b) provides important insights for understanding how gamers cope with uncertainties in their gaming practices, and how they adapt to and accept changes, shedding light on various aspects of gamer experiences and game culture.

By examining the positive attitudes displayed by gamers when facing uncertainty in gaming, I can also understand how emotional experience is linked to enjoyment, satisfaction, and the depth of game engagement. This helps me to conduct a more thorough and detailed analysis of the impact of uncertainty on gaming experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the significance of video games in shaping individual and societal dimensions.

Uncertainty in Gaming Practices

Gerrard (2017) and Darling and Keller (2022) suggest that games offer individuals a temporary reprieve from negative experiences in their offline daily lives. However, it is essential to emphasize that online gaming experiences are inherently interconnected with everyday life experiences, influenced by specific cultural, social, and political contexts. This close relationship implies that uncertainty in games may have both positive and negative effects on gamers. The following literature review further explore this perspective, providing crucial background information for my project and aiding in a deeper

investigation into how gamers perceive and respond to uncertainty.

Uncertainty in Game Studies

As early as the definition of play, Caillois (1961, p.7) pointed out that ‘play is free activity. It is also uncertain activity’. The presence of uncertainty in games serves to increase their challenge, making gaming an enjoyable activity where gamers can experience tension, excitement, and a sense of accomplishment (pp.7-8). Although Caillois’ (ibid., p.44) exploration of games encompasses various types of games (agon, alea, mimicry, ilinx), his theory reveals the significance of uncertainty in games within human culture and society, highlighting how uncertainty widely exists in various types of games.

Malaby (2007, p.106) examines games as a widespread phenomenon of human activity, not limited to specific types. He uses the concept of ‘contingency’ to describe the unpredictability of specific situations in games, arguing that contingency makes games interesting and challenging because gamers need to respond to unexpected situations and uncertain outcomes (ibid.). In this process, Malaby (2007) observes that games continually generate various possibilities, and new game practices or meanings generated by gamers can, in turn, offer new ways to play the game. Thus, games and the formation of contingency are ‘an ongoing process’ (p.102), characterized as dynamic and recursive (p.104). More importantly, Malaby’s (2007) perspective that games cannot be completely separated from everyday experiences provides substantial makes me realize that uncertainty in gaming is closely related to gamers’ real-life experiences, which is significant for my project.

However, Costikyan (2013, pp.13-14) argues that the term contingency does not fully capture the interactive nature of games. He (ibid, 2013, p.14) believes that all digital and non-digital games should be interactive, where both the

game's output and the gamer's input behaviour influence each other's states. Thus, uncertainty—Costikyan's (2013) preferred term, as well as mine—is pervasive in the carefully designed structures of gamer-game interactions (Costikyan, 2013, p.8). Costikyan (ibid., p.2) asserts that uncertainty is a crucial element in games to maintain their appeal and enhance gamers' interest. For example, uncertainty creates the challenge in games. By introducing randomness and unknown factors, gamers cannot predict the outcome of each action (p.73). This compels gamers to make tactical and strategic adjustments, making decisions in the face of uncertainty (p.77). Uncertainty also adds fun and anticipation to games. Gamers often encounter uncertain situations during gameplay, such as random events (p.82), hidden information (p.92), or unknown opponent strategies (p.78). These uncertainties stimulate gamers' curiosity and desire for exploration, providing them with excitement and surprises in the game. Moreover, uncertainty injects dramatic elements into games by creating a tense atmosphere, increasing the sense of urgency and suspense (p.86). Costikyan's (2013) analysis of uncertainty in interactive games provides a theoretical foundation and guidance for this project, helping me to gain a deeper understanding of gamers' behaviours and experiences in dealing with uncertainty in mobile gaming practices.

Power et al. (2019, p.2) agree that uncertainty exists in various game elements and can evoke emotional fluctuations in gamers, including excitement, tension, and curiosity. However, unlike Costikyan (2013, p.2), Power et al. (2019, pp.2-3) argue that uncertainty should be used to understand gamers' experiences rather than objectively measure the game. Through evaluating the level of uncertainty by observing gamers' behaviours, emotions, and psychological reactions, they (ibid., p.20) find that uncertainty in games also has boundary conditions - similar to what I found in the review of literatures on uncertainty in everyday lives (Wilson et al., 2005, p.19, see page 62). Gamers' perception of uncertainty in game practices is dynamic, and when uncertainty decreases or

disappears, they may feel a loss of motivation. Appropriate uncertainty motivates them to face challenges positively, but excessive uncertainty diminishes gamers' positive emotions and gives rise to negative experiences or emotions (Power et al., 2019, pp.25-26). These studies highly relevant to my research objects, as I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how gamers perceive and respond to uncertainty in mobile gaming experiences, as well as how uncertainty influences their emotions and behaviours.

Uncertainty can evoke different types of curiosity, according to To et al. (2016, p.2), which is considered as an important reason that why uncertainty in games can be attractive. Curiosity, defined as the information gap between individuals' existing knowledge and their desired knowledge, prompting their further information-seeking to narrow this gap (Loewenstein, 1994, p.75; To et al., 2016, p.2). It 'lies deep at the heart of play' (To et al., 2016, p.3), motivating gamers to delve into uncertainties (see also Silvia, 2012, pp.157-158; Galdieri et al., 2020, p.177). As gamers invest emotionally in these unknowns, curiosity often yields feelings of joy (Järvinen, 2008, p.103). Loewenstein (1994, pp.76-77) argues that curiosity itself, like uncertainty, is an unpleasant state, but the process of satisfying curiosity is enjoyable. This suggest that individuals are willing to tolerate uncertainty in pursuit of the pleasure derived from resolving curiosity. However, moderate uncertainty is more likely to effectively arouse curiosity, which is similar to Bar-Anan's (2009, p.126), Wilson et al. (2005, p.19) and Power et al. (2019, pp.25-26)' discussions of uncertainty boundaries.

Furthermore, Kumari et al. (2019, p.352) discovered that gamers are drawn to uncertainty also due to their motivation and personal experiences. First, the uncertainty in games gives importance and impact to each decision, stimulating gamers' motivation to pursue success and achieve goals (p.354). Second, uncertainty provides diverse choices and possibilities, allowing gamers to make decisions according to their own will and preferences, thus

experiencing autonomy and a sense of control (p.355). Finally, gamers constantly interact with uncertainties, adapting and adjusting their strategies and actions. When gamers can effectively deal with uncertainties and succeed, they feel a sense of mastery and achievement (p.356). Kumari et al.'s (2019) research provides a deeper understanding of the role of uncertainty in the game system and is also relevant to the importance of understanding how gamers face and deal with uncertainties in mobile gaming practices.

This review of uncertainty in the field of game research provides significant theoretical context for my project. Drawing from perspectives of scholars such as Caillois (1961), Costikyan (2013), Power et al. (2019), and Kumari et al. (2019), the review demonstrates the multifaceted role of uncertainty in game practices. This includes stimulating curiosity, increasing the challenge of games, providing autonomy and agency, and eliciting emotional responses from gamers. These viewpoints not only offer a robust theoretical foundation for understanding gamers' experiences of uncertainty in gaming but also highlight the connection between uncertainty in gaming practices and real-life experiences, providing crucial insights for exploring gamers' attitudes and behaviours towards uncertainty in mobile gaming practices.

Different Types of Uncertainty

The previous subsection informs that uncertainty plays a crucial role in both game design and gamer experiences. It increases the challenge, attractiveness, and enjoyment of games while also influencing gamers' psychological states and behaviours. Building upon these studies, my project aims to further explore the types of uncertainty that gamers encounter during gameplay and how they respond to these uncertainties, evaluating whether their responses are positive or negative. Therefore, analysing the different types of uncertainties in gaming practices is an important first step. Many game

designers and scholars have analysed the sources or classifications of uncertainty from various perspectives. These works have provided varying degrees of inspiration for my project.

Caillois (1961) emphasizes the sources and impacts of uncertainty in different game modes. For example, in Agon, which emphasizes competition and skill, uncertainty arises from opponents' actions in seemingly evenly matched challenges (pp.14-15). In Alea, which emphasizes chance and luck, uncertainty stems from the unpredictable outcomes of drawing lots, rolling dice, or other random events, where 'winning is the result of fate' (p.17). In Mimicry, which emphasizes imitation and role-playing, rules and the success of imitation are uncertain (pp.22-23). In Ilinx, which is based on the pursuit of vertigo, uncertainty arises from the unpredictability of sensory and emotional experiences (pp.23-24). According to Caillois (1961, pp.10-11), uncertainty persists throughout the entire game process, especially the game outcome. When a game no longer has any uncertainty, gamers lose interest as they no longer enjoy the game, and the game comes to an end (p.173). Caillois's (1961) classification provides a framework for understanding how uncertainty interacts with core elements of different types of games.

Malaby (2007) argues that not all games have a clear outcome. Consequently, he places more emphasis on the occurrence of unforeseen events during gameplay and the variability that emerges from meaning production process, asserting its connection to our everyday life experiences. Firstly, Malaby (2007, p.108) identifies that stochastic contingency, similar to random events in games like Alea (Caillois, 1961, p.17), has become implicit in computer games. Secondly, social contingency arises from uncertainty about other players' resources or actions. Thirdly, performative contingency reflects the risk of success or failure in gamers' actions, resembling real-life challenges. Lastly, semiotic contingency highlights the fluidity of meanings in gaming, where

symbols and interpretations constantly evolve, adding to the unpredictability of gameplay (Malaby, 2007, p.108). While Malaby (ibid.) uses the term of ‘contingency’, I believe these classifications largely align with the broader sense of uncertainty that my project focuses on. In particular, the perspective on semiotic contingency emphasizes the gamer’s interpretation and decoding of symbols in gaming, as well as the interactive negotiation and construction of meaning during gameplay. This highlights the agency and proactive capabilities of gamers in gaming practices, as discussed in Chapter 5.

Costikyan (2013, pp.71-103) gives a thorough classification and analysis of sources of uncertainty in games. He proposed 11 categories, encompassing gamer skills, game mechanics, gamer interactions, randomness, rule complexity, hidden information, narrative development, game updates, and more. These sources of uncertainty constitute key elements of the gaming experience, influencing both game design and gamer engagement. Furthermore, Costikyan (2013, p.10) believes that uncertainty experienced by gamers is more crucial. This presents stronger emphasis on the roles and behaviours of gamers in gaming practices, as well as how they perceive and interpret in-game events. This serves as a crucial theoretical foundation for exploring gamer behaviours and experiences in coping with uncertainty in mobile gaming within the context of my project.

Power et al. (2019) and Kumari et al. (2019) further emphasize the importance of player experience on this issue, which greatly inspired my project. For example, Power et al. (2019, pp.23-25) classify uncertainty into external and internal types, associating them with gamers’ real experiences. This viewpoint underscores the pivotal understanding that how gamers perceive and navigate uncertainty is fundamental to their gaming experience. They aptly assert that a delicate equilibrium must be maintained between uncertainty and gamers’ experiences; otherwise, gamers may lose interest in the uncertainty woven into

the game. This perspective facilitates an understanding of how diverse types of uncertainty influence gamer engagement, involvement, and the delicate boundary of uncertainty. Kumari et al. (2019, pp.353-357), approaching the subject from the gamer's standpoint, categorize uncertainty into game uncertainty, gamer uncertainty, and outcome uncertainty, emphasizing the importance of uncertainty in igniting gamer curiosity and positive efficacy (ibid.). This classification contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how gamers address and navigate uncertainty in gaming, presenting a crucial viewpoint for investigating gamer behaviours and experiences in mobile gaming.

Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, I discuss each of the methods utilised for this project, explaining both the rationale and the logistics for each approach, and connecting the methods to the research questions that underpin this project. It should be noted at the outset however, that the theme of uncertainty, which formed a continuous thread throughout the previous chapter, is also central to this chapter. The methods adopted for this project each come from negotiations not only with participants but also – as with the case of the digital diary which I built as a WeChat mini-programme - with regulators and organisations (Tencent). This not only necessitates an immediate upfront recognition of negotiated methods on which this project rests. It also goes some way to explaining my use of multiple methods and approaches, which each came with different compromises but also offer multiple perspectives on the issues discussed. The methods have produced rich and sometimes surprising data as is usual with quantitative approaches, but they have also been at times highly uncertain: when I was unsure if Tencent would allow me to launch the WeChat mini-programme, when I was unable to recruit participants in the ways I had originally intended, when participants offered surprising new avenues of exploration through their input.

In many respects of course, this project is also built to be uncertain. Collecting multiple types of data in order to address my first research question which sought to explore gamers values and identities has meant that some data overshadowed other data. I became more interested in gamers emotional expressions regarding game characters (because this seems to reflect wider identity negotiations) than (for example) in their articulated objectives when playing *Onmyoji*, and these interests have also shaped what is ultimately presented here.

Introduction to Key Methods

My project combines the methods of formal analysis, digital diaries, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the uncertainties faced by gamers in *Onmyoji*, how gamers construct their identities within specific gaming contexts and delve deeper into the understanding of gaming and gaming practices through power relationships. These three components of my project collectively demonstrate how uncertainty permeates the entire research process and plays a pivotal role in the study. When confronted with uncertainty in the game, gamers not only need to select appropriate game roles but also decide how to act in uncertain situations. These choices and actions not only shaped their in-game identities but also reflected their coping strategies and values when positioning in the specific power dynamic.

The following subsections discussed why I considered these methods to be the most suitable for addressing the research questions, and how the theme of uncertainty permeated my project as an integral part of the methodology.

Formal Analysis

Formal analysis, as defined by Lankoshi and Bjork (2015), involves closely examining an artifact and describing the relationships between its specific elements in detail (ibid., p.23). I was interested in utilising formal analysis to examine how character-related visual representations and narratives in *Onmyoji* influence gamers' identity and identification, identify potential sources of uncertainties provided by *Onmyoji* and understand how the game functions as a complex system to provide gamers with a unique gaming experience. In the context of game studies, this method allows researchers to gain a better understanding of the game system and its components, such as the rules and

control schemes, as well as how the system is presented to the gamer, including interface design and visual style (Fernandez-Vara, 2014, p.16).

Drawing upon the perspectives of Lankoshi and Bjork (2015, p.23), Fernandez-Vara (2014, p.16), Cameron (2017), and Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi (2017), I employed the method of Formal Analysis in this project to analyse the character-related narrative development of *Onmyoji*, with a specific focus on how visual elements influence the representation of characters in the game (and its derivatives) (RQ1). I also examined *Onmyoji* as a system, to identify the elements and mechanisms of gameplay that introduce uncertainties. Through comprehensive examination and analysis of the game system, I uncovered sources of uncertainty, facilitating a better comprehension of the structure and functionality of the game system and integrating the concept of uncertainty throughout the system (RQ3). The formal analysis method permits a multidimensional analysis of *Onmyoji*, including character design, narrative, and gameplay elements. This multidimensional analysis helps to deepen the understanding of how different factors influence uncertainties and reveals their interrelationships. And in turn, this understanding of uncertainty provided rich information and insight into how gamers construct their identities and identifications in the game.

Approach

Before conducting formal analysis, I engaged in repeated playthroughs of *Onmyoji* with specific research objectives, including trying different methods to acquire various Shikigami characters, documenting character-related narrative elements, getting familiar with the updated gameplay and content, and identifying potential sources of uncertainty in the game environment. Additionally, I noted the different feelings these game contents evoked in me.

While I have been playing *Onmyoji* since its release in 2016, as drawing from Lankoshi and Bjork (2015, p.26), I acknowledged that replaying the game, as the crucial initial step of formal analysis, yield fresh perspectives and deepen my understanding of game mechanics. During these playthroughs, I paid close attention to details, discovered new gameplay options, and gained deeper understandings of narrative developments and character relationships. Following MIT OpenCourseWare's (2011) recommendations, I took notes to document my observations, including keywords of my gaming experiences, their relationships with my themes, mind maps of the game system, trying to sort out the logic for further analysis (see Appendix 4). These notes served as indispensable references during the review of my gameplay experiences and data analysis, facilitating reflection and providing context for the written and verbal expression data provided by participants through the WeChat mini-programme and interviews. This understanding, particularly concerning narrative dynamics, character representation, and sources of uncertainty, strengthens the evidence for my project.

Then, I conducted a formal analysis on the characters, focusing on their visual presentation and narrative aspects (in Chapter 4, see page 133), as well as on the gameplay mechanics, particularly exploring potential uncertainties inherent in the gaming experience of *Onmyoji* (in Chapter 6, see page 250). Continuing with the analysis, I approached the *Onmyoji* elements in relation to four foci: **background settings**, **in-game scenes**, **character settings**, and **items and props** (see Table 1). It is important to note, as highlighted by Lankoshi and Bjork (2015, pp.25-26), that these elements interact within the game system and should be considered alongside the game's rules, goals, and mechanics. And then, it helps better understand how these elements related to characters influence gamers' identification and how uncertainties in gameplay reflect power dynamics. This implies that the elements listed below contribute to multiple aspects of formal analysis, rather than just one.

First and foremost, background settings served as the foundation of the game world. Analysing background settings not only provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the narrative context upon which character development is based, but also indicated how uncertainty was overtly woven into the environment of the game in relation to (for example) unknown factors, random events, or unpredictable narrative developments. These manifested in turn through spoken dialogue, cut scenes, and scrolls, and their relevant elements for analysis are listed in the table below.

Table 1. Game Elements for Regarding Background Settings.

Key Elements	Descriptions
Visual Aesthetics	Evaluate the art style, colour palette, and overall atmosphere.
Narrative Significance	Determine how they contribute to world-building, storytelling, and character development.
Operability and Functionality	Examine how they can be operated and contribute to creating atmosphere, setting the tone, and providing context for actions.

Secondly, in-game scenes encompassed interactive environments and locations within the game. I explored 7 in-game scenes (the Courtyard, the Main Chapters, the Summon Scene, the Demon Parade, the Shikigami List, the Heian Tales, and the Duel Scenes) which occurred at different moments in the game in order to understand the main and subplot narratives gamers experienced and how these plot elements collectively influence their perception of the narrative and possible emotional responses. I also examined the potential uncertainties present in these scenes, such as random events, randomly generated enemies, or unpredictable terrain changes. The table below summarized this approach.

Table 2. Game Elements for Regarding In-game Scenes.

Key Elements	Descriptions
Rules and Goals	Identify the rules governing gamer actions and how they align with the goals.
Gamer Exploration	Assess the degree of gamer control, decision-making

	opportunities, objects to interact with, NPCs to engage with, or obstacles to overcome.
Feedback Mechanisms	Evaluate the feedback mechanisms provided to gamers, including visual and auditory cues.
Narrative Integration	Contributions to storytelling, character development, and world-building.

Then, character settings involved the design and development of key characters in the game. I explored the character settings of Shikigami and the Paper Doll, and I was interested in the characteristics and abilities of these characters and how they interacted with uncertainties. Moreover, by identifying visual design elements, I examined the visual representation of Shikigami characters to understand how they influenced gamers' perceptions and identification of the game narrative. What I would like to add here is that, the formal analysis of character representation considers *Onmyoji* and its rich array of derivative media works, such as derivative games, related cartoon series, animations, fan creations, and so on. This is because I took into account gamers' transmedia gaming practices. The table below lists the key elements I analysed in this part.

Table 3. Game Elements for Regarding Character Settings.

Key Elements	Descriptions
Visual Design	Evaluate their visual appearance, like costumes, hairstyle, facial features, body proportions, and overall aesthetic presentation.
Personality Traits	Assess their personality traits and characteristics, like demeanour, attitude, and emotional expression.
Scarcity and Rarity	Examine any changes in characters' behaviour, interactions, relationship building, or motivations over time.
Character Operability	Analyse the degree of control and manipulation gamers have over characters
Character Storylines	Examine narrative clues in their individual quests, side missions, and biography.
Cultural Influences	Consider any cultural influences or references apparent in the character's design, such as traditional attire, cultural symbols, or historical contexts.

Representation Across Different Media:	Analyse differences or similarities in visual design, personality portrayal, backstory interpretation, and character development across different iterations or adaptations

Lastly, items and props played a significant role in the game and could influence gameplay and gamer decisions. Through analysing where and when items appeared, how they appeared, and what function they offered the character and gamer, I identified factors that might support narratives, introduce, elevate, or decrease uncertainties, such as randomly dropped items, unpredictable item effects, or randomly generated attributes. I explored the 5 most common items and props in particular (Amulet, Soul, Hyakki Yakou Ticket, Game Currencies, and Game Tokens), a selection based on my repeated gaming experiences, which led me to conclude that these items are pivotal for acquiring and developing Shikigami characters, as depicted in the table below.

Table 4. Game Elements for Regarding Items and Props.

Key Elements	Descriptions
Functionality	Evaluate their intended purpose, usability, and effectiveness in achieving specific objectives.
Acquisition and Availability	Analyse how they are obtained, unlocked, or purchased, as well as their availability and accessibility.
Utility and Effectiveness	Examine their impact on gamer performance, strategy, and overall success in the game.
Customization and Upgrades	Consider any opportunities for modifying their attributes, enhancing their capabilities, or personalizing their appearance.
Scarcity and Rarity	Assess their availability in relation to gamer progression, difficulty level, or specific in-game conditions.
Storylines	Examine their narrative significance, backstory, or cultural significance.

Through conducting a systematic formal analysis that integrated these game elements with the game's rules, goals, and mechanics, I gained a deeper understanding of the sources and effects of uncertainty within the game

system. This comprehensive analysis allowed me to explore the interrelationships among different elements and identify factors that had significant impacts on gamer experiences and decisions. Through formal analysis, I examined how uncertainty intertwined with the characteristics, abilities, and development of game characters that gamers encountered. This interaction in turn influenced the degree of gamer identification with the characters, as gamers needed to make decisions and choices based on the uncertainty factors, shaping their perceptions and perspectives of the characters. Therefore, through Formal Analysis, I gained in-depth insights into uncertainty within the game system (RQ3) and further addressed the research question regarding gamer identification construction (RQ1).

Whilst Formal Analysis details observable game elements, it does not consider how these may be responded to, affectively experienced or interpreted (for example) by gamers as they play. Indeed, factors such as gamer psychology, emotional experiences, and narrative interpretations are not easily obtained directly through formal analysis method. Additionally, the construction of identification, agency negotiation related to power dynamics, and the perception of uncertainties within gameplay are dynamic processes influenced by gamer decisions, game events, and interactions. It was therefore necessary, as I go on to explain, to utilise other methods in order to include and consider these elements to answer my research questions.

Digital Diaries

The method of diary requires the research subjects to self-report personal experiences – what they actually did or experienced- in a continuous and complete period of time (Gillian, 2001, p.192), and also comments on their psychological state, summaries of their experiences and reflects on relevant behaviours. Alaszewski (2006, p.2) defines the ‘diary’ as ‘a document created

by an individual who has maintained a regular, personal and contemporaneous record'. All of the inputted information becomes research data (Bolger et al., 2003, p.581). It is the continuous and repetitive nature of the data over time that is insightful in term of capturing everyday experiences and reflections (Alaszewski, 2006, p.2). The three characteristics noted above ('regular', 'personal', and 'contemporaneous') also constitute the instruction for this method in terms of input.

In this project, I wanted to use a diary method to capture how individuals and groups perform and interpret situations during the gaming process, as well as motivations behind participation in order to understand better their decision-making process. The Digital Diaries method asked participants to use a WeChat mini-programme, which I named WeLog, for a consecutive period of 10 days. They were encouraged to record their experiences openly and extensively in the game and their interactions related to the game. They were also encouraged to express their thoughts, reflections, and interpretations as openly and in as much detail as possible.

The language, memes, shared content, and opinions expressed by gamers in their diaries are important manifestations of self-expression for their gaming practices. These self-expressions involve their preferences for the game, choices of game objectives, and adherence to behavioural norms within the game, all of which help reveal the values gamers pursue in the game. Gamers' diaries also reflect their interactions with other gamers, non-player characters (NPCs), and the game systems.

Approach

I used a digital diary method based on WeChat mini-programme in order to create, in keeping with more contemporary methods (see Bolger et al., 2003;

p.596), more efficient and convenient tool fit to mobile gamers existing lifestyle. Using WeLog to collect data on gamers' gaming experiences and emotional expressions offers several distinct advantages. Firstly, WeLog developed on the WeChat platform is more aligned with the daily usage habits of the digital generation in China. WeChat has consistently been one of the most popular instant social media applications in China. Built on the WeChat platform, WeChat mini-programmes do not require downloading or installation, allowing users to easily access them by scanning QR codes or clicking on shared links sent by WeChat friends (Yan and Zhao, 2018). The WeChat mini programmes use already familiar aesthetics and carry over much of the same functionality as WeChat, much reducing barriers such as learning new skills, whilst also improving both data collection efficiency and participant satisfaction. My participants only needed to have a mobile phone logged into WeChat to be able to open the WeLog specifically designed for this project. Given my participants are all gamers of the mobile game *Onmyoji*, it was a safe hypothesis that they would all be high mobile phone users. The consistency and coherence of this user interface contribute to a positive user experience, making participants willing to actively engage in the research and consistently record their gaming experiences.

In addition to its user-friendly and accessible nature, WeChat mini-programme also provides a secure and privacy-protected platform for my participants. What I mean by this is that the security and privacy provisions resonate those on WeChat and are therefore also familiar and expected. As a popular social media application, WeChat has established a comprehensive mechanism for user privacy protection. Using WeChat mini-programme as the data collection platform maintained existing and accepted measures to protect participants' personal information and game data. Whilst I cannot therefore claim that the WeLog was 'secure' or 'private' in terms of data privacy (because ultimately Tencent had access to these data as part of their user agreements in keeping

with wider social media and extractive data practices), I can claim that within the existing privacy settings and structures of WeChat, my WeLog operated as securely as was possible. The important element for me was ease of use and familiarity. Another layer here was trust, and I felt that participants were more likely to trust the WeLog and me as a Chinese scholar operating from a UK institution, if we used a familiar platform.

Furthermore, using WeLog made the process of diary writing more digitized and enjoyable for participants, and ultimately maintained their involvement throughout the project. Initially designed by myself, the WeLog interfaces underwent further negotiated with Tencent as part of the launch process. Appendix 5(ii) displays the interfaces I designed for WeLog along with specific explanations of their functions. WeLog incorporates convenient and familiar (for users of WeChat) input and expression functions for participants. Some design features made the process more enjoyable for my participants. For instance, the online text input function allowed participants to record and share their gaming experiences and feelings by typing continuously (without word limit). They could also utilize the built-in emoji provided by the WeChat system to enhance their expression. The image uploading function enabled participants to select and upload any image they want to share after completing the text input. These images could be screenshots of the game or their fan creations, among others.

As suggested above, it was also important to capture data through devices already used by participants, so the ask and commitment was not unusual. In *Onmyoji*, each task requires approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. I made sure that the diary entries took no longer than 10 minutes as this could become arduous. Mobile games provide convenience for gamers, insofar as the mobile device is carried with people, in their pockets, on their person: the convenience and embodied familiarity of checking in (Turkle, 2008, p.122, Farman, 2012,

p.21) would have been disrupted if I had asked gamers to record their gaming behaviour in detail through other modes such as video or typed, written, spoken. The playing time of mobile games is also flexible, making it unrealistic to record their gaming behaviours during fixed time periods throughout the day: I needed a method fit to their existing practices. The WeLog I developed for this project included features that enabled participants to review and make instant modifications – to start and stop and change their entries. The idea here was to fit into existing use, to create a tool that could be engaged with during a spare moment on public transport, or while sitting in a café; that could be picked up, looked at, put down. Participants could also access their completed diaries from the diary list on the homepage at any time. This feature helps participants recall what they had experienced and written in their diaries. Within 24 hours of submitting their diaries, participants could open WeLog and make deletions, modifications, or additions to the submitted content. This flexibility and control allowed participants to adjust and enhance the content of their diaries, creating tasks that might have in the first instance been reactive and then later been more reflective. It enabled them to more fully record their gaming experiences and feelings. The ability to review and make instant modifications is one of the important reasons why this method was chosen for this project not least because I felt it was in keeping with the existing experiences of playing *Onmyoji* on mobile phones for my participants.

Participants submitted their digital diaries on a unified platform, which created consistency in relation to the inputted data. This created uniformity of data which could be coded, sorted, and tagged (by me). The diaries submitted by participants appeared in the backend database of WeLog. I could access these data in the backend database, organized by participant ID, including submission time and shared content. It meant I was also able to monitor participation levels, see patterns of participation and identify any difficulties participants may encounter during usage and provide necessary technical

support. By observing the completeness and submission time of each diary, I could identify if any participants have usage-related issues and offer technical assistance or answer their questions in a timely manner. While I am minded that collecting data in this way created new knowledges and new algorithmic identities for my participants (see Cheney-Lippold, 2017, p.124, Sumpter, 2006, p.9). I should note that in keeping with other digital methods (see for example Rogers, 2019, p.109; D'Ignacio and Klein, 2020, p.111; Gehl, 2012, p.105) only I had access to the backend database and the coding and organising of data was premised on research requirements and management.

At this point, it is important to note that using a WeChat mini-programme created both affordances (as noted above) and restrictions. The conditions of possibility (Cheney-Lippold 2017, p.124) for using the WeLog meant adherence to Tencents regulatory policies for both myself as a researcher and the participants of the study. During the registration and launch process, for example, I encountered multiple phone inquiries from Tencent's official department and personally visited relevant government departments to submit physical documents and undergo photo authentication processes. This demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of registering and launching a mini-programme within the media regulatory context in China, but it also enabled me to experience this regulatory context first hand. In what follows I briefly explain the complexities of working with Tencent.

Modifications to Research Design

After designing and developing WeLog, I tested it with 9 participants to gather feedback on their user experience. Concurrently, I conducted tests on the data storage and retrieval functions in the backend of the WeChat mini-programme. Based on the testing feedback and participant needs (see Appendix 5, iv), I made adjustments and improvements, such as optimizing the interface layout

and enhancing functionality, and fixing any errors. This iterative process aimed to align the mini-programme with participant expectations and usage habits. My goal was to balance regulatory requirements with research objectives while ensuring ease of use and fit for purpose. By actively engaging with participants and integrating their feedback of using WeLog, I believe I enhanced the quality and effectiveness of the project.

During this review phase of WeLog, I came face to face with the rigorous process of media censorship. The WeChat Official Account Platform scrutinized the frontend program I uploaded, starting with a review of basic account information, including the account name, introduction, logo design, and service scope. Following that, as indicated in Weixin Docs (2021), they assessed the alignment of the WeChat mini-programme's service categories with the services provided, ensuring no links associated with the categories loaded illegal or non-compliant content. Other aspects, such as basic functionality, usability, integrity, user privacy, and data security, underwent thorough review. The content of WeLog's interfaces was examined to ensure compliance with regulations, including the prohibition of fraudulent or deceptive content, content harmful to national security or interests, and explicit or violent material (ibid.). Additionally, WeLog was required to have a filtering function to prevent inappropriate content. Upon completion of the review process for all these aspects, WeLog then was able to be submitted for online release. This process gave me valuable lived experience of the regulatory context for online engagement, through which I was subject to rigid regulatory requirements. Looking back, I feel that this enabled a much deeper understanding of the kinds of negotiations gamers enter into when gaming online in relation to the regulatory context, and it made me more attuned to gamers comments with regard to this.

Before the official launch of WeLog, it was necessary to complete the ICP

(Internet Content Provider) filing, a regulatory requirement aimed at preventing illegal website operations and combating the dissemination of harmful internet information. The ICP filing system, implemented by the government, regulates internet information services. Despite WeLog operating on a non-profit basis, it still had to undergo ICP filing procedures to engage in information collection, development, and processing. To fulfil the ICP filing, I prepared necessary documents and submitted them to the internet service provider, initiating the review process. Upon approval of the initial review, the information was forwarded to the local regulatory authority, which requested physical copies of required documents, including domain name, server information, purpose of the WeChat mini-programme, presented content, and nonprofit status. This process was deeply uncertain and nerve wrecking not least because the method relied on a successful outcome. I went back and forth for some time, amending details and clarifying demands.

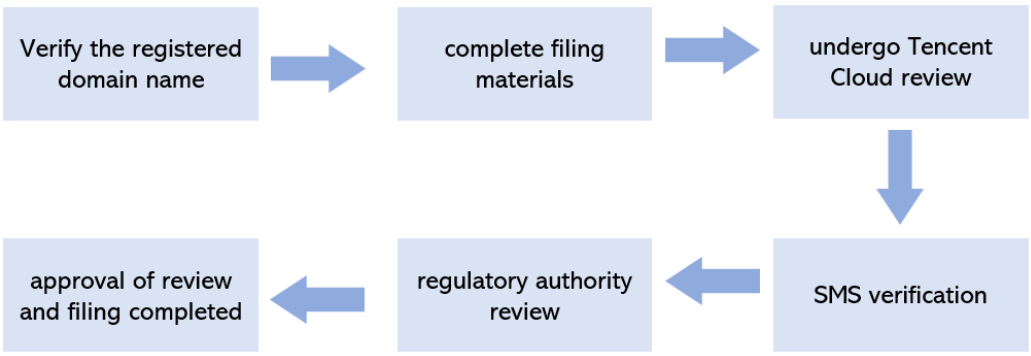

Figure 1. A schematic diagram of the WeChat mini-programme review process.

As highlighted in Chapter 2 regarding media regulation in China, the emphasis on self-regulation has been a key policy of Chinese internet regulatory authorities. This policy allows for more nuanced supervision and management of media content through new media technologies (Weber and Jia, 2007, p.773). Mobilizing Chinese internet companies and individual website administrators to manage media content complements the top-down

censorship by the central government and is considered more effective (Zhang, 2006). Relative policies officially implemented since 2005 provided clear regulations for non-operational websites providing internet information services, namely the ICP registration (Integra Group, 2023). Essentially, ICP registration is an online registration of non-operational ICPs nationwide, creating a unified national website information database for rapid identification of websites hosting harmful information (Goclick China, 2021). At one point in my ICP submission, I had to provide identity verification by submitting a photo holding my identification card in front of a specific background provided by the regulatory authority. This felt very exposing, but it was only upon successful verification, that the application entered formal review status. I feel that this processes overtly revealed many of the power structures and regulations experienced (in far more covert ways) by both gamers and general users of the internet.

Having undertaken the project, in the end, I believe that the digital diary based on the WeChat mini-programme was a highly suitable method for capturing gamers' daily gaming experiences and emotional expressions in this project insofar as it fit to their already existing practices, and this ultimately benefitted the project. The experience of engaging with Tencent offered me valuable lived experience of navigating within a broader regulatory context and meant that I remained highly aware of this throughout the project. The experience also made me much more aware of power dynamics and negotiations which always underpin research, but which can often be less visible to the researcher (Skeggs, 1991, p.136). This experience taught me that just as I was being positioned in a less powerful and negotiated relationship with Tencent, so I was positioning my participants, and it enabled me to have the confidence to change a number of strategies and approaches in terms of recruitment and communication which I detail later in the chapter.

In-depth Interviews

In-depth interviews are recognized as a well-organised dialogue process that happens between the researcher and the respondent (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.113). The idea behind them is to not only understand the in-depth description and insights of respondents on specific things, activities, or events, but also find out the influencing factors behind them (ibid.). Through looking critically at how respondents articulate their understandings and identifications about the culture around them, for example, what words they choose to use and how they construct their words, the in-depth interview is a method that enables the researcher to examine the world view and ideology of individuals (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002, p.179; Shaw, 2012, p. 30). As Cote and Raz (2015, p.93) argue, the gaming process is actually a process of continuous interaction between gamers and different characters in the game, the game content, and also other gamers. This affords very little space for conscious reflection or articulation of motivations, agency, or uncertainty (for example). In order to then gather these data, I utilised in-depth interviews.

As suggested earlier, in this project, the method of in-depth interviews was used in conjunction with the diary. Zimmerman and Weider (1977, p.483) argue that such a combination of diary and diary-based interview could be seen as a method that approximates participatory observation. Firstly, digital diaries and in-depth interviews, as two different data collection methods, provide diversified and multi-dimensional sources of data for this project. The digital diaries capture the observations, experiences, and reflections of my participants in their daily gaming experiences, while the diary-based interviews allow for a deeper understanding of their thoughts, decision-making processes, and emotional changes throughout the entire gaming process. Secondly, diary-based interviews offer a reflective space where participants are invited to comment on their diary entries particularly in relation to the themes of this

project; they are also spaces where gamers contextualise their gaming experiences through wider conversations around gaming and everyday life. This means they offer depth of understanding at a range of levels for my project. Put simply: The digital diaries provide participants' self-recorded gaming experiences and viewpoints, while the diary-based interviews enable us to contextualise and further explore those experiences and viewpoints.

Furthermore, by conducting digital diary research first and then proceeding to diary-based interviews, there is some foundation of 'shared understanding' insofar as I can make the questions posed during the diary-based interviews more targeted and insightful (Pitkänen, 2015, p.117). Indeed, as Zimmerman and Weider (1977, p.489) suggest, diaries serve as a way to generate questions for subsequent interviews. By synthesizing the participants' recorded gaming experiences and emotional expressions in the diaries, I was able to identify themes closely related to my research questions and topics. These analyses guided the design of questions in the diary-based interviews, making them more specific, targeted, and insightful. Ultimately, I believe that employing a combination of in-depth interviews and digital diaries is a wise approach for many reasons related to rapport, support, interest and of course by integrating these two types of data, I gain a comprehensive and detailed understanding of gamers' gaming practices, while also enhancing the reliability and effectiveness of the project.

Approach

Before commencing diary-based interviews, I conducted a pilot test with three participants: Participant 6, Participant 17, and Participant 18. I collected their feedback and opinions on the interview questions and procedures. These three participants had been involved in the entire research process, providing valuable and positive feedback, and maintaining a good relationship with me.

Importantly, they represent gamers with diverse gaming experiences, including those with extensive gaming experience, limited gaming experience, and complete novices. During the pilot test, I used a prepared interview guide to ask them questions and closely observed their reactions and responses. I paid attention to their level of understanding of the questions, the fluency of their expressions, and their ability to accurately convey their gaming experiences and perspectives. After the pilot interviews, I encouraged these three participants to provide feedback on the questions. We discussed their thoughts and impressions regarding the interview process and the questions I posed. They were able to share their understanding and suggest any clarifications or improvements that could be made to the questions. They also provided suggestions for other key themes or aspects that could be explored. Taking their feedback into consideration, I revised and adjusted the interview questions accordingly. This involved clarifying the wording of the questions, adjusting the order and logic of the questions, and adding new questions or removing irrelevant ones. For example, Participant 17 suggested using more moderate and tactful language to inquire about participants' evaluation of media regulation policies, even though concerns about media regulation sensitivity need not be overly emphasized.

My final interview guide (see Appendix 6) consisted of four parts. The first part revolves around some general questions about participants' gaming experiences, aiming to make participants feel more relaxed at the beginning of the interview, encouraging them to share their genuine thoughts and experiences. The second part comprised individualised questions derived from the participants' submitted digital diaries, specifically targeting the content that I found interesting and in need of more detailed explanations. This individualized and targeted approach allowed me to gain deeper insights and contextualise the diary data, offering additional detail and motivation behind them. Also, these questions relate to my three research questions, where I

aimed to gather unique insights and opinions from the participants. This was a more open-ended discussion to stimulate participants' thoughts and expressions, encouraging them to share their understanding and evaluation of aspects such as identity, agency, and uncertainty in their gaming practices. The third part includes questions for participants to reflect on their overall assessment of their gaming experiences and any changes in their understanding before and after participating in the project, giving me insight into their dynamic changes and reflections during the gaming process. The fourth part tries to get feedback about their opinions on the digital diary and interview research methods. This helped me evaluate the effectiveness and acceptability of the methods, and also provided me with some suggestions for improvement to enhance the design and implementation in the future. I allowed time for follow up questions during the interviews to pursue unexpected avenues or clarify issues. Many of the insights gained throughout the interview process were unexpected, providing me with pleasant surprises and enriching the overall experience.

The decision to conduct one-on-one diary-based interviews online via Tencent Meeting, a video conferencing platform developed by Tencent, was based on several considerations. Firstly, at the time of conducting the interviews, China was experiencing a tense situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For an extended period, many people in China chose to reduce their time spent outside and in-person social interactions, including my participants. Online interviews provided a safe and viable method for participants to engage in the interviews. Secondly, the participants in this project were in eight different cities in China and the United Kingdom, with the furthest participant being nearly 9,000 kilometres away from my location. Conducting face-to-face interviews was not feasible during this time both because of lockdown restrictions and because of comparability of data: I wanted to maintain the same approach throughout the project. Online interviews eliminated the limitations imposed by

geographic distance, allowing participants to remain in their respective cities, which I felt ultimately increased participation. They could schedule the interviews at their convenience and use their familiar and comfortable technological devices, in a familiar setting. Tencent Meeting is a well-known video conferencing and remote collaboration tool in China, and I wanted to ensure uptake and remove as many barriers to participation as possible.

I formally initiated the interviews after all my participants completed and submitted their digital diaries on WeLog. Since the digital diary study was conducted in three rounds, participants from the first round had to wait for nearly three weeks before the diary-based interviews began. This meant that some participants forgot certain details or affective/emotional responses and mentioned that they no longer remembered their thoughts at the time of the diary entries. As a result, their responses during the interviews contained many uncertain terms such as ‘maybe’ or ‘possibly’. In other cases, it became clear that the diary exercise had prompted and initiated an increase in gaming which then dropped off once the exercise was completed. Participant 12, for example, told me that she gradually lost interest in the game after the 10-day diary period ended and now played the game infrequently. I had not foreseen this, but it reminds us of Lury and Wakeford (2012, p.5)’s argument that methods produce objects of study. Because of the length of time between the diary exercise ending and the interviews beginning, and because of participants telling me they could not remember details, I began to include brief review of the diary input for participants before the interview began.

Furthermore, during the conversations with participants, I came across intriguing topics that led to the generation of additional questions, resulting in extended interview times. Initially, I anticipated each interview to last between 60 to 90 minutes. However, in reality, most of the interviews extended to 120 minutes. Some even lasted 150 minutes. These extended interview durations

provided me with valuable information and insights, enabling a comprehensive understanding of participants' gaming experiences and perspectives. However, they also increased the workload for subsequent data processing and analysis. Transcribing and analysing the substantial amount of data generated from these extended interviews was time-consuming and complex.

Moreover, selecting Tencent Meeting as the online interview software in China meant that the interviews were subject to technical limitations inherent to the software itself. These included (amongst others) connectivity issues, audio delays and audio quality problems. For instance, during the interview with Participant 1, there were instances of audio-video synchronization issues. I also encountered unstable and interrupted network connections when interviewing Participant 10. These issues disrupted the flow of the interviews, leading to communication difficulties, information loss, and incomplete data. To address these technical limitations, I dedicated time before each interview to conduct technical tests, ensuring that my devices and network environment could support smooth interviews. I also informed participants about potential issues and provided simple technical guidance. Additionally, when participants were unable to use their webcams, I switched to conducting telephone interviews. Flexibility and adaptability were my strategies to ensure the acquisition of as complete and accurate data as possible.

It is also important to note that Tencent Meeting, under the same parent company Tencent as the WeChat mini-programme, operates within a congruent regulatory context to ensure adherence to pertinent laws and regulations governing online platforms and content in China. The platform has its own terms of use and privacy policies, and both the platform and its users operate within a regulatory context. Therefore, when using this platform, it was essential for me to familiarize myself with and adhere to the relevant policies to ensure the protection of participants' data and privacy. It was also necessary

to anticipate the potential influence of media regulations and mainstream social expectations on the participants. Some considerations that have factored into how I interpreted my data related to the impact of the technologies on participants answers (the extent to which they may have modified responses because of how I asked them to participate). I also considered the extent to which they would be inclined to provide answers that align with societal expectations or the researcher's anticipated responses.

However, it is also worth noting that these issues align with the central focus of this project, which is the issue of Chinese media regulation and power dynamics. By interacting and interviewing participants on Tencent Meeting, I was able to better observe and understand the limitations, problems, or pressures they may encounter when using the software and how they navigate these regulatory constraints. I will further elaborate on this aspect in subsequent sections.

Discourse Analysis

As mentioned above, in this project, I employed formal analysis to examine character representation and sources of uncertainties in gameplay and narrative, while utilizing methods such as digital diaries and diary-based interviews to investigate gamers' specific gaming practices and their interpretations of them. Through digital diaries and in-depth interviews, I could gain access to gamers' personal experiences and perspectives, which they articulated in negotiation with wider power dynamics (Hall, 1989, pp.70-71; Hall, 1994, p.400; Butler, 2008, p.170; Yuval-Davis, 2010, p.267; Vignoles, 2017, pp.13-14). In order to interpret and analyse these articulations, I drew on discourse analysis which seeks to draw out values and ideologies within language systems.

Discourse analysis proves to be a highly suitable method for this project due to its qualitative and interpretive nature, which delves into the values and ideologies embedded within language. This method accentuates the impact of political and cultural elements on the construction of meaning within specific contexts, aligning perfectly with the objectives of this study (Luo, 2020; Salkind, 2010). Saussure's notion that language encompasses not only shared rules and codes but also unique behaviours arising from diverse linguistic structures further underscores the relevance of discourse analysis (Culler, 1976, p.16). These cultural practices, manifesting in specific behaviours, essentially constitute languages that facilitate the construction and transmission of meaning.

As elucidated in Chapter 2, Hall (1997, p.17) views cultural practices as processes of producing and exchanging shared meanings, which include the use of language, symbols, and images. These shared cultural codes are the result of specific contexts and language habits rather than a fixed entity. It is because not everyone lives in similar environments or possesses the same cultural habits that meaning is not fixed. However, of course, there are certain stabilised meanings within a language; otherwise, different cultures would never be able to understand each other (ibid., pp.18-20). As products of cultural practices, media texts can be seen as readable texts or a series of texts. Structural analysis of media texts is also a part of discourse analysis. Examining the structure of selected texts helps analyse how narratives (meanings) are constructed, conveyed, understood, and interpreted. This analysis is also based on the details of the research object itself and contextual knowledge (Luo, 2020).

Hence, discourse analysis emerges as a vital method in this study, offering a comprehensive approach to analysing data garnered from formal analysis, digital diaries, and in-depth interviews. It enables deeper insights and

reflections on the theory and practice of gaming experiences. By dissecting the nuances of language and cultural context within the data, discourse analysis facilitates a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in participants' gaming experiences and sheds light on the broader socio-cultural implications of gaming in contemporary society.

Approach

The raw materials used for this discourse analysis are derived from the 'texts and talk in social practices' (Potter, 2004, p.202) provided by my participants, including their digital diaries, and oral expressions during their interviews with me. The digital diaries documented the participants' gaming experiences at specific stages, along with their thoughts, feelings, and reactions during the gaming process. These records were typically spontaneous expressions by the participants, reflecting their genuine inner states. Through discourse analysis of the digital diaries, I was able to gain understanding of the participants' personal perceptions, emotional experiences, and interpretations and evaluations of events occurring within the game. Additionally, the interviews provided me with an opportunity for one-on-one communication with the participants, enabling me to delve into specific topics (related to the diaries and the research questions) and understand the participants' deeper thoughts and viewpoints. Through these interviews, I further explored the participants' cognition, emotions, and attitudes towards their gaming experiences, as well as investigate the challenges, confusions, and expectations they face during the gaming process.

After the completion of the digital diary and diary-related interview phases, I proceeded to transcribe the collected rich data. On one hand, I accessed the data management backend of WeLog, where the digital diaries submitted by participants were arranged chronologically based on the upload time of each

individual diary entry. To better organize and analyse, I re coded these diaries according to the unique IDs of the participants, ensuring that each participant's diaries from Day 1 to Day 10 were arranged in sequence. I exported and compiled the titles, upload times, main text content, and the uploaded images of each participant's diaries into a single document for subsequent retrieval and comparative analysis. On the other hand, I transcribed all interview videos and audio recordings into text format for analysis. Initially, I utilized the 'automatic transcription' feature within the Tencent Meeting application for preliminary transcription. However, I found instances where certain content was either obscured or inaccurately transcribed. Consequently, I invested additional time in rewatching and re-listening to all video and audio recordings. This process not only helped me rectify inaccuracies and obscured content in the transcription documents but also enabled me to comprehensively capture the participants' rich variations in body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice during the interviews. These detailed recordings were incorporated into the transcription documents to support subsequent analysis efforts. This process of re-evaluation and refinement further ensured my attention to the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the data, providing more reliable and rich material for my project.

After completing the transcription, I engaged in data familiarization. I re-read and annotated the transcription documents, extracting relevant content around the identified themes to examine how gamers 'act in the allocation, organization, and internal design of turns at talk' (Antaki, 2008, p.2). In this phase, I undertook two main tasks. Firstly, I extracted demographic information of all participants and keywords commonly mentioned in the data (such as 'grinding', daily tasks, time management, extracurricular gaming experiences, social interactions, plot enthusiasm, character-related discussions, fan creations, and media censorship) and compiled them into a table, serving as an index for further analysis (see Appendix 7). This endeavour not only

provided me with a holistic understanding of all participants but also facilitated both horizontal and vertical comparative analyses. Moreover, it also enabled me to identify and locate specific participants in the subsequent analysis of specific keywords. Secondly, from the data related to those identified keywords, I extracted three themes frequently discussed by the participants and also revolving around my research questions: identity and identification (around characters and the game narrative), power and agency (involving gamers' abilities and power dynamics in gameplay), and uncertainty (addressing experiences within the game and broader gaming experiences). I marked and extracted data around these three themes, aiming to unveil how participants 'make sense of their experiences, or, if the interest is less psychological, to uncover the imprint that society has left on their lives' (Antaki, 2008, p.6).

In the specific analysis of the three themes, I paid particular attention to the nuanced discourse strategies employed by the participants in their digital diaries. I closely observed how gamers expressed their emotions and opinions, including their choice of vocabulary, punctuation, memes, syntactic structures, and evaluative language, to help me grasp their subjective experiences and emotional responses during gameplay. For instance, gamers might use endearing terms to express affection for a particular character, employ emotional vocabulary to describe the tension experienced during challenging tasks, or utilize positive or negative adjectives to convey their attitude towards elements of uncertainty. Of particular note, I identified the use of specialized vocabulary, such as gaming jargons related to identity and community identification (see page 118), endearing nicknames used to establish a close relationship with characters (see page 149), homophones or puns employed to circumvent regulations (see page 235), and self-categorization into their gamer identity types (see page 283). These interesting discoveries enriched my exploration of the three research questions and added depth to my analysis.

Furthermore, in analysing the data, I conducted a combined analysis of the participants' usage of specific terminology/vocabulary and expression strategies (linguistic elements) when discussing particular topics, alongside their body language, facial expressions, speech rate, and intonation (non-linguistic elements). This produced more holistic understandings of the participants' attitudes, emotions, and viewpoints concerning their gaming practices. Particularly when addressing topics related to regulation, I found that integrating linguistic and non-linguistic elements revealed deeper layers of meaning construction. For instance, Participant 12, while expressing some viewpoints on media censorship, exhibited a somewhat unnatural speaking manner, often deliberately lowering her voice and occasionally covering her mouth with her hand. Participant 11 appeared to intentionally avoid discussing topics related to censorship during the interview, but subsequently expressed many thoughts in supplementary documents. Participant 8 did not shy away from discussing such topics; however, when mentioning specific names or terms, they frequently employed various common alternative terms, potentially to circumvent censorship. These observations shed light on the implicit considerations that participants had when expressing their opinions. Combining these insights with an understanding of China's unique media regulatory context revealed their attitudes and strategies when addressing regulatory topics (elaborated in detail in Chapter 5, see page 227).

Therefore, during the discourse analysis, I reaffirmed that participants' expressions were not merely straightforward records but rather reflections of deep reflection and emotional expression. Their discourse contained rich meanings and personal experiences, but the interpretation and analysis also needed to take into account the cultural and social contexts (Paltridge, 2012, p.11; Paltridge and Wang, 2010; JournoGyan, 2017). On one hand, drawing from a thorough understanding of the Japanese anime/Yokai culture embedded in *Onmyoji*, I analysed on gamers' discursive comprehension of

characters and game narratives, as well as their emotional investment in the game. On the other hand, of greater importance, I integrated examinations of the history and current state of media regulation in China into the discourse analysis. As discussed in Chapter 1 (see page 8), in China, media regulation imposes certain constraints on freedom of speech and expression. This implies that gamers' expressions and discourse during gaming experiences may be subject to specific rules and limitations as well.

Taken together then, I used a range of methods to each analyse identity construction and identification, agency negotiation, and uncertainty. This offered multiple approaches to any one element of my study offering different layers for an of analysis. The richness of this approach lies within the multiple approaches which together seek to recognise the complexities of these issues I am studying. By integrating the research findings with the media regulatory environment and the wider political and cultural context, I gain a deeper understanding of how gamers' game experiences, perspectives, and attitudes are informed and shaped by this specific environment. This integrated analysis, as I go on to explore, reveals the significant impact of the wider political and cultural background on game practices and gamer behaviours, providing a deeper understanding for this field of research.

Some Implications

Notes on Recruitment: The Workaround Strategy

My initial attempt at recruiting participants involved using Weibo, a prominent social media platform in China known for facilitating information sharing and exchange. I chose Weibo because of its hot topics function, which enables users with common interests to connect and interact. *Onmyoji*, the mobile game I was studying, also had its own channel on Weibo. I posted my

recruitment information directly under the relevant topic, attaching professionally prepared recruitment materials. However, I quickly encountered content restrictions imposed by the platform. I had overlooked Weibo's posting requirements, which prohibited the sharing of contact information such as WeChat IDs, email addresses, phone numbers, or QR codes. Additionally, the platform restricted mass messaging to prevent spam. Although Gerrard (2018, p.4497) proposes a 'workaround' method (Gerrard and Thornham, 2020, p.1271) aiming at circumventing such restrictions or censorship imposed by platforms or systems, it was also important that I adhered to the platforms regulations. Although I did employ some workaround methods with regard to the language I used, or manipulating symbols, I was careful not to exceed the normative expressions on each platform (which themselves often employ similar workarounds). This experience underscored the importance of understanding and adhering to the posting guidelines and limitations of each platform. It also emphasized the need to tailor recruitment approaches to the unique characteristics of different media platforms.

Learning from this experience, I reviewed the posting guidelines of the NGA forum before proceeding with recruitment there. These guidelines provided crucial information about posting protocols, including designated sections for recruitment posts, image uploading and formatting methods, and recommended posting intervals. By adhering to these guidelines, I successfully posted my recruitment thread without violating any rules. The guidelines also outlined prohibited content and the corresponding penalties for rule violations. Adhering to these regulations helped maintain a positive forum image and prevented unnecessary penalties. However, I did also employ workaround methods to circumvent regulatory restrictions while conveying the desired content to gamers. For instance, when including my WeChat ID in the post to encourage interested gamers to contact me, I substituted uppercase 'V' letters for the keyword 'WeChat', which might trigger platform censorship.

This approach allowed me to comply with the guidelines while effectively communicating that gamers could engage with me further through WeChat (see Appendix 3, iii). Although these actions to avoid censorship felt almost instinctual, it's essential to acknowledge the importance of respecting platform rules and maintaining ethical research conduct. While I made efforts to work within the guidelines and adapt my approach, it's crucial to ensure compliance with regulations and ethical standards to uphold the integrity and validity of the study.

The constantly adjusted recruitment methods demonstrate that initially set standards and methods are never entirely applicable to the actual circumstances. Hence, continuous adjustments to recruitment strategies and criteria were necessary. This aligns with the notion of 'recursivity' advocated by Lury and Wakeford (2012, p.20), which involves 'exploring and exploiting the possibilities of multiple temporalities that may accompany methods'. This iterative adjustment process enabled me to better adapt to changes in the research context and ensure the accuracy and reliability of the study. Therefore, the attention, concern, and responsibility that I, as a scholar, have towards my research subjects, participants, or objects of study are paramount in research and social practices. Such reflexivity allows researchers to critically examine their viewpoints, potentially influencing their interactions with participants and data interpretation. Hence, I remained cognizant of my role as a researcher and endeavoured to maintain neutrality throughout the research. Despite sharing a gamer identity with the participants, I also engaged in continual self-reflection to identify and address subjective biases and personal positions that might influence the research. Drawing on insights from scholars such as Horst and Miller (2012, p.108), Walkerdine (2007, p.3), and Thornham (2011, p.14), who advocate for reflexivity in ethnographic research, I contemplated power dynamics between myself and the participants. While adopting similar expressions and language as other gamers and providing courteous and

professional responses, I always acknowledged my role as a researcher and reflected on its implications.

Notes on Uncertainty: Weaving throughout This Project

Optimizing recruitment methods in uncertain circumstances

I experimented with various methods to recruit participants, including reaching out to gamers in chat groups and forums, as well as relying on referrals from acquaintances and existing participants. However, each attempt was riddled with uncertainties.

Recruiting from chat groups posed challenges due to the unpredictable nature of group interactions and the informal communication tone. The ever-shifting topics made it hard to focus on recruitment efforts, potentially resulting in missed opportunities. Moreover, the casual atmosphere, punctuated by banter and jokes, made it difficult to discern genuine interest from casual conversation. The uncertainty surrounding how formal invitations would be received added another layer of complexity, often met with scepticism or outright rejection. This experience underscored the importance of flexibility and adaptability when engaging with chat groups, vital skills for effectively navigating such uncertainties.

While leveraging forums for recruitment provided access to higher-quality interactions and professional viewpoints (Wesolowski, 2014, pp.8-9), I encountered uncertainty regarding the limitations of feedback in this process. The sheer volume of content on forums posed a risk of my recruitment posts being buried among other threads, diminishing their visibility and response rates. Subsequent attempts at recruitment on the same forum yielded less favourable outcomes, highlighting the need for a robust risk management plan,

as recommended by Wesolowski (2014, p.10).

Recruiting participants through referrals introduced uncertainties regarding sample representativeness. While referrals capitalized on existing trust and relationships, potentially leading to higher engagement, they also raised concerns about sample bias due to the tendency for recommendations to circulate within similar social circles. Consequently, I grappled with the worry that participants might share similar backgrounds, potentially impacting the findings' representativeness and applicability. However, this concern motivated me to encourage participants to openly share their thoughts and feelings during discussions and interviews, while also carefully considering how these factors could influence data interpretation. These efforts, I believe, helped mitigate some uncertainties.

Unravelling Uncertainties in the Dynamic of Media Regulation

In my research design phase, I also grappled with uncertainties stemming from media regulation. As previously noted, the utilization of WeLog by participants hinged on its successful passage through the ICP filing review (see page 85). However, the timeline for this review process remained highly uncertain. I was unable to foresee when the materials I submitted would undergo scrutiny by relevant government entities, nor could I anticipate which aspects might fall short of regulatory compliance, given the seemingly ever-changing landscape. Throughout this process, WeLog received two notices necessitating modifications. After undergoing two rounds of revisions and resubmissions, the review concluded after 46 days, significantly surpassing my initial expectations.

These uncertainties, stemming from media regulation, not only hindered the progress of my project but also underscored a complex interplay among participatory censorship by individuals, self-censorship by Chinese internet

companies, and top-down state censorship (Luo and Li, 2022, pp.4-5). On one hand, the ICP filing policy embodies the government's stringent requisites for companies and individuals regarding media content regulation (Goclick China, 2021). Tencent's pre-emptive self-censorship of WeLog prior to ICP filing submission underscores media companies' proactive response to state censorship policies. On the other hand, as the developer and manager of WeLog, I meticulously adhered to all requirements set forth by the government and Tencent for WeChat Mini-program development. The compromises and active cooperation I undertook aimed to ensure WeLog's smooth passage through the review process for research purposes. Additionally, I maintained vigilance over the content generated by participants on WeLog to forestall the appearance of any non-compliant material (Fung, 2014, p.57; Ahmad, 2017; Yang, 2016). Any unauthorized content could precipitate WeLog's closure, potentially exposing me, as its manager, to legal risks. This uncertainty also prompted me to furnish participants with usage guidelines (see Appendix 5, v), cautioning them to exercise prudence when addressing sensitive topics such as politics, pornography, and violence. My actions signify a shift from being subject to media regulation to actively participating in regulatory oversight, ensuring media use fit to a politics I was enforcing.

Uncertainties from the Broad Context

Finally, it's crucial to confront the significant uncertainty triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic during the research process. Travel restrictions and social distancing measures rendered participation in or direct observation of the *Onmyoji* stage musical unfeasible, deviating from the initial plan. This uncontrollable circumstance underscores the sway of external forces, as pandemic response measures were dictated by authoritative bodies and governments. Although unable to substitute on-site observations entirely, reviewing existing videos or images of the stage musical provided some

relevant data, supplemented by discussions with participants who had experienced similar productions during interviews, thus enriching the pool of insights. Additionally, the pivot to online video interviews in lieu of face-to-face interactions, necessitated by the pandemic, proved effective in addressing uncertainty. Despite potential disparities from in-person communication, these online interviews facilitated in-depth conversations with participants, yielding novel perspectives on the utilization of media software within the regulatory context.

Furthermore, the broader uncertainties stemming from the pandemic served as a pivotal backdrop for this project. By delving into uncertainties within gaming experiences, I delved deeper into how these uncertainties mirror and intersect with uncertainties inherent in everyday life. The multifaceted uncertainties triggered by the pandemic encompassed health, safety, social dynamics, and routine activities, mirroring the uncertainties within gaming tied to role-playing, decision-making, and outcomes. This research paradigm illuminates the intricate dynamics and meanings of gaming both at the individual and societal levels, unravelling the symbiotic relationship between gaming and daily existence. In doing so, it opens novel vistas for game studies and everyday life research, offering fresh insights into the interplay between virtual realms and reality.

Chapter4 Identity and Identification

According to Hill's (2002, p.38) reminder, gamers' self-reports 'cannot be accepted merely as evidence of [fan] knowledge', they must be further explained and analysed to connect these self-descriptions with specific social-cultural contexts or privileged discourses. Shaw (2012, p.35) also notes that when observing how individuals' identities as gamers are shaped under the influence of social structures through their reflective self-narratives, it is necessary to consider the impact of social and cultural factors and examine how identities such as gender and sexual orientation intertwine with their identity as gamers. These two arguments provide my starting framework for exploring the construction of gamer identity in this chapter, that is, analysing self-expression within a specific context and paying attention to the complexity.

Through the continuous ten-day digital diary records and one-on-one in-depth interviews with 20 participants, I obtained a large amount of data on how gamers play in the game and on other related media platforms, their explanations of their participation behaviours, and their understanding of game characters. I explored how these participants' self-expression around their gaming experiences contributes to the construction of their gamer identity and identification with game characters, as well as the multidimensionality and complexity presented in the construction of identity and identification.

Research on gamers' self-expression about identity and identification, as well as the findings presented here, enable us to see the importance of studying games. First and foremost, my project reminds us that games are not only virtual worlds that provide entertainment, but also (and importantly) places where self and social identity are dynamically constructed, performed, and negotiated. Here, the power relationship and agency negotiation between gamers, games, and regulatory institutions show how gamers' self-expression

is influenced by specific social-cultural or even regulatory contexts and presents its unique characteristics. In what follows I analyse these issues based on the digital diary and interview data obtained in this project.

Identifying as Gamers

Gaming Behaviours as Self-expressions

From the gameplay behaviours of gamers, that is, how they specifically play the game, their self-expression as a gamer or non-gamer can be clearly seen. Gamers are constantly making choices throughout the entire gaming process: they choose the characters they like to play; whether to follow or disobey game rules, whether to complete or not complete daily tasks. As Caillois (2001, p.6), Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p.33), and Juul (2010, p.259) have emphasized in their definitions of games, the most basic feature of gamer gameplay practice is meaningful choices constituted through free will. Individual choice, as Giddens (1991, p.197) argues, ‘becomes an enveloping framework of individual self-expression’ in modern society. The changes in modern society, especially the acceleration of the digital revolution, have given people more control and choice over self-expression and identity construction. More importantly, as Burger (2015, p.281) believes, this has also given ordinary people ‘the power to re-imagine the self’. Specifically, in the process of making choices, based on people’s cultural and social context, they will evaluate and make choices to express their personality and highlight uniqueness, or they may choose to pursue more consistency, with different expectations for the results of their choices. Therefore, in this process, ‘choice is self-expression’, which reflects and implies their values and meaning construction in a specific context (Kim and Drolet, 2003, p.380).

Doing the Dailies

I intend to discuss gamers' self-expression in gaming based on their daily gameplay behaviours. When using WeLog, participants in my project needed to first recall and record their 'gaming experiences' for the day. Most participants clearly listed the names of the tasks or activities they completed in the game that day in the text box, while some simply summarized their day as 'doing the dailies'.

Daily tasks play an important role in *Onmyoji*. Doing the dailies, as explained by Participant 1, means that gamers log in to the game every day and complete relatively fixed tasks or activities. Typically, after logging in to the game's main interface, gamers will see a list of daily game tasks, and they will receive corresponding rewards for each task completed on the list. Although gamers can choose not to do these tasks or activities, they will receive substantial rewards (often important props) from the game system as long as they complete them, including coins, experience, amulets, and Souls. However, these daily tasks also impose time pressure and constraints on gamers. Especially during popular events, a large influx of gamers may participate simultaneously. This causes concern among some gamers that they may not be able to log into the game in time, resulting in missing tasks or events. This time constraint exacerbates the sense of urgency. For example, 'Nightfall' is an activity in *Onmyoji* that is fixed and open every day from 5pm to 10pm. This requires gamers to be online within a specific timeframe. Some gamers specifically set alarms to ensure they do not forget the timing of these tasks or activities (Participants 1, 18, and 19).

In addition to tasks set by the game, some gamers' gaming behaviour is also constrained by the time requirements of their guild. For instance, some guilds typically require gamers to team up with other members for over 30 battles in

24 hours. Failure to complete these tasks within the stipulated time may result in being ‘kicked out’ of the guild (Participant 18). Gamers need to organize their time according to the rules to ensure they do not lose their in-game status and rewards. These observations indicate that in gaming, time management involves not only the rational planning of in-game tasks and effective utilization of resources but is also closely associated with social interactions. By adeptly managing these aspects, gamers can not only achieve better results in the game but also establish a more positive and influential image in this virtual environment. Therefore, it is evident that time management skills in everyday gaming are not merely operational skills but crucial elements influencing gamers in maintaining or elevating their in-game identity.

Choosing to persist in completing daily tasks does not necessarily mean, however, that they are all satisfied or enjoying the process. A number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with this type of time constraint. Participant 16 described in his diary that doing daily tasks in the game is like ‘being imprisoned in *Onmyoji* all day long’. When faced with time-limited tasks, he ‘feels very urgent, like working. Because you have to complete it on time, otherwise you will miss it’. Many participants expressed this feeling unintentionally, and they also compared completing daily tasks in the game to ‘working’ (Participants 2, 9, 11) or ‘being imprisoned’ (Participant 8), indicating that they do not like the feeling of having their time forcibly arranged (Participant 5). These accounts suggest that agency and choice remain central motivating factors for playing *Onmyoji* for my participants, and when they feel these are curtailed because of perceived restrictions, they express levels of anxiety they relate to work pressures. These responses seem closely tied to their values and perceptions regarding time, and their approaches to time management. I address these issues below and, and in what follows, continued to explore the discussions of the daily tasks.

Despite gamers expressing dissatisfaction with the time constraints and mandatory nature of daily tasks, they nevertheless persist in completing these tasks because, as they explain to me, these tasks provide crucial in-game resources (Participant 7 and 9). The ‘resources’ mentioned by participants refer to the various rewards bestowed by the game system after completing tasks. These rewards can help gamers improve their strength in the game, such as levelling up Shikigami, upgrading souls, having more opportunities to obtain rare Shikigami, enabling gamers to tackle higher-level stages or gameplay with greater ease. For example, Participant 3 mentioned in the interview that every time they log into the game and see the level they have achieved, they feel a sense of accomplishment, stating, ‘I’m really great’. Participant 2, during the interview, could distinctly articulate the quantity of characters owned at each different rarity level. He also acknowledged experiencing a sense of achievement derived from the ‘resources’ acquired in the game. This finding once again underscores how time in the game is intricately intertwined with issues of power and agency. Despite generating negative sentiments towards time constraints, then, gamers nevertheless express affirmation of its value by identifying with the reward strategies within the game. Similar to the concept of ‘identity verification’ proposed by Hearn (2017, p.73), we could understand such gamer identification not merely as an acceptance of the game rules but also a tacit approval of the power structures within the game. In this sense, these everyday gaming behaviours not only reflect gamers’ construction of in-game identities but also illuminate the complex dynamics of time, power, and identity, collectively shaping gamers’ experiences and engagement in the game.

Daily Sign-In

Based on my observations, many participants, without hesitation, could accurately state the number of consecutive days they have logged in to the

game during the interviews. This serves as another means through which they express their identities in my project. ‘Daily Sign-In’ is a game mechanism in *Onmyoji* where gamers can sign in daily to receive game items such as props, coins, Souls, and other in-game items as rewards. The rewards for consecutive logins are more generous. After completing the sign-in, the game system reminds the gamer of the total number of consecutive sign-ins to date. Some participants mentioned that even if they didn’t have much time to complete daily tasks, they would still make sure to login the game and complete the ‘Daily Sign-In’ (Participants 1, 3, 5, 14, 15), which was seen as a ‘must-do’ task (Participant 2).

On February 10, 2022, *Onmyoji* rewarded gamers with over 2000 consecutive logins. These gamers not only received special and rare props, but also enjoyed privileges without consuming specific props during battles. Participants who received this award, such as Participant 7, expressed happiness and a sense of recognition in both interviews and diaries. She believed that her persistence was meaningful, strengthening the connection between herself and the game. Participant 14, on the same day, expressed admiration for gamers who received the reward in her diary, stating, ‘The character skin for the 2000-day sign-in looks great! But it will take me a long time to get there’, and ‘I hadn’t played the game for over a year before. Otherwise, my sign-ins would have been close to 2000 days. It’s a pity. But this time, I won’t leave again’. Many other participants also conveyed respect and admiration for gamers who achieved a 2000-day sign-in in the interviews.

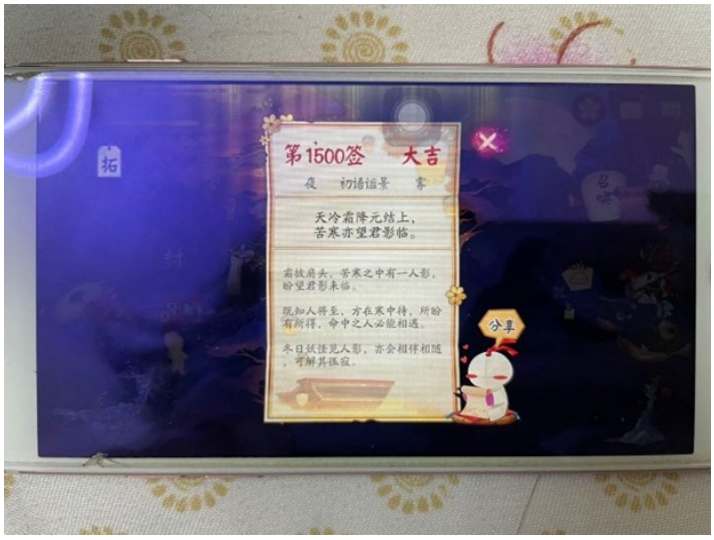

Figure 2. Gamer daily sign-in in *Onmyoji* for 1500 consecutive days (shared by Participant 3).

I believe that the honour of the '2000-day achievement' bestowed by the game system upon individual gamers is in a similar vein to what Hearn (2017, p.68) highlighted in her research regarding Twitter account 'verification' for users. It can be regarded as official recognition and authorization of the legitimacy of gamers' identities, symbolizing the social and personal influence derived from their identities. Similarly, this authentication of identity also encourages gamers to further express themselves (in ways valued by the game and the gamers) and enhance their abilities to gain others' perception, attention, and recognition, which is referred to as 'online reputation' by Hearn (2017, p.73).

Participants express their loyalty to the game by consistently engaging in Daily Sign-ins, concurrently demonstrating how they continually construct their identity as gamers within a specific community culture. Based on my observations, when this loyal gamer identity receives recognition from the game's official authority, participants always believe that their acknowledged or verified identity should not be questioned by anyone. After the announcement of the reward policy for 2000 days of achievements, there was a fierce debate among gamers. Some gamers, who had not signed 2000 consecutive days, argued that despite not meeting the day count, they had

spent a considerable amount of money/effort on the game, expressing their expectation of receiving similar rewards based on their financial contributions. On the other hand, gamers who had achieved 2000 consecutive days regarded their perseverance as the most precious, asserting that recognition of their sustained investment of time and effort could not be measured in monetary terms (Guo, 2022). This observation highlights how gamers seek identity and agency in an evaluative context.

These numerical indicators such as consecutive sign-in days and scores can be seen as a value system constructed by, and fit to, the game system, emphasizing (and valuing) individual effort, achievement orientation, and competitiveness. Firstly, the game encourages competition among gamers, as they strive to improve their scores, sign-in days, or other in-game metrics. This encouragement from the game is taken up, whilst the values of competitiveness, individual effort, and achievement orientation are adhered to and promoted by gamers, and this in turn motivates gamers to enhance their performance, seeking to stand out within the game (within the rules and values set by the game). Secondly, gamers are also consistently encouraged in the game to take individual responsibility (even though they play in guilds), achieving accomplishments through persistent dedication. This emphasizes individual freedom, autonomy, and responsibility sharing as key values of the game. Moreover, the game's achievement system motivates gamers to establish and promote a very particular kind of self-worth (as tied to the values discussed above). They prove their value in the game by achieving high scores or reaching goals. Lastly, this value system strengthens social identity by encouraging gamers to respect and admire successful individuals, which, as Hearn argues (2017, p.68) is intertwined with social status and social values.

Taken together, this suggest that, mastering professional knowledge, making choices regarding rare resources while undertaking responsibilities and risks,

contemplating oneself and others in competitive engagement, and forming connections in social interactions—these aspects characterize the value system constructed by the game, reflecting features of neoliberalism as mentioned by Baerg (2014, p.188). Especially through quantifiable measures, such as the sign-in days in *Onmyoji* used to judge the level of investment, gamers become 'calculable individuals' (ibid., p.204). This illustrates how gamers, to a certain extent, become objects evaluated by others within wider discursive systems. Therefore, the construction of identity and identification within the game's value system is closely intertwined with the issue of power and agency that I focus on in my project (discussed in Chapter 5).

Collection and Other Social Interactions

In addition to daily gaming behaviours, I found that gamers also express a sense of achievement in collecting rare characters and wielding power in interactions with other gamers. This further strengthens their recognition of their gaming behaviours and the affirmation of their current identity.

For instance, obtaining and collecting all the rare characters is a clear goal for many participants when playing *Onmyoji*. This requires them to invest a significant amount of time and effort in acquiring and nurturing each Shikigami and completing the corresponding graphic records in the game (Figure 3). Gamers who collect all the game's rare characters can become what participants call themselves as 'Full Records Gamer'. It is a way for them to prove that they 'can be as lucky as other skilled gamers' (Participant 19) and can also be a showcase of 'their achievements in the game' (Participant 10). Those participants who become full records gamers, such as Participants 8 and 13, gain an in-depth understanding and mastery of the characteristics and abilities of almost all Shikigami in the game, enabling them to navigate the game more proficiently.

Figure 3. Collected rare characters will be lit in the scroll (from in-game screenshot).

The time and attention spent on obtaining characters and rewards, such as different badges and titles, clearly increases some gamers sense of achievement. Gamers often affirm their efforts and give value to what they have gained (Juul, 2010, pp.258-259; Tondello et al., 2015, p.713). As Participant 4 stated in the interview, ‘If I don’t think it’s worth it, I won’t make that choice’. This reflects that gamers are not merely participants in the game but active agents shaping the gaming experience and in-game identity in relation to those values systems discussed above. Their choices and efforts are intertwined not only with in-game rewards but also closely connected to their self-identity and individual expression. This is very important for understanding why gamers invest so much in gaming and how the game shape their identity and self-expression.

It was also clear form my data that, interactions with other gamers are important and serve as a crucial means for gamers to affirm their identities. For instance, the mentorship system in *Onmyoji* is one of the gameplays designed to encourage social interactions between new and experienced gamers. Participant 7 articulated a sense of responsibility in guiding apprentices, as she believes ‘a mentor is crucial for a novice with zero

experience'. She emphasized the significance of her extensive gaming experience, allowing her to provide appropriate advice when needed and facilitate the rapid growth of her apprentices. Participant 2 also shared a similar experience, stating that he takes pleasure in sharing his gaming expertise with novice gamers. He expressed satisfaction when referred to as a 'gaming expert' by others, highlighting the positive emotions associated with mentoring and the recognition received. Participant 16 also believed that, as a 'Pro' within the game community due to his strong gaming skills, he held a certain influence or 'appeal'. Other gamers, he claimed, recognized his gaming level and prowess, granting him a position of authority. Participant 16 described his influence, which he claimed stemmed from his rich gaming experience, as the ability to 'guide discussions and set the tone' within the community. We can see here a valuing of self-worth in relation to position within a wider community as well as resonances with the values promoted within the game such as (as discussed earlier, see page 113) individual effort which is measured against a that of a wider cohort. This indicates that gamers can attain higher status and more influence in the game due to the skills or knowledge they possess. This power extends beyond virtual standings within the game; it also translates into the real world, as other gamers hold respect and admiration for those who excel in the game.

Foucault's (1980, 1982) theories on power and knowledge can help us gain a deeper understanding of how gamers in the gaming process express themselves through choosing and adhering to daily tasks as a way of constructing their identity. According to Foucault (1980, p.78), knowledge and power are not two separate domains, but rather closely connected and interdependent. Power is not only a form of political entity but also permeates through various institutions and practices in society (Foucault, 1982, p.778). Individuals acquire knowledge through complex and ever-changing discourse practices and are continually constructed as knowable and understandable

entities through power relations (ibid., pp.788-789). This has important implications for our understanding of gamer identity and the relationship between individual gamers and the game. In *Onmyoji*, daily tasks, daily sign-ins, character collection and the mentorship gameplay are practical activities determined by the game system, constituting a form of power within the game. Gamers complete daily tasks based on their understanding of the rules and their management of time and energy, gradually gaining in-game power. This power allows them to master the game's rules and skills more proficiently, unlock new game content, and acquire higher-level equipment. Simultaneously, by persistently completing these tasks, gamers prove their dedication and level of engagement as loyal gamers, garnering recognition and attention from other gamers or the game system itself. Gamers leverage this recognition and attention to establish their reputation and status within the game community. While obtaining material or virtual rewards in the game, they also enhance their degree of recognition and authority in the gaming community. This, in turn, grants them a certain level of influence and decision-making power.

In this power dynamic, gamers develop a deeper understanding of their gaming identity and, as Moje and Luke (2009, p.419) argue, construct a sense of subjectivity through the meaning generated by their behaviours or the values attributed to them. Therefore, according to Foucault (1982, pp.788-789), gamers are not merely passive participants in the game but actively shape their gaming experience and personal identity by mastering knowledge. In this process, the values promoted by the game are closely linked to gamers' choices and negotiations, collectively constructing their identity. As Foucault (1980, 1982) theories reveal, knowledge and power are intricately connected and interdependent, shaping individual identity through complex power relationships. This further emphasizes Foucault's assertion (1982, p.778) that power exists not only in political entities but permeates various aspects of society.

Using Jargons as Self-expressions

In addition to examining the ways in which gamers express themselves through gaming, my project also aims to investigate how gamers construct their identities through online speech as a form of self-expression. According to Payne (2005, p.2), the process of online gaming involves interaction and communication between gamers and both human and artificial intelligence. Online speech, which refers to the ways in which gamers communicate through text and language online, such as through text messages, customized tags, emoticons, acronyms, and other unique forms of language, provides gamers with a means of self-expression in terms of sharing their location, status, knowledge, and strategies with others (ibid., p.3). One of the goals of this section is to identify the meaning embedded in these interactive and diverse forms of online speech.

Through analysing participants' descriptions of their daily tasks in their diaries, I found that gamers often use special names for certain tasks or activities in the game, which are often slang, puns, or abbreviations. While these forms of language may not adhere to the rules of standard written language or may not immediately reveal their connection to the current context to others, they represent language customs that young people are developing and utilizing in digital spaces to satisfy their self-expression needs and reflect community norms (Turner, 2011, p.263). In particular, the use of specific jargon, which refers to words or expressions used by a particular profession or group of people for a particular purpose and are difficult for others to understand (Crystal, 2001, p.25; Khalifa, 2020, p.151), is often employed by gamers to express and highlight their gamer identities in so far as they discursively align themselves to particular communities, knowledge or culture.

In fact, Thurlow and Brown (2003) identified this phenomenon in the early

texting behaviour of young people. The language they used in their messages was often described as ‘new hieroglyphics’ (p.16). They used non-standard orthography such as abbreviations, acronyms, and emoticons to chat, express themselves, and maintain relationships with others (pp.16-17). Thurlow and Brown (2003) argue that this expressive form becomes an interesting and powerful mechanism to manipulate traditional language norms and customs, integrate new technological practices, and innovate unique language use forms. In turn, this maintains and develops social relationships, but also constructs and demonstrates identities (pp.17-18). Much research has noted comparable behaviours in digital spaces. Crystal (2001) believes that online language is full of strong personal innovation spirit and has a close relationship with identity construction. Especially in the virtual world, traditional language norms are no longer applicable or questioned (ibid., p.191), people create new terms based on the contextual features of their environment or introduce interesting variations to established terms to describe their experiences, capture the characteristics of the electronic world, and overcome the limitations of technology in communication (ibid., p.67). These unique online languages locate the users within the community, expressing their common values and experiences.

The Language Codes of *Onmyoji* Gamers

My project finds that *Onmyoji* gamers, in keeping with the research noted above, also have a set of language rules and ways to express their gaming experiences. For example, they refer to completing the 11th level of the *Onmyoji* Soul mission as ‘挖土’ (in English, ‘digging soil’). The Chinese characters for level 11, ‘十一’, when combined together, form the character for ‘土’ (in English, ‘soil’). Therefore, gamers refer to completing the 11th level Soul mission as ‘digging soil’, similar to the process of digging resources in the soil.

In the context of the game, it accurately means the same as the terms ‘grinding’ or ‘gold farming’, which represent the process where gamers need to repeatedly challenge game levels to obtain and collect resources, experience, and rewards. However, in *Onmyoji*, gamers use ‘挖土’ as a humorous and mocking expression to describe the game process. As participant 19 mentioned, completing the 11th level Soul mission is a challenging process in the game that requires a lot of time and effort to obtain rare game items that can help gamers enhance their character abilities. Gamers use the metaphor of ‘挖土’ to express the tedious and repetitive nature of the challenge and their own struggles, as if they were sweating profusely while mining in the ground.

Gamers also use many other special jargons. They call the process of receiving rewards after completing daily tasks or other repeatable tasks ‘收菜’, similar to harvesting crops in a field. They call the process of consuming resources to complete tasks or activities ‘放菜’, similar to planting crops in a field. The use of this jargon expresses gamers’ views on certain tasks or activities in the game, which they consider to be ‘like doing farm work’ (Participant 7) with certain tedious and repetitive nature. At the same time, the self-metaphor of being a crop harvester or planter reflects gamers’ awareness of their identity in the game. In addition, gamers also refer to high-quality Souls, which can be used to upgrade and cultivate powerful Shikigami in the game, as ‘胚子’ (in English, ‘embryo’), expressing their value and expectations for Souls. Gamers can obtain these embryos through various dungeons, events, and shops in the game. The higher the quality of the embryo, the stronger the attributes and abilities of the upgraded Shikigami, making it one of the important resources for gamers in the game. Participant 19 felt like a ‘creator’ every time he mentioned ‘embryos’, as he could use valuable Souls with potential for the cultivation and strengthening of characters. Gamers deepen

their perception of their identity and role in the game through the process of character development. Similar special jargons appear frequently in the diaries of the participants, and they even mention these special words and phrases when describing and explaining their participation behaviours during in-depth interviews.

These special language codes, in Turner's (2011, p.276) view, are the 'digitalk' used by young people in digital environments, which express their mastery of digital technology, creative use of language, and understanding of network community conventions. They use specific language conventions in specific spaces and are confident that their readers can understand them (ibid.). Except for Participants 12, 13, and 17 (who are novice gamers with little knowledge of these jargons and therefore use them rarely in their diaries and interviews), other participants in their diaries and interviews use a lot of jargon exclusive to *Onmyoji* gamer group, perhaps assuming that I am a member of the gamer group and should be well-versed in the meaning of the jargon. As a researcher and a *Onmyoji* gamer, I made it clear to my participants at the beginning of the study that I had a dual identity. However, it must be admitted that in order to appear more like an experienced gamer in subsequent interviews, I still had to spend some time checking the meanings of many jargons that I did not know while reading participants' diaries. Obviously, the jargons focused on in this project are the expression of digitalk exclusive to *Onmyoji* community, which allows for the sharing of community meaning and strengthens community identity, while also labelling those who do not meet community standards as outsiders (Turner, 2011, p.276). Similarly, learning the digitalk exclusive to the game community is an important step towards gaining recognition of one's identity among other members of the game community.

An Example: the Usage of ‘肝’

The most commonly used jargon by participants in their diaries and interviews is probably ‘肝’, which is used to describe their daily dedication to completing routine game tasks. Literally, ‘肝’ means ‘liver’ in English, but it has become a popular internet slang because of the game *Onmyoji*, named after the harm caused by staying up late. ‘肝’ can be used as an adjective and a verb. In *Onmyoji*, many activities require gamers to repeatedly complete to obtain game resources, such as Soul, Awakening, Yuling, Exploration, etc. In addition, there are many mechanisms in the game that require gamers to spend a lot of time and energy to cultivate characters, such as Shikigami’s advancement, skill upgrades, and strengthening of Soul. Therefore, gamers often need to spend a lot of time and energy to achieve game goals, which is called ‘肝游戏’ (in English, ‘liver the game’).

This game mode sometimes causes fatigue and dissatisfaction among gamers, but for some loyal gamers, it is also a pleasure and challenge. According to the statistics I have done on the digital diary data, except for novice gamers (who do not know the existence of this game term and what it means), the other 17 gamers mentioned their ‘肝’ in the game a total of 67 times in their diaries. Among them, six of these gamers used the word ‘肝’ more than four times in their diary titles to summarise their day. For example, Participant 1’s diary title on Day 5 is ‘废肝的一天’ (in English, ‘A day of Liver Waste’); Participant 2’s diary title on Day 3 is ‘拖着病躯肝日常’ (in English, ‘A Day of Dragging My Body to Liver’); and Participant 19’s diary title on Day 4 is ‘没有活动的日子就开始了无尽的肝’ (in English, ‘The Days Without Activity Began

with Endless Liver') and the one on Day 5 is '为了第一个六星式神，肝经验' (in English, 'Liver Experience for the First Six-star Shikigami').

When I asked them about the approximate time and experience they spend in the game each time, most of the participants repeatedly mentioned '肝' in their responses. For example, Participant 2 described to me that 'this game is really a liver with a man'. This sentence is a derivative of the term '肝', which actually means that a person is addicted to playing a certain game for a long time, to the extent that they consider the game as a part of themselves, and others feel that this person has become a part of the game, as if a person has grown on their liver. Similarly, Participant 15 told me, '*Onmyoji* is a game that grows on your liver, you can't even do it without spending 24 hours on it'. Some participants said that in the early days of the game, it only worked manually, so that was the time when they were most connected to the game. Participant 7, for example, said that he 'blacked out' when he was playing the game manually. Participant 8 felt that he 'used to be a real Liver-Explosive Gamer' and described how he '肝' at length. However, despite the fact that some battles in the game had the option of automatic mode, participants still felt they were paying for it. For example, Participant 4 said in an interview that the game was 'essential for watching dramas' and that 'the most liver-intensive time was when I watched a Korean drama in a row [when auto-battle mode was on]'.

For some participants, '肝' is not a positive virtue; this game mode causes them fatigue and dissatisfaction. However, for many loyal gamers, 'liver the game' is also a source of joy and challenge. Participants describe in their diaries the large amount of time and effort they spend on the game with seemingly complaining tones, to the point where their 'liver is about to explode'. Some participants even reveal that they have invested a lot of money into it.

Participants seem to be aware that this situation is not healthy and that they should control their game time appropriately, but during the interview, when they mentioned their experiences of '肝', they mostly laughed and showed happy expressions. Some even added a lot of body language to share their experiences. For example, although Participant 8 said that his game behaviour was 'really exaggerated and outrageous' at the time, from his expression and body movements, he seemed to be very happy and excited when recalling this experience. Especially when the effort put into '肝' pays off, 'I feel like all the previous efforts were worth it' (Participant 8). This self-awareness and emotional expression reflect gamers' negotiation and identification with the behaviour and values associated with '肝' in the game. These gamers appear to be shaping their gaming identity through the experience of '肝', even though this term often carries negative connotations in other contexts, involving issues such as addiction, excessive time consumption, and financial expenditure. This also illustrates how the values within the gaming community shape gamers' behaviours and identity formation. Gamers seem to actively engage in this process when aligning with various values within the game, even in the face of potential negative consequences.

Derived from '肝', there are many tags, among which '肝帝' (in English, 'the Liver King') is the most typical. In the word '肝帝', '肝' is used to indicate the time and effort spent, while '帝' refers to the gamer's dominant position and unparalleled strength in the game, which can also be understood as an expert in this field. Therefore, '肝帝' refers to those who invest a lot of time and effort in *Onmyoji* and become the top gamers in the game. While the term itself carries a certain amount of ridicule and irony, it simultaneously conveys a sense of acknowledgment and respect. Participants 2, 7, and 16 all stated in

the interview that they liked the ‘肝帝’ tag because they ‘felt that they had made a lot of contributions to *Onmyoji*’ (Participant 2), and they were also happy when others called them ‘肝帝’, which was ‘affirmation of their own efforts’ (Participants 7, 16). This is somewhat similar to the ‘Pro’ I discussed in the previous section (see page 116), but ‘肝帝’ emphasizes more on the investment of a large amount of time and energy, with a sense of self-identification based on effort, hard work, and dedication. On the other hand, ‘Pro’ emphasizes more on the accumulation of skills and experience, with a sense of self-identification based on proficiency, experience, and achievements. This phenomenon once again illustrates that in the gaming community, different gamers use various ways to construct and express their identity, reflecting the diversity of values and focal points emphasized by individuals in the game. Regardless of the way, gamers’ self-identification is closely related to the rules, mechanisms, and value orientations of the game.

In addition, from the use of jargon as a way of self-expression, we can also see more about the multidimensionality and complexity of identity construction. Taking Participant 18’s experience of ‘肝’ as an example, he documented and shared his consecutive 4-day experience in WeLog, revealing complex emotions towards this gameplay. On the fifth day, he mentioned that he had to ‘肝’ to complete a challenging combat mission on his own, and admitted that ‘it’s actually quite boring to keep grinding’. In his diary on the sixth day, he shared a long paragraph about his experiences and techniques of ‘肝’, involving numerous complex numerical calculations, but ultimately concluded that ‘if you want to get stronger, you need to invest a lot of time and effort into “肝”. But it’s not for a scientific researcher like me’. On the seventh day, the title of his diary contains a long string of ellipses after the word ‘肝’, seemingly

conveying a sense of resignation. However, he still persisted in sharing a significant number of tips and techniques related to '肝'. He ended by saying that he 'could have done more important things'. On the eighth day, he stopped sharing tips and repeatedly mentioned the amount of time and effort he had spent. Under the heading of 'Today's Insights', he wrote, 'I really wasted time with the game!!!' with three exclamation marks in a row, conveying his complaint about the game. Interestingly, in a later interview, he revealed that he would always uninstall the game because he felt it was too time-consuming but would always come back to it because he wanted to experience new characters. As he said, 'the game always draws me in over and over again, but then bores me over and over again'.

This example highlights the complexity of identity construction in gaming and the contradictory emotions and attitudes individuals may experience during the gaming experience. It also reveals that gamer subjectivity is not fixed but continuously evolves with different stages and changes in the gaming experience. Through the experiences of Participant 18, we can observe distinct fluctuations in his emotions and attitudes towards '肝' in the game over time, ranging from initial boredom and fatigue to later sharing techniques and gaining recognition, and finally to complaining and questioning. These emotional changes may be influenced by various factors, including changes in the game's internal mechanisms, the evolution of individual goals, and the impact of social interactions, among others. This emphasizes that gaming is not just a form of entertainment but also a complex interaction and psychological experience, where gamer identity and emotions continually intertwine and evolve over time, experience, and environment. In fact, many participants have had similar experiences as him (Participants 2, 6, 8, 14, 15, 18) - giving up the game (uninstalling the software) due to the tedious and time-consuming game tasks, but then being repeatedly attracted by the game

content (re-downloading the software). As Hall (1994, p.392) suggests, identity is not a completed fact, but rather ‘a production, which is never complete, always in process’. It is formed based on historical and cultural discourses, and therefore, Hall (1994, p.400) suggests that we should see the important external forces that shape identity.

In summary, from the daily gaming behaviours and language codes used by the participants, it is evident that gamers continuously construct and reshape their identities throughout the gaming process. This identity encompasses both their in-game identities and other real-world ones, such as university students, officials, researchers, or designers. This is a complex multidimensional process, as suggested by Grooten and Kowert (2015, p.82) and Kaye et al. (2017, p.221), asserting that constructing gamer identity involves the interaction between virtual and real-world identities. On the one hand, gamers invest a significant amount of time and effort to construct and solidify their in-game identities. This is because they profoundly identify with the value system established by the game, emphasizing the importance of achievement orientation, competitiveness, and individual effort within the gaming context. This identification not only integrates them into the virtual world of the game but also forms the basis for establishing connections and interactions with other gamers. On the other hand, gamers must strike a balance between their in-game identities and other roles in everyday life. This may lead to conflicts, as different roles demand distinct time and energy allocations. The negotiation and balancing process compels them to continually contemplate how to interact with other roles and identities in both the game and elsewhere, ensuring harmonious coexistence. This also reflects the ongoing challenges they face from the real world while negotiating between multiple identities. It is worth pointing out that the negotiation and balance between the different identities of gamers highlighted here is closely related to the issues of power and agency discussed in Chapter 5.

In the subsequent section, I delve further into another crucial aspect of identity construction, examining how gamers express their values by building identification with in-game characters. I conducted an in-depth exploration of how gamers establish connections with virtual characters in the game and how these characters influence their self-identity and gaming experience. Through this novel perspective, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of how gamers continuously evolve and shape their identity within the gaming world. This enables a deeper exploration of the relationship between games and individual identity, as well as the impact of games on the psychological and emotional aspects of individuals.

Identifying with characters

The characters in the video game are used by gamers as a means through which they can self-express their own identities. They align or negotiate with the gamer's aesthetic values, identity, and social recognition (Livingston et al., 2014, p.8), and in doing so, they position themselves in relation to the perceived values and qualities they articulate in relation to the game. In agreement with Hall's (1996) perspective, Shaw (2013, p.2; 2015, p.70) contends that studying gamer identification with characters is a good starting point for understanding gamer identity and their relationship with media. Differences in life experience, cultural background, and personality traits can lead to diverse ways of using media, enabling us to be more open and accepting of different experiences and perspectives (Shaw, 2015, p.70). In my project, the 20 participants used a significant amount of space to record their interpretations of certain character personalities and plot elements in the game, which provided insights about their lives, which in turn contextualised their articulations. Their self-expression (how and what they noted) through character identification reflects their values which in turn speaks to their identity as gamers. Through these self-expressions, gamers also position

themselves within the power dynamics of the game through the characters they discuss (as Shaw argues in 2015, p.143).

Many scholars have studied gamer identification with avatars that can be played by gamers in video games. These avatars, which are closely related to the gamers, can help gamers explore their close, potential, or ideal selves (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Lin and Wang, 2014; Sibilla and Mancini, 2018), leading to a strong sense of attachment to the game (Lewis et al., 2008, pp.515; Kartsanis and Murzyn, 2016, p.33; Szolin et al., 2023, p.1). This attachment also reflects cultural diversity, unequal social contexts, and power relationships that shape gamers' experiences and understanding of video games (Trepte and Reinecke, 2010, p.175; de Wildt et al., 2020, p.973), among others. Indeed, virtual characters, who are 'mediators between personal identity and social life' (Taylor, 2006, p.110), are central to the core of the virtual community experience. In *Onmyoji*, characters occupy a very important position, both in terms of gameplay and narrative. However, it is important to note that this study specifically focuses on the Shikigami in *Onmyoji*, referred to as 'Character Options' by Shaw (2015, p.134). These entities possess distinct background stories, allowing gamers to strategically choose and create narratives beyond the game text, potentially forming identification with them.

Shaw (2015) posits that gamer identification with characters is a complex issue influenced by various factors, including gamers' gaming motivations (ibid., p.109), embodied experiences with technology (p.123), understanding of narrative elements in games (p.107), and different social and cultural contexts (p.115). The participants in my project had diverse reasons for selecting characters. Some chose characters for strategic reasons, as mentioned by participants 7 and 18, who explained that they selected characters during the preparation phase to strengthen their battle teams rather than based on personal preferences. Participants also considered aesthetic reasons for

character selection, exemplified by participant 9, who expressed a lack of interest in the characters' stories but was drawn to specific characters based on their appearance. However, as Shaw (ibid., p.103) argues, not all interactions between gamers and the game can be considered forms of identification. Identification, as defined by Shaw (2015, p.94), is 'a process by which we come to feel an affective connection with a character on the basis of seeing that character as separate and yet a part of us in some way'. This perspective helps gamers critically examine and understand characters more deeply, ultimately achieving emotional resonance and identification with the characters.

Narrative identification

Character Representation in Transmedia Storytelling

As pointed out by Shaw (2015, p.143), 'gamers identify with narratives above and beyond the physical characteristics of characters'. In *Onmyoji*, through the discourse analysis of participants' diaries and interview data, I similarly discovered that the narrative elements of characters are one of the most critical factors influencing gamers' understanding and identification with characters. On one hand, the visual characteristics of Shikigami significantly capture gamers' attention. As Kuntjara and Almanfaluthi (2017) suggest, the process of character design utilizing various elements (pp.43-44), such as lines, colours, facial expressions, body postures, facial movements, and facial shapes, is 'almost like creating magic, as it is a long process of putting a soul into a character and making it come alive' (p.42). The unique visual features of each character not only endow them with personality and distinctiveness but also serve as crucial factors for gamers to delve into understanding the characters and comprehending their stories. On the other hand, the Shikigami characters in the game possess unique skills and comprehensive personal

biographies, detailing their origins, experiences, personality traits, and relationships with other characters. However, acquiring these biographies often requires gamers to complete specific in-game tasks or obtain randomly appearing character narrative fragments in other non-mainline tasks. Due to the uncertainty of these fragments' appearance (detailed analysis in Chapter 6), gamers often need to invest a significant amount of time and effort to fully comprehend a character's story.

While the game provides character biographies, their limited narrative capacity prevents them from encompassing the entire vast story world. Therefore, some gamers interested in the narrative aspects of game characters actively seek out other media products to obtain more information about specific characters, enriching or complementing their understanding of these characters (Jenkins, 2006, p.95). This transmedia narrative practice, described by Jenkins (ibid., p.243) as 'transmedia storytelling', emphasizes 'a paradigm shift, a move from medium-specific content toward content that flows across multiple media channels'. Transmedia storytelling allows gamers to explore storylines in the game while delving deeper into the story world through other media content such as TV, film, and animation, creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience (p.96). This integrative process leverages collaboration between different media, presenting events to the audience from multiple perspectives, creating 'a unified and coordinated entertainment experience' (Jenkins, 2010, p.944).

The multi-layered narrative system of *Onmyoji*, considered one of its key success factors, encompasses the main plot, subplot, and numerous event narratives within the mobile game, as well as derivative narrative elements such as comics, animations, and films (Lei and Yu, 2021, pp.71-73). These elements are interconnected, constructing an expansive and intricate story world. On the one hand, the main and subplot narratives within the mobile

game provide gamers with a rich and diverse gaming world filled with mystery, adventure, and emotion. The development of these storylines often involves character growth, emotional entanglements, and changes in relationships between characters. On the other hand, derivative media like comics, animations, and films broaden the game's narrative, endowing characters with additional life and depth. Gamers establish emotional connections with characters through interactions and storylines in the game. And these connections are then reinforced and extended in derivative content outside the game. Gamers gradually form identification with game characters through this multi-dimensional narrative experience, which plays a crucial role in the subsequent chapters discussing agency negotiation (Chapter 5) and uncertainty (Chapter 6).

It is worth undertaking a brief formal analysis of one of the *Onmyoji* characters at this point in order to underpin further arguments as well as those raised above. As 'an important technique for organizing visual information' (Glatstein, 2019), Formal Analysis here is a valuable tool I employed to dissect the visual elements of *Onmyoji* characters, such as appearance, attire, facial expressions, and body language, attempting to unravel the complex interplay between aesthetics, narrative, gamers' experience, and identification. The Shikigami named Futakuchi onna, offers an interesting case study not least because within the *Onmyoji* franchise, the same character is visually represented and defined differently across various media. At the same time, multi-dimensional storytelling provides characters (and Futakuchi onna) with additional dimensions and depth. In examining Futakuchi onna, we can also begin to understand how gamers experience emotional resonance when interacting with different media (pertaining to identification in this chapter) and how this resonance interrelates with their behaviours and experiences in the game (related to agency negotiation discussed in Chapter 5 and uncertainty discussed in Chapter 6). This analysis then, contributes to a better

understanding of the impact of a multi-layered narrative system on character identification.

An Example: Futakuchi Onna in the *Onmyoji* Franchise

In Japanese folklore, Futakuchi onna (‘二口女’, two-mouthed woman) is a female monster, with widely circulated versions often telling the story of a stepmother who transformed into the Yokai (supernatural being) Futakuchi Onna due to mistreating her stepchild. According to legend, a man remarried after his wife’s death, but the stepmother, upon giving birth to her own daughter, began abusing the older daughter left by the deceased wife, denying her food, and ultimately causing the girl to starve to death. On the forty-ninth day after the death of the elder daughter, the man accidentally hit the back of his wife’s head while chopping wood. Although the wound didn’t threaten her life, it miraculously transformed into a mouth, with a portion of the skull turning into teeth, and some of the flesh on the head becoming a tongue. This newly formed large mouth was in constant pain, and the only way to alleviate the suffering was by feeding it (Yokai.com, 2023a).

There are various versions of Futakuchi Onna in Japanese folklore, but a commonality is that the second mouth is typically concealed by hair, making it difficult to notice without careful observation. This hidden mouth always requires consuming more than an ordinary person to satisfy its appetite. Consequently, this shared characteristic becomes a crucial visual element in the portrayal of the Futakuchi Onna in various media works (Papp, 2010, p.14). In the two distinct artworks depicted below (Figure 4), narrating different versions of the Futakuchi Onna story, a visually similar set of features is presented: a woman dressed in a kimono, with long hair, and a second mouth covered by hair at the back of the head, revealing a tongue and teeth, with the hair extending like tentacles to grab food.

Figure 4. Futakuchi Onna portrayed in different artworks.

Left: Takehara Shunsen: Futakuchi Onna (二口女) from Ehon Hyaku Monogatari (Michimaro, 1841, p.19);

Right: Yuko Shimizu: Futakuchi Onna (二口女) from Beware of the Yokai! (Arthur, 2009) .

In the mobile game *Onmyoji*, the Shikigami Futakuchi onna has a personal biography that differs significantly from the malicious stepmother in Japanese folklore. This character is portrayed as a constantly crying, apologizing young girl. According to the in-game character biography, Futakuchi Onna desires friendship but is puzzled as to why people around her mysteriously disappear one after another. A wise old monk informs her that her body harbours some ominous presence, which is causing misfortune for her and those around her. Futakuchi Onna thinks it's just a strange bug and tries hard to drive away this presence while also fearing to harm it. It is evident that Futakuchi Onna in the game is portrayed as a naive, childlike and kind-hearted character. Despite this, the character's design in the game presents some similarities with the folklore, such as being a female character, wearing traditional Japanese clothing, and having long hair that transforms into arms and hands at the tips. However, there are also differences in the portrayal, for instance, there is no second mouth discovered on the back of her head in the rear view, and the

powerful arms formed by her hair have two perpetually closed large eyes, suggesting an inherent power being concealed (Figure 5).

Figure 5. The pre-awakening skin design for Futakuchi Onna in *Onmyoji* (YYS, 2023).

In *Onmyoji*, ‘Awakening’ is a crucial mechanism that allows gamers to enhance the abilities and attributes of their Shikigami characters. This process typically accompanies visual changes in the characters, making their appearance more splendid or featuring unique characteristics to reflect their enhanced abilities. Following the Awakening, the appearance of the Shikigami character, Futakuchi Onna, undergoes significant alterations. As depicted in Figure 6, the hair-transformed arms become more robust, with sharper nails, and the eyes on the arms open, emitting flames. Most notably, the concealed second mouth is no longer covered by hair, revealing sharp teeth. However, despite her seemingly enhanced aggressiveness in appearance, when standing, she points her toes inward, displaying a reserved posture. Her left index finger remains by her mouth, conveying an innocent and bewildered expression. This aligns with her portrayal in the game narrative: she is unaware that her second mouth might consume others, and this uncontrollable behaviour induces feelings of guilt, expressed continuously through apologies.

Figure 6. The post-awakening skin design for Futakuchi onna in *Onmyoji* (YYS, 2023).

In *Onmyoji*, the character's skills are closely tied to her story and visual presentation, further enriching gamers' understanding of this character. For instance, every time Futakuchi Onna bows or apologizes (expressing friendliness), the spirits on her head uncontrollably seize the opportunity to attack the opponent. This skill combines the character's internal conflicts with the game mechanics, creating a profound gaming experience. By directly experiencing the character's skills, gamers can sense her inner kindness and confusion, as well as the uncontrollable power within her. Some participants believe that this skill design not only enhances the game's strategic aspects but also deepens their emotional connection to the character, making it easier to establish an emotional sense of identification.

In the derivative game *Onmyoji Arena*, the character of Futakuchi Onna incorporates culinary elements, making her a distinctive and appealing persona different from the original version. Both her appearance and abilities have undergone corresponding modifications to align with her character setting as a sweet girl who loves food. For instance, in a skin representation available for gamers to choose (see Figure 7), Futakuchi Onna is dressed in

clothes and accessories made from chocolate wrapping paper. Correspondingly, her new skills are related to her love of food, adding a unique flavour to her combat style in the game: all enemies in close proximity to her are beguiled by her sweet appearance. However, when the opponents lower their guard, Futakuchi Onna throws bullet-like projectiles resembling paper cup chocolate cakes, causing potent physical damage (Moba, 2019). Although Futakuchi Onna in the derivative game differs significantly from her image and skill design in *Onmyoji*, she consistently maintains a sweet and adorable girl image. This coherence in appearance contributes to maintaining character consistency while allowing gamers to continually experience their beloved character across different games.

Figure 7. The skin of Futakuchi Onna ‘Cocoa Sweetheart’ in *Onmyoji Arena* (Moba, 2019).

The derivative cartoon series *Heian Monogatari* based on *Onmyoji* serves as an exemplary illustration of how character portrayals within the original game can be enriched through light-hearted and humorous narratives. This form of animation not only deepens gamers’ understanding of the characters but also provides a more vivid and enjoyable world. In a specific episode of this cartoon series, it is explored why everyone dislikes Futakuchi Onna (Bilibili, 2018). Futakuchi Onna aspires to be friends with other Shikigami but consistently scares everyone away. Believing that adopting a slender appearance like other female Shikigami would make her more approachable, she decides to start

with weight loss. However, her second mouth secretly indulges in consuming a significant amount of food while she sleeps. Consequently, upon waking up the next day, Futakuchi Onna still is the girl who appears plump, feeling aggrieved, continuously crying, and struggling to make friends (Figure 8). This story emphasizes her yearning for friendship and social interaction while revealing her dissatisfaction with her own appearance. The cartoon's light-hearted and humorous style provides gamers with an entertainment experience distinct from the mobile game itself. It not only deepens character development but also adds more dimensions and fun to the world of *Onmyoji*. Such derivative works, besides offering additional stories and emotional engagement, can attract diverse audiences, including those who may not be interested in mobile games but are intrigued by animated content.

Futakuchi Onna eagerly anticipates participating in social activities with other Shikigami, expressing, 'It looks lively; let me join in too'.

After being rejected, Futakuchi Onna cries in sadness, and Abe no Seimei comforts her.

Futakuchi Onna attempts to make herself more attractive through weight loss, but her second mouth consistently sneaks in and consumes food while she sleeps.

Upon waking up, Futakuchi Onna discovers that she has actually gained weight instead of losing it.

Figure 8. Screenshots from Episode 2 of *Heian Monogatari*, titled ‘The Depressed Futakuchi Onna’ (Bilibili, 2018).

Another derivative animation of *Onmyoji*, *Hyakki Kindergarten*, is adapted from a fan-made comic. This animation injects a fresh and adorable image into the characters of *Onmyoji*, portraying them as kindergarten children. In this animation, Futakuchi Onna is depicted as a strong but charming and cute child who forms positive friendships with other characters, infusing her character with more optimistic qualities (ACFun, 2018; see Figure 9). This work represents the fervent passion of gamers for the characters and creatively expands the stories of the characters. Beyond fulfilling Futakuchi Onna’s dream of making friends, it also fosters a unique understanding and emotional connection to the original characters for a broader audience.

Figure 9. In the seventh episode of the second season of *Hyakki Kindergarten*, Futakuchi Onna achieves victory in the weightlifting event during the kindergarten sports day, earning recognition and praise from other Shikigami (ACFun, 2018).

In the eyes of many *Onmyoji* gamers, Futakuchi Onna is perceived as an adorable, innocent, kind, and food-loving little girl. This is evident in the memes created by gamers, where Futakuchi Onna is often depicted with a round face, expressing a love for food, and radiating a cute and benevolent demeanour (18183.com, 2018; See Figure 10). Participant 7 even jokingly refer to herself as a ‘Futakuchi Onna’ in conversations with friends due to their love for eating. This emotional connection and creative expression not only deepen the engagement of gamers with their beloved character but also provide them with a platform to share unique perspectives and stories. This shared experience not only strengthens the connections among gamers but also enhances their affection and identification with the character, further enriching the overall cultural landscape of the gamer community.

Figure 10. Memes of Futakuchi Onna circulating on the internet, 'I didn't mean to' (left), 'it's also hard to get full of these' (right). (18183.com, 2018)

The story of Futakuchi Onna in the *Onmyoji* franchise demonstrates that transmedia storytelling provides various opportunities to represent characters, allowing gamers to have a more comprehensive understanding of the characters. This understanding extends beyond the game's narrative and includes derivative animations and fan creations. This diverse narrative approach enriches the character's image, sparks emotional resonance among gamers, and deepens their identification with the characters. However, this diversity may also lead to a deviation from the original character image. Characters are reshaped in different media to suit various contexts and audience demands. This adaptation and reinterpretation may sometimes deviate from the traditional image, potentially altering gamers' perspectives on traditional figures. Particularly in fan creations, gamers may imbue characters with new traits and stories, further influencing their interpretation. The content shared by my participants (discussed in the next section) support this viewpoint, indicating that transmedia storytelling impacts the construction of character identification.

Furthermore, I argue that the portrayal of character in transmedia storytelling of *Onmyoji* involves power dynamics related to body and societal expectations.

According to Zhong (2019), legends of female monsters, represented by characters like Futakuchi Onna, reflect the complex attitudes towards women in early Japanese society. Zhong (ibid.) argues that Japanese society simultaneously praised women as mothers and caregivers while expressing concerns about negative traits such as jealousy, paranoia, madness, and greed through these monsters' imageries. This complexity and contradiction are perpetuated and reimagined in different media, prompting profound reflections on gender power dynamics in society and culture. However, from the representation of Futakuchi Onna in *Onmyoji* and its derivative media, it can be observed that the character consistently presents a delicate inner and an uncontrollable aspect of power, reflecting, to some extent, the prevalent impression of women in modern society in relation to societal beauty standards and cultural expectations for women (Leung et al., 2001, p.345; Saito, 2017, p.90; Rodgers et al., 2022, p.537), as well as societal scrutiny of women's bodies and excessive focus on their appearances. Achieving society's set standards of appearance may even be a challenging task for women, potentially leading to emotional distress and self-doubt. This power issue is depicted in media works through the character's efforts and failures.

The next section further analyses how gamers construct character identification in transmedia storytelling, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of character images in different media and gamers' responses to them.

Character Identification in Transmedia Narrative

The preceding discussion indicates that gamers are not merely consumers of the game's narrative content; they actively engage with various media-related derivative works. They select narrative segments from these works that resonate with them, integrating them to form a more comprehensive

understanding of the game characters. This practice of transmedia storytelling enriches gamers' understanding of the game world, influencing their specific gaming behaviours and experiences, and providing them with additional elements and dimensions for constructing their own identities. The detailed accounts shared by my participants in digital diaries and interviews serve as compelling evidence supporting this viewpoint.

Participant 1 shared in her diary that it was only after watching the CG (Computer Graphics) of the Shikigami named Suzuhiko on a video platform that she was drawn to the character's pursuit of freedom and defiance against authority. This connection extends beyond the internal game narrative, expanding their identification with the character through content on other media channels. Similarly, Participant 5 compared the story of the same character learned from other derivative games and character CGs, noting the gradual progression and enhancement of the character's story across different platforms, further enriching her understanding of the character. Participant 8 admitted that his impression of the Shikigami named Kachou Fuugetsu changed significantly only after watching a derivative animation about her. The impact of transmedia storytelling is not limited to text or images; it is conveyed through multimedia formats such as animation, enabling gamers to perceive and understand characters more deeply. Even non-playable characters (NPCs) in the game, such as Participant 4's mention of Kohaku, become part of transmedia storytelling. Despite limited interaction with Kohaku in the game, through in-game dialogues, textual descriptions, and other derivative works like gamer-created content, Participant 4 still constructs an identification with this NPC character, attributing qualities such as cuteness, gentleness, and dedication to Shiro.

> 'Kohaku could have been cutely around the onmyojis and told them where to go and what to do. Until that day, when Onikiri descended

> on Heian-kyo and the living creatures were devastated. Kohaku stood up and fought for everyone! He was so gentle! He even willingly accepted the curse to withstand more damage. Isn't such Kohaku worthy of cherishing?' (Participant 4's description of Kohaku in his diary)

These examples emphasize how gamers gather information from various media platforms to understand game characters from diverse perspectives and depths. This transmedia storytelling practice provides gamers with more diverse ways of identifying with characters, simultaneously enriching their experiences in the game world.

From the language employed in participants' diaries, it is evident that they consistently utilize the third person to narrate the stories of these characters and articulate the insights these narratives impart to them. This linguistic approach aligns with the perspective they adopt within the game. However, I contend that this differs from the viewpoint described by Crick (2011) regarding gamers in third-person games, such as *Tomb Raider.* In games like *Tomb Raider*, gamers typically identify or manipulate their avatars from an overhead or rear perspective. Nevertheless, the visual representation of the avatar 'occupies the "game body" perspective' (ibid., p.263), providing experienced gamers with a sense of control and enabling them to immerse themselves in the game world in a 'fully embodied, sensuous, carnal' state (p.267).

While in *Onmyoji*, although gamers take on the role of the protagonist named Seimei, the core experience revolves around manipulating and managing various Shikigami characters. During battles, gamers observe and control the team members' skills from an overhead perspective, with the ability to rotate the viewpoint by sliding their fingers on the screen. In chapter plots, gamers can operate the avatar by tapping the screen, triggering dialogues with Shikigami characters, providing a clear view of each character's appearance

and actions. When cut-scenes appear, gamers lose control to some extent, becoming spectators of the storyline (further discussed in Chapter 5 regarding the issue of agency, see page 179). It is evident that gamers consistently adopt a god-like perspective to scrutinize the game events, distinctly differentiating their own bodies from the bodies of in-game characters. Particularly when facing characters with strong personalities and independent narratives, the differentiation between the gamer's body and the character's body maintains a certain distance. This distance serves as a constant reminder to gamers that they cannot fully control the characters (Rouse, 2004, p.219). And such a distance, as emphasized by Shaw (2015, p.126), is a fundamental requirement for gamers to establish identification with characters.

Based on their understanding of narratives, participants expressed various reasons for identifying with the characters, primarily because they perceived traits in these characters' narratives that resonated with their own values and ideals. These included a desire for freedom, inner strength, selfless companionship, and perspectives on war, humanity, and life. Firstly, through interacting with these characters, gamers established an emotional connection as they believed these characters represented a part of their own ideals. For instance, Participant 1 strongly identified with Suzuhiko Hime, emphasizing her pursuit of freedom. Using the phrase 'outwardly a cool-looking girl but inwardly a passionately humorous one', Participant 1 described Suzuhiko, emphasizing the allure of her inner personality. This indicates that Participant 1 views Suzuhiko as an aspirant of freedom, forming an emotional connection with her. Participant 8 also mentioned a pursuit of freedom, believing that Suzuhiko embodies this ideal in the game, a state he cannot achieve in his everyday life. This suggests that his emotional connection to the character is rooted in the character representing ideals and desires he cannot fulfil. He used the phrase 'I also want freedom' to underscore his own desire while expressing admiration and blessing for the character. Participants found resonances in the narratives

of game characters related to their own ideals and values. They identified with the characters' traits and established emotional connections through interaction. This emotional connection may influence their engagement and loyalty to the game, as they find emotional satisfaction in the game related to their own experiences.

This emotional connection is to some extent related to the attractiveness and pleasure of the game. Research by Turkle (2011), Przybylski et al. (2012, p.74), and Hu et al. (2019, p.7) emphasizes the identity exploration and growth opportunities provided by video games. Gamers in video games can experiment with their ideal selves, finding happiness and personal development, which contributes to the appeal of video games. In *Onmyoji*, this appeal is further manifested. From the gamer's third-person perspective, these characters in the game appear to be entities with agency (discussed in Chapter 5, see page 194)—although some information is hidden, awaiting gamer exploration and discovery, these characters seem to possess complete personal biographies, unique personalities, complex interpersonal relationships, human-like emotions, and self-made choices for specific purposes. When a game character possesses traits that gamers desire or lack in everyday life, gamers may view these traits as parts they are missing and seek to compensate for this lack through interaction with the character. Thus, gamers like Participant 8 may experience emotions of envy or admiration because the game character possesses traits that he does not have. The process of compensating for self-differences through identification with game characters, as suggested by Klimmt et al. (2009, p.364), is considered a source of enjoyment provided by video games.

Secondly, gamers also particularly identify with game characters that prompt reflections on complex themes such as humanity and life. For example, Participant 7, through the story of the Shikigami named Higanbana, reflected

on the essence of war. As she mentioned, ‘The battlefield knows no distinction between friend and foe; death is constant; that is war’, ‘the real ending is that nobody survives’, and ‘The true killer is war’. Her descriptions emphasized the merciless and indiscriminate nature of war, as well as the innocent sacrifices made during it. She related the game’s story to real-world issues of war, reflecting more broadly on humanity. Participant 19 mentioned that the story of Menreiki reveals the complexity of human nature, asserting that everyone has duality within them, a conflict between their dark and good selves. This reflection helps gamers better understand the internal contradictions and conflicts within themselves, fostering contemplation on personal growth and development. Participant 16 quotes from Takiyasha Hime, ‘Born as a distant ship, born towards death’. He believed that this statement unveiled the essence of life, encouraging people to cherish the present without being burdened by the past or the future. This contemplation can inspire gamers to appreciate the present moment and seek a meaningful life. These perspectives highlight how game characters serve as a medium guiding gamers to contemplate significant issues like humanity, life, and self-awareness. The characters and storylines in the game are not merely virtual; to some extent, they represent the gamers’ internal conflicts and reflections. This emotional connection links gamers and game characters, contributing to personal growth and development, influencing their values, and shaping their attitudes toward life. This finding is enlightening for understanding the significant role games play in shaping gamers’ identity and thoughts.

Furthermore, as per Shaw’s (2015, p.94) definition of identification, in specific contexts, gamers’ identification with characters also partly stems from their recognition of universal human traits within the characters. When gamers can identify characteristics that resonate with their own, they are more likely to establish emotional connections and identification with the characters. Taking the Shikigami named Enmusubi as an example, Participant 4, through an

analysis of the character's traits such as poverty, caring for others, and facing difficulties without hesitation, identified with this character. These traits make the character more relatable to real humans, making it easier for gamers to intertwine their own identity with that of the character. Participant 16 also interpreted Enmusubi in his diary, describing the character as 'ordinary, positive, and hardworking. Like you, like me, like everyone'. His viewpoint indicates a positive evaluation and a sense of identification with the character, emphasizing the character's ordinariness and similarity to humans in the real world. This further demonstrates how games influence gamers' identification and thinking, as well as the crucial role characters play in guiding gamers to contemplate complex themes.

However, it is essential to emphasize that different gamers may identify with different characteristics of characters, given variations in individual experiences and values. Thus, the sense of identification is a highly individualized process influenced by various factors. Similarity to human traits in the real world can also trigger gamers' sense of identification, as it provides a familiar and easily understandable emotional connection. However, in certain contexts, the heterogeneity and uniqueness of virtual characters may attract gamers, offering a fresh experience and perspective (Sibilla and Mancini, 2018). For instance, in *Onmyoji*, two Shikigami, Shokurei and Mishige, were criticized by many participants for being too similar to normal humans, as they failed to ignite gamers' desire for exploration. This example also prompts consideration of gamers actively seeking agency and uncertainty during the gaming process, which is further discussed in Chapter 5 (see page 187) and Chapter 6 (see page 287).

When gamers identify with the game narrative, this emotional connection often transcends the game world, extending into real-life experiences. A notable manifestation of this connection is the affectionate nicknames gamers use for

game characters. This form of address is not merely a linguistic expression but a manifestation of emotional connection, reflecting the gamers' special sentiments towards the characters. In the following section, I further explored how these affectionate nicknames become vivid symbols of gamers' identification.

Expressing Identification through Affectionate Nicknames

An intriguing finding in my project is that participants express their identification with characters by using affectionate nicknames for them. This can be considered a way of expressing the intimate emotional connection they establish with these characters, analogous to how individuals treat family members, friends, or pets in close relationships. Humans typically employ endearing terms for individuals, animals, or objects with whom they share close connections, such as parents, partners, pets, toys, and more, considering them 'important members of kinship networks' and even transcending species barriers (Charles and Davies, 2008, p.23). These terms often convey aspects of emotional needs, such as love, dependence, and a sense of belonging (Charles, 2017, p.118).

Gamers establish emotional connections with gaming characters through spending significant time in the game and sharing adventures. Gamers may share their emotions towards game characters, and these affectionate nicknames can become a shared language that enhances social interaction and resonance. This finding highlights how video games, as a medium, stimulate and shape gamers' emotions, serving as a tool for fostering social interaction, emotional expression, and identification. This is crucial for understanding the depth and diversity of gaming culture and gamer experiences.

Game Narrative-related Nicknames

Some participants create more personal and informal names for game characters. For instance, Participant 8 refers to the Shikigami named Ubume as ‘Mom’ or ‘Bird Mom’. This is because, in the character’s biography, Ubume is portrayed as a mother who has lost her child. He explains, ‘Ubume ‘s appearance aligns with her biography, making me feel like she is truly my mom in the game’. He also shared a WeChat moment posted six years ago with the caption ‘Bird Mom, I love you! [blushing face]’, expressing deep emotions towards Ubume (Figure 11). This appellation reflects an understanding of the game narrative and emotional identification with the maternal character. Importantly, it also mirrors the gamer’s appreciation for family values and maternal care.

Figure 11. Participant 8 shared a screenshot of his WeChat moments, ‘Bird Mom, I love you! [blushing face]’.

For instance, Participant 11 refers to the Shikigami named Tamamo no Mae as ‘Big Uncle’ because, in the game narrative, Tamamo is the uncle of the protagonist, Abe no Seimei, who has lost his own children. As reflected in his diary contemplating the Big Uncle’s emotions towards children and expectations for him, ‘Perhaps every time Big Uncle sees other kids, he would think if his own children were still alive, they would be like them. I hope Big Uncle can live according to his wishes someday!’ All of these negotiations and positions of identification are not only pleasurable but create opportunities for deeper identification. When Participant 11 wrote, ‘I hope Big Uncle can live according to his wishes someday’, we see autonomy, freedom, and choice, being valued and expressed as aspirational. In this way, the emotional connection between the gamer and the game character involves not only the identification with the character itself but also resonates with the gamer’s own values and emotions.

The reflections in these two examples align with previous scholarly perspectives on narrative identification. By presenting the story from different perspectives and characters’ viewpoints, gamers can more easily resonate and emotionally connect with the characters in the story, thereby enhancing their identification with the narrative. Simultaneously, as individuals become more similar to the characters in the story or align with the characters’ perspectives, they are more likely to identify with and accept the viewpoints and information conveyed in the story (Murphy et al., 2013, p.4; Hoeken et al., 2016, pp.306-307; van Krieken et al., 2017, p.3). This impact of narrative representation and character similarity can stimulate readers to engage in deeper reflection and acceptance of the perspectives and information presented in the story.

Furthermore, these two examples emphasize the multi-layered nature of narrative and emotional identification, illustrating how gamers express and

embody their values through the addressed names of the characters. In my project, gamers are not only participants in the game but also interpreters and co-creators of the characters. Through narrative and emotional identification, they connect the characters in the game with their life experiences and values. This further highlight how video games, as platforms for cultural and social exchange, shape complex and rich relationships between individuals and virtual worlds.

Spouse-related Nicknames

Some participants affectionately address their favoured game characters as ‘husband’ or ‘wife’, expressing appreciation and identification with these characters’ appearance, abilities, values, and other aspects. As discussed earlier (see page 149), gamers perceive characters as unified entities with independent personalities based on their understanding of the narrative. Therefore, in the interactions with these characters, gamers gradually develop aesthetic identification with their appearance and, as Koike and Loughnan (2021, pp.3-4) suggest, expand their understanding of them from a deeper psychological perspective by continuously learning about the virtual characters’ needs. These characters are perceived as ‘attractive, proximal others’, fostering emotional connections. Particularly, when gamers feel that human companions cannot fulfil certain needs as effectively as these virtual characters, the latter may serve as substitutes in real emotional relationships and evoke positive emotional responses (ibid., pp.6-7).

For example, Participant 5 believes that emotional relationships between partners in everyday life can be more complex. If both partners perceive their contributions as unequal, it may lead to the termination of the relationship, such as the possibility of infidelity, as mentioned. However, in the gaming world, he thinks that virtual characters are ‘essentially just a bunch of data, and you will

save a lot of unnecessary worries in real life. These virtual characters will never betray you, and you can invest more emotions.' His expression reflects a psychological need to simplify emotional relationships in the virtual world and alleviate stress in everyday life. Virtual characters provide a secure, controllable way to meet this need. Although these emotional connections may be virtual, they hold genuine significance for gamers. This also underscores how games fulfil gamers' emotional and identity needs, emphasizing the vital role of virtual characters in meeting these needs.

However, it is important to note that the use of terms like 'wife' by male gamers to establish intimate relationships with female characters often relies on the premise that these female characters meet their aesthetic preferences. For example, Participant 13 expresses in the diary a considerable appreciation for the appearance of certain female characters in the game, while Participant 9 explicitly states that his preference for a particular female character is based on the size of her breasts. It is evident that gamers' appreciation and attraction to the appearance of characters may make it easier for them to establish emotional connections with these characters. However, when some male gamers excessively emphasize the appreciation of appearance, they also objectify female characters and understand them firstly in relation to their aesthetics without considering their value or attributes within the game (Yamaguchi, 2020, p.360).

I also find that female gamers also refer to female characters they like in the game as 'wife'. While this intimate term may also be partially based on aesthetic appreciation, its more significant aspect is its representation of identification with the abilities and values embodied by these characters. For instance, Participants 7 and 10, both female gamers, express appreciation for the appearance of female characters referred to as 'wife' in the game. However, they express satisfaction with the increasing presence of powerful and

valuable female characters in the game, reflecting qualities such as resilience, intelligence, and courage. The positive identification and expectation among female gamers create a resonance that goes beyond emotional resonance and includes expectations for game developers and the industry as a whole to see more strong and valuable female characters. This finding responds to Winch (2013, p.32)'s argument about female friendship, suggesting that mutual appreciation among women leads to 'attendant feelings of belonging, security, and identity'.

This observation prompts an intriguing consideration: whether female gamers referring to female game characters as 'wife' reflects power dynamics between husbands and wives that may exist in everyday life. This might suggest that female gamers seek a different gender power in the gaming world to compensate for potential power imbalances in their real lives. This finding highlights the complexity of video games as a platform reflecting social and cultural dynamics, allowing us to delve deeper into issues such as gender power, societal expectations, and the evolution of gender roles through the intimate relationships gamers establish with virtual characters. To some extent, this echoes the theme of agent negotiation that I focused on in Chapter 5.

Child-related Nicknames

In addition to spousal nicknames, many participants also use child-related nicknames to describe their affection for preferred characters. This form of Nicknames not only expresses a deep emotional connection established with the characters and identification with the personification of game characters but also reveals a particular power relationship.

On one hand, some participants express emotional investment in game characters through such callings. For example, Participant 2 refers to his

favourite character as ‘cub’ (in Chinese, ‘崽子’), stating in his diary, ‘The continuous motivation for me to keep playing is to see many cubs waiting for me to feed them.’ This form of nicknames demonstrates his care and sense of responsibility toward the character, viewing them as entities in need of parental care. Participant 11 refers to her favourite character as ‘daughter’ (in Chinese, ‘闺女’) and even creates a dedicated folder on her computer to store game screenshots related to this character, frequently reviewing them. She creates an intimate and enduring relationship with the character by intertwining the character with her own gaming experiences. Participant 10 uses a similar way, referring to a male character she likes as ‘good big son’ (in Chinese, ‘好大儿’), often expressing thoughts like ‘I want to buy clothes for my good big son’, meaning purchasing in-game skins from the game store. This highlights her affection and concern for this character.

Through these participants’ expressions, we can observe that gamers, in their continuous gaming experiences and exploration, comprehend and perceive characters through aspects such as appearance, language, and behaviour, establishing emotional connections with the characters. Treating characters as entities in need of care and attention, akin to the intimate relationship between parents and children, gamers often assume the roles of parents or caregivers—caring for characters (providing necessary resources and support through feeding, healing, or purchasing new skins), protecting characters (choosing appropriate equipment or teammates to ensure characters do not suffer excessive harm in battles), and nurturing characters (acquiring equipment, levelling up, or enhancing abilities to cultivate characters into more proficient fighters). Therefore, these terms of address are not merely linguistic habits; they embody gamers’ emotional investment and gaming practices, emphasizing the importance of characters in the gaming experience and the unique interaction between gamers and characters.

On the other hand, this parent-child relationship also implies a potential power dynamic. Alongside this intimacy, gamers often perceive themselves as having the power to dominate and control characters, even feeling a parental-like moral responsibility and obligation (Banks, 2015). In *Onmyoji*, gamers provide material support to their 'children', such as giving characters in-game equipment, coins, and experience points. They also frequently expect characters to demonstrate a sense of social responsibility in the game world, including character growth and social status. For instance, Participant 10 expresses maternal expectations for the characters, 'I don't insist that they achieve great things; I just hope they can grow into mature Shikigami, capable of standing on their own.' Participant 16, when discussing a character in the game, Shuten Douji, believes, 'Certainly, one should have a sense of social responsibility to gain powerful strength.' In this relationship, gamers usually have more control, determining the actions and fate of game characters, including selecting tasks, participating in activities, and allocating resources. The power to allocate resources is typically in the hands of the gamer, meaning they can decide how to distribute resources, allowing them to govern the survival and development of the characters. This power dynamic helps gamers better shape the game world and, according to Livingston et al. (2014, p.7), fosters a deeper emotional connection with the characters.

It is important to emphasize that, despite characters being acknowledged to some extent as possessing vitality and personality traits, in such intimate relationships, characters are often being in a passive and dependent position. They need to follow the gamer's instructions and are subject to the influence and domination of the gamer. Therefore, this power relationship is typically unequal, with gamers enjoying greater control while characters occupy a relatively submissive position. The power dynamics described here represent only a part of the power dynamics in gaming practices, and I delve into and discuss more findings regarding power and agency in Chapter 5.

In summary, I have found, as highlighted by Shaw (2015, p.94), that gamer identification with characters is built upon considering characters as independent entities and seeking a connection between them and the self. In this process, gamers establish relationships with characters in various ways. Different gamers exhibit distinct gaming behaviours, resulting in varying levels of intimacy established with characters. The relationships between gamers and game characters are multifaceted and complex, involving intertwining aspects of identification, emotional connection, and power dynamics. This intimate interaction not only captivates but also, to some extent, shapes gamers' gaming experiences and identities. I discovered that beyond establishing emotional connections within the game, some gamers further explore and express their gaming identity through creative means. Therefore, in the following section, I elaborate on how gamers shape and express their gaming identities through fan creations. Fan creation is a widely observed phenomenon in gaming communities, enabling gamers to reimagine characters and plots from the game, exercise their imagination, and share their creations with fellow gamers. This creative activity not only provides an outlet for gamers' creativity but also allows them to deepen their understanding of characters and stories beyond the game world. Thus, fan creation serves as a crucial window to understand how gamers integrate gaming into their personal identity construction process.

Creative self-expressions in the specific context

In addition to the game's narratives and related stories, *Onmyoji* gamers also gain an understanding of the characters and stories from other, related fan-created works. Their love for the characters can inspire them to continue creating and expanding the *Onmyoji* world's narrative possibilities, reflecting their dual identity as both gamers and fans. As Gray et al. (2017, p.6) suggest, 'fan consumption has grown into a taken-for-granted aspect of modern

communication and consumption that warrants critical analysis and investigation'. Therefore, in this section, I explored how gamers express their identification with game characters through consuming and creating fan works, and how this process reflects the agency that gamers construct in their meaning-making.

Creative Expressions through Memes

Memes have become a global cultural form and are widely used on Chinese social media. Typically composed of images and text, they contain humorous and/or funny elements that 'shape and define each other' in specific contexts (Ying and Blommaert, 2020, p.230). In my project, gamers often create or use memes to express their love and identification with a particular character. Memes related to *Onmyoji* adopt elements such as a character's image, movements, and expressions, along with appropriate text, to convey gamers' emotions and attitudes toward that character. These memes can be widely used within and outside the game, such as on social media, chat apps, forums, and other platforms.

Usually, memes created by gamers for a specific character may deviate significantly from the character's original representation in the game, but they convey the creator's interpretation of the character. Other gamers who download and use these memes also show their agreement with this interpretation to some degree. For instance, Participant 8 shared a fan-made meme (Figure 12, right) in his diary while referring to the Shikigami named Miketsu, to express his frustration towards the randomness of her skill release during battles in the game. Miketsu is a Shinto deity originally associated with food, blessing agriculture, and industry. Based on the character's design in the game, this character is intended to have a gentle and resolute personality. As depicted in Figure 12, the left side shows the original image of this character

in the game. Despite the character's powerful skills according to the design, in actual gameplay, she often fails to trigger attacks due to the low probability of skill activation, leading to gamer failures in many situations. In this meme shared by Participant 8 (Figure 12, Right), Miketsu presents a bright smile, appearing lively and seemingly non-aggressive. However, she gives a thumbs up to gamers while saying, 'I just won't shoot', conveying a sense of teasing or schadenfreude. I believe that by sharing and using this meme, Participant 8 has established a shared understanding with the meme creator and other gamers regarding their perspective on the character's skill release during gameplay.

Figure 12.
Left: the Shikigami named Miketsu in *Onmyoji*;
Right: the meme of Miketsu, with the text 'I just won't shoot' (shared by Participant 8).

Participants often use fan-made memes to assist in expressing their current mood or viewpoint in their digital diaries. For example, Participant 1 shared about failing to get her favourite character even after trying 132 times, and 'sulkily decided to give up'. She then used the meme in Figure 13 (Right) in her diary. This meme features a chibi version of Abe no Seimei (the main protagonist of the game narrative, with the original design shown on the left side of Figure 13) lying on the ground, hugging his legs with teary eyes, and

the accompanying text reads, ‘Give Me Back the Gade’. Jade is the most important currency in the game, where 100 jades can be exchanged for one opportunity to summon rare characters. According to Ying and Blommaert (2020, p.244), the character in this meme is originally intended to convey negative emotions such as sadness, loss, and struggle. However, the use of a chibi design, as noted by Ying and Blommaert (ibid., p.240), depicts ‘what they regard as cute’, seemingly mitigating the initially intended negative emotions. In her diary, Participant 1 expresses the frustration of spending a significant number of in-game resources without achieving positive results. However, when combined with the chosen meme, I could more intuitively sense her emotions at that moment — despite anger, there is a predominant feeling of being wronged, yet still maintaining a positive and optimistic outlook. This combination of expression vividly illustrates the complexity and diversity of emotions experienced by gamers.

Figure 13.
Left：Abe no Seimei in the game;
Right：the meme of Abe no Seimei, with the text ‘Give Me Back the Gade’.

Additionally, participants often use spoofing memes to express their identification with a particular character. For instance, in his diary, Participant 9 mentioned Onikiri, a Shikigami in *Onmyoji*, and commented, ‘I like Onikiri’s design. He wields three swords and can cut through anything, showcasing the style of Daijyousan’. The term ‘Daijyousan’ refers to a unique gameplay in *Onmyoji* where gamers need to form a team consisting of specific Shikigami

to challenge specific instances and gain corresponding rewards. These specific Shikigami are named after the Daijyousan series in the game. Therefore, this term is frequently used to describe a gamer's strong lineup and formidable combat ability. At the end of his diary, Participant 9 included Figure 14 (Left) to showcase his 'Daijyousan' team.

Figure 14.
Left: A parody image of 'The Style of Daijyousan';
Right: and the wrestler D'Angelo Dinero.

The meme used in Figure 14 (Right) features wrestler D'Angelo Dinero's expression after winning a match, where his previously nervous and angry expression dramatically shifts to a cunning fake smile. This expression was captured and cut off by people, who then created various meme with it that were widely spread on the internet. This smile seems to convey a sense of superiority, a fake smile, teasing, or temptation. When this meme is used to depict Onikiri, it becomes the gamer's understanding of a powerful, unbeatable, and somewhat unfashionable Shikigami filled with a sense of superiority. By using this meme, gamers not only express their emotions but also convey their identification with the character. This identification is established through a process of deepening understanding of the characteristics and personality associated with the character in the game, and then choosing or creating an appropriate meme to express one's views. The practice of extracting facial expressions of well-known public figures and overlaying them on other characters is very popular on Chinese social media platforms. Although the

specific connotations of the referenced memes may continuously evolve (Ying and Blommaert, 2020, p.234), what remains constant is their ability to help creators or users express specific emotions and identities in the present moment and context.

By using memes, gamers express their current mood and state, as well as poke fun at game characters for the purposes of entertainment and relaxation. Participant 11, for example, confesses to having a keen interest in searching for various humorous character emojis online. While admiring the creators' creativity and talent, she finds these images funny and enjoyable. As noted by Ying and Blommaert (2020, p.249), memes that are popular on Chinese social media serve various purposes while pursuing fun. The creation and consumption of memes can also promote non-face-to-face communication on the Internet. The images and textual symbols that constitute memes are recombined according to specific cultural or social conventions and are continuously endowed and updated with specific meanings in particular contexts and practices, which are shared by members in the same cultural or social context (ibid., p.228). As Participant 9 explained in the interview, using memes deepens communication with the game and other gamers. Memes make oneself 'more relaxed and at ease, and are more understandable than cold, emotionless text. Sometimes, when it's difficult to discuss a topic or unsure what to say, sending an emoji to the other person may immediately convey my meaning, and the topic will be immediately opened up' (Participant 9). Therefore, and in a similar vein to their use of specific language discussed earlier (see page 118); gamers who belong to the same gaming community create and use memes according to shared knowledge and rules in non-face-to-face communication, conveying or interpreting the meaning contained therein (see Ying and Blommaert, 2020 p.249), while deepening their personal and social identity in the community.

Creative Expression: Other Fan Creations

In addition to expressing their identities and identifications by sharing or creating game-related memes, some participants in my project reported having experiences in creating fan fictions or videos. Based on a deep understanding and extensive research of transmedia storytelling, fan creators typically create new characters or introduce unusual plots based on appropriation or derivation. Some of these works expand on the original story world (Participant 3), supplementing depth to game characters and creating new narrative modes in transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2010, p.948; Shaw, 2015, p.133). Others only borrow the names of game characters, creating plots unrelated to the game's settings (Participant 11), expressing concerns about everyday life, projecting self-identity, or pursuing community identity (Black and Steinkuehler, 2009, pp.274-276).

For instance, one of the beloved game characters, Ibaraki Douji in *Onmyoji*, is a powerful monster but has always been following another character, Shuten Douji. For him, Shuten Douji is the one he admires the most. In the game's storyline, Ibaraki Doji always says 'Oh, my best friend'. Some of his lines in the plot, such as 'I can tell you more about his merits, but it would take three days and three nights', 'Only Shuten Doji makes me unable to extricate myself', and 'I want to surrender my body to him' (Figure 15), have sparked many gamers' imagination about the ambiguous relationship between these two male characters.

Figure 15. Screenshots from Plot Chapter Ten in *Onmyoji*: Ibaraki Doji describes Shuten Doji to others, saying, ‘He is the epitome I pursue, the man at the pinnacle of the Yokai tribe’, ‘I want to find him... And lost to him’, ‘Yeah, and then... I want to surrender my body to him’.

On the most popular Chinese social media platform, Weibo, the hot topic #酒茨 (a couple name given to Shuten Douji and Ibaraki Doji by their fans) has accumulated a total reading volume of 1.64 billion and a discussion volume of 1.213 million. There is a wide range of creative content related to these two characters, including illustrations, videos, novels, jokes, and even professionally produced comic books based on excellent fan creations. Without exception, these creations all revolve around a romantic love story between these two male characters. In one fan comic, Shuten Doji and Ibaraki Doji are depicted having their own child (see Figure 16). In other fan works, gamers also portray Ibaraki Doji getting a manicure and wearing women’s clothing (see Figure 17). Participant 15 acknowledged in the interview that she had also written their love stories, including explicit sexual descriptions. She mentioned enjoying reading similar-themed fan fiction written by other authors.

Figure 16. A fan comic featuring Ibaraki Doji, Shuten Doji and their child (Wen, 2023).

Figure 17. The most popular fan creation in the 2023 Onmyoji Game Skin Design Competition: Ibaraki Doji - Mandragora Blossom (Ning, 2023).

The participants in my project hold two distinct perspectives regarding the relationship between the game narrative and derivative fan narratives of *Onmyoji*. On one hand, some participants believe that these two parts merges into a cohesive whole, jointly shaping their understanding and identification of the game world. As Participant 20 expressed, ‘It’s like a big tree, where the official narrative is the main trunk, and other fans’ creations form the branches and vines’. They emphasize the importance of fan creations as a supplement to the game narrative, adding depth and dimensions to the game world. For example, they believe that fan creations provide new emotional connection

points (Participant 19), broaden their understanding of characters and plots (Participant 3), and even break free from traditional thinking (Participant 20). ‘I like this entire world more. Without these fan creations, who would have thought that one day Ibaraki Doji would wear women’s clothing, Umibouzu would wear leather pants, and Asura would pole dance’ (Participant 8). These creative ideas in fan works showcase the creativity of gamer authors and their creative response to the game world.

On the other hand, some participants believe that official and fan creations are two parallel worlds that should be regarded separately. These gamers have their own preferences and typically choose one over the other. This perspective demonstrates that within the fan community, gamers can make choices and position themselves based on their preferences and interests. For example, Participant 7 sees the game as the true narrative, while fan creations are merely additional entertainment. She insists on respecting the original stories, seeing them as her primary identification with the game world. In contrast, Participant 15 tends to identify more with fan creations because she believes these works better align with her interests and imagination, stating, ‘Only fans know exactly what fans want to see’. This perspective underscores the significance of fan creations in meeting the diverse needs and interests of different gamers. It also illustrates how fans deepen their understanding and engagement with the game world through fan creations.

However, regardless of their viewpoints, gamers ultimately identify with the *Onmyoji* world they construct in their minds. This world is built by selecting elements from various media works that resonate with them the most. Gamers engage with the game, consume derivative works, choose preferred materials for their own creations, or appreciate fan works they like. In this process, they consistently pick the elements they identified with the most from different media works and collectively assemble them into a story that aligns with their

understanding and acceptance. This process showcases the agency and creativity of gamers; they are not just consumers of the game but also contributors to the creation of the game world. As Participant 4 expressed, ‘I decide what this world is like; it’s not presented to me by any work. I will make this world more complete with my own understanding’. This highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of gamer identity and identification with the game world, expressed and constructed through various media and creative processes. Therefore, fan creation is not only a form of entertainment but also a means of expressing and constructing self-identity, community identity, and character identification.

Alternative Expressions in the Regulatory Context

China’s media regulatory context plays a crucial role in the creative process. According to Chinese media regulatory policies, explicit same-sex fan fiction with sexual content is not allowed to be openly published on social media platforms (Yu, 2017). For creators and fan authors, this means working within an environment of regulations and censorship. In such a situation, Foucault’s perspective (1995, p.138) becomes particularly relevant, as he suggests that every society has strict power structures that regulate and control individuals’ behaviours and expressions in various ways. This ongoing enforcement and supervision may lead individuals to become ‘docile bodies’, meaning individuals who tend to obey and conform to authority (ibid).

However, as also observed by Jenkins (2006, p.158), when these regulations occur in the fan creation domain, fan creators demonstrate impressive adaptability and creativity. They shift their creations to non-public platforms to evade regulations and freely express their creativity there. The scenario described by Participant 15 is a case in point. As a gamer passionate about writing homosexual fan fiction, she informed me that she deliberately avoids

censorship by publishing her works on overseas servers. People with similar interests ‘will know where to find’ them (Participant 15). This emphasizes the complex interaction between fan creators and communities and how they continue to develop their identities and identifications in a specific cultural and regulatory context.

Conversely, when gamers perceive that their interests or expectations have been harmed, they also actively become regulators themselves. The research of Wang and Ge (2022, p.13) and Luo and Li (2022, p.4) supports this viewpoint. They found that media users utilize state power to scrutinize others’ comments and work, and although such regulatory power is considered transient and illusory, it indeed constitutes a part of the dynamic regulatory dynamic (Wang and Ge, 2022, pp.16-17; Luo and Li, 2022, pp.13-14). A more in-depth analysis of agency negotiation in the regulatory context is presented in Chapter 5 of my thesis. In this section, my main focus is on how gamers express themselves in such discursive context and how it reflects the identities they construct and the values they identify with.

In my project, gamers perceive that their interests or expectations are shaped through the emotional connections and identifications they establish with characters in the game, manifesting as a sense of ownership over the characters and expectations regarding their developmental trajectories. As mentioned earlier, gamers establish intimate relationships with characters in the game (see page 149), anticipating that these characters reflect their personal identity and expectations. When narrative decisions made by the game developers significantly deviate from their expectations, gamers feel that their interests are harmed and take action to intervene in such situations (which is a manifestation of gamer agency, further discussed in Chapter 5). This reflects the extent of gamers’ investment in the gaming experience and character identification, showcasing their influence in shaping the game world.

According to participants' articulations, gamers often exert pressure on the game developers in various ways, attempting to influence changes in the game content. They make their voices heard through leaving comments on social media accounts or posting extensively on gamer forums. A concrete example is of the character named Orochi, a significant antagonist who was initially perceived by gamers as a powerful entity intending to destroy the human world. However, in the narrative of a newly released in-game chapter, the game developers changed Orochi's characterization, depicting the character as a 'good person' simply interested in wondering and appreciating the human world. Many gamers expressed dissatisfaction with this change, articulating their viewpoints through forums, and Participant 2 was one such contributor. Eventually, the game developers acknowledged the gamers' discontent, retracted the altered storyline, and committed to revising the narrative while providing compensation to the gamers (Game Daily, 2018).

Participant 2 discussed one of the character skins for the Shikigami, Onikiri, expressing concerns about its potentially explicit and vulgar elements. In the commemorative skin for the Shikigami, the character is depicted wearing a collar with long iron chains around the neck, and there are signs of rope bondage on the partially exposed body (see Figure 18). Participant 2 expressed concerns that these elements do not align with the cultural values and social responsibility that the game should convey. While acknowledging an appreciation for certain suggestive fan-created images, he believed that the inclusion of design elements that deviate from mainstream aesthetics and cultural values in the game is inappropriate. Many gamers shared this criticism, with the skin receiving a low score of 2.64 out of 10 on the NGA gamer forum, where 5008 participants voted, and 2896 of them gave it a score of 0 (NGA, 2021a). This reflects the sensitivity of gamers to game aesthetics and moral standards, as well as their expectations of the game developers. Such reactions also demonstrate the agency of gamers as active participants in

game culture. They are not merely consumers of the game but also shapers and overseers of gaming culture. While acting as gamers, their behaviour and aesthetics are influenced by the mainstream discourses of the real-world society they inhabit. They scrutinize game creations in ways that align with mainstream aesthetics and cultural identities, making decisions based on what they believe is right. This behaviour underscores gamers as integral parts of the gaming culture community, actively contributing to and upholding what they consider appropriate cultural values in gaming.

Figure 18. The Controversial Skin Design for Onikiri (NGA, 2021)

Publicly criticizing or satirizing game designers on forums is a common practice among gamers. Participant 7 stated that her favourite type of fan work was satire aimed at game designers. She shared her favourite piece of such writing, titled ‘A Little Designer Who Sells Souls’ (NGA, 2021b). The article employed the narrative structure of ‘The Little Match Girl’ to portray the game designer as a barefooted Soul-seller freezing to death on a cold winter night because they refused to sell high-quality Souls to gamers. The story criticized the unreasonable appearance rates of Souls, one of the essential game items in *Onmyoji*. This type of writing is highly popular in the gaming community as it offers a humorous way for gamers to express their views on issues or challenges within the game. The agreement expressed in the comments

indicates resonance among other gamers, who also find this humorous satire amusing and meaningful. For example, in the comments area of this article, I observed gamer comments such as, ‘Please write another article like this, thank you!’, and ‘Where can I buy your work?’ (ibid.). Participant 7, when sharing this article with me, also expressed, ‘I won’t allow anyone not to have read this article. It’s too classic; I recommend memorizing the entire text’.

Criticizing game developers or providing suggestions to them reflect gamers’ identification with and expectations of the game. When gamers identify with a particular character or line-up in the game, they expect the game developers to maintain a balance and rationality of the character or line-up, ensuring that their gaming experience and identification would not be disrupted. When this identification is violated, gamers feel ‘betrayed’ by the game developer. Therefore, through gamers’ criticizing, we can see their efforts to construct and maintain their own identities and defend their character identification. Although, as Abraham (2021, p.6) stated, it reflects ‘how desire, when misinterpreted with belief, could become irrational’, it also shows us that the construction of identity and identification is part of the process of gamers’ agency, which involves negotiation with the game system and even power structures (ibid., p.12). I provided further analysis in the following chapters.

Summary

In this chapter, I drew on the digital diaries and interviews from my participants to explore the identity constructions specifically in relation to how gamers align and negotiate with the values expressed and represented through various aspects of *Onmyoji*. Throughout this process, gamers continually express themselves through their behaviours, language codes, and interactions with others, revealing the values they appreciate and emphasize, closely linked to their real-life experiences. This discussion led to several key arguments:

Firstly, the discussions in this chapter highlight how the game, as a captivating digital platform, provides gamers with a unique opportunity to deeply explore and construct individual identities. Through an in-depth exploration of participants' gaming experiences, activities such as completing daily tasks, daily sign-ins, collecting rare characters or items, engaging in diverse social interactions, and more, serve as means for them to showcase unique preferences. The actions behind this diversity directly shape gamers' images and development trajectories in both the virtual world and the real society. Consequently, this process leads to the gradual formation of gamers' self-awareness, including whether they see themselves as gamers, what type of gamer they are, and how they position themselves in negotiation with other identities. This underscores the powerful influence of games as an interactive and participatory medium, not just as an entertainment tool but as an environment rich with possibilities, allowing gamers to intricately carve and express their identities in a relatively free and meaningful manner.

Secondly, from my project, I discovered that identity construction in gaming is a diverse and complex process occurring in various contexts. Gamers not only express their preferences and values by completing in-game tasks but also establish a shared culture within the community through the use of specific linguistic codes and memes, fostering a sense of resonance and identity. For instance, in my study, I observed gamers widely using the term '肝' (liver, in English) to emphasize their dedication and efforts in the game. This unique linguistic code not only serves as an identifier for in-game commitment but also becomes a shared symbol within the community. Interestingly, this language extends beyond the gaming scene and infiltrates gamers' real lives. This phenomenon suggests that the language and cultural codes within gaming communities are not isolated but have become a cross-cutting cultural phenomenon spanning virtual and real realms, ultimately also influencing

gamers' self-perception. Such examples further highlight the societal impact of digital entertainment platforms.

Thirdly, identification with characters also illustrates how gamers express their emotions and values through emotional connections. Within the narrative of the game, gamers often resonate with the personality traits, experiences, or values of a character, deepening their immersion in the game world. Additionally, the modern media environment offers more possibilities for transmedia storytelling, allowing gamers to interact with their favourite ones in different forms of cultural works such as TV shows, movies, novels, etc. Gamers identify with characters is manifested in multiple ways. On one hand, they use specific affectionate nicknames to express different types of understanding and identification with characters, reflecting their emotional connection with the characters. On the other hand, creative and alternative forms of expression (emojis, fan fiction, comics, videos, as well as sharing and discussions on social media) also showcase the values that gamers adhere to or identify with. This presents a complex landscape of gamer-character identification, deserving further in-depth research to comprehend its dynamics and multi-layered nature.

Fourthly, I observed gamers' strong pursuit of autonomy and agency in gaming. This autonomy and agency are not only crucial elements in their identity construction but also shape their individual image in the game, reflecting the gamers' uniqueness and creativity. This process is closely related to the pleasure gamers experience in the game. The pleasure and satisfaction derived from gaming often motivate them to actively engage in the game, thoroughly explore its intrinsic mechanisms, and shape their identities within it. This pleasure arises from various gaming elements, including intense combat, character development, the enjoyment of social interactions, and the challenges presented by game tasks. Gamers actively seek this pleasure not

only because it provides entertainment but also because it is intricately linked to their self-identity and values.

However, I also observed that this pursuit of autonomy and agency in gaming practices presents some underlying challenges and complexities. Despite gamers seeking autonomy in the game, game developers may potentially limit gamers' choices by cleverly designed reward systems, task settings, or social interaction mechanisms, guiding them onto a trajectory of expected behaviours. Furthermore, within a broader regulatory context, the forms and content of gamers' self-expression regarding identity and identification are also somewhat restricted by discourse, affecting the realization of their autonomy. It is precisely because of these constraints, both within and outside the game, that gamers' gaming practices encounter various uncertainties. This makes gamers more adept at negotiating and creating their identity within restricted contexts. This finding closely links the issue of identity I focused on in this chapter with the agency negotiation between gamers, games, and discursive power, which I delved into in Chapter 5, as well as the uncertainty issues I examined in Chapter 6. These factors collectively contribute to the complexity of gaming practices, making it an area worthy of in-depth research.

Chapter 5 Agency Negotiation

Through the analysis in Chapter 4, it becomes evident that gamers' identity is constructed through multiple interrelated factors. This process involves not only interactions with the game and the negotiation of explicit game values (such as autonomy and choice) but also the appropriation of broader game media (such as memes), engagement in discourses surrounding game culture (such as language codes), and identification with game characters and game narratives. This perspective extends far beyond the game itself. It aligns with the viewpoints of many scholars whose research emphasizes that the gamer identity construction encompasses broader and relevant practices within transmedia culture (Jenkins, 2006, p.96; Taylor, 2006, p.32; Shaw, 2013, p.2; de Grove et al., 2015, p.350; Grooten and Kowert, 2015, p.74; Black, 2017, p.191). Therefore, we need to consider the game more broadly as an encompassing domain that includes gaming practices as well as associated cultural, social, and political factors.

However, in this process of identity construction, I also observe a mutual negotiation between gamers and the game system, where both interact as agents possessing agency, from the digital diary and interview data provided by my 20 participants. These interactions accompanied the gamer's gaming experience and demonstrated how the theme of agency in video game studies is complex and multidimensional, involving phenomena of both gamers and the game (Harrell and Zhu, 2009; Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009). Therefore, in this chapter, I focused on the negotiation of agency between gamers and the game system and analyse it in the context of China's unique media regulation. Exploring how gamer agency and the system agency form a dynamic whole in interaction and interdependence, as Harrell and Zhu (2009, pp.48-49) believe, can promote the expression of meaning in games, and help us understand gaming as 'an ongoing process' (Wardrip-Fruin et al., 2009, p.7).

Agency Negotiation in Transmedia Narratives

Onmyoji is a narrative-driven mobile game that immerses gamers in a rich narrative environment through various means (Youxiputao, 2017). The game conveys narrative information to gamers using character dialogues, cut-scenes, and meticulously crafted audio-visual effects. The diverse narrative elements within the game system are interconnected, creating a complex whole that offers gamers a multi-level narrative experience encompassing the main storyline, secondary storylines, and numerous event storylines. This multi-layered narrative environment empowers gamers to shape their roles in the game and actively engage in the narrative. However, gamers are not confined solely to experiencing narrative within the game. They construct an independent narrative experience beyond the game by engaging in the gaming community, reading game-related novels and comics, and creating fan works, thus expanding the game's narrative world. These transmedia narratives offer gamers more opportunities to delve into the backgrounds and lives of game characters and share their own creations and perspectives with fellow gamers. Nevertheless, even outside the realm of the game, gamers remain subject to the influence of the game system's settings, as their creations and discussions are bound by the narrative elements established within the game.

This negotiation of agency between gamers and the game system reveals complex power dynamics. The distribution of this narrative power persists both within and outside the game and impacts gamers' overall narrative identification (as discussed in Chapter 4, see page 130). This critical observation contributes to a deeper understanding of gamers' gaming experiences and how the game system both shape and are shaped by gamers, thereby influencing the evolution and interpretation of the narrative.

The Agency of the Game System

The completion of chapter storylines is designated by the game system as an obligatory goal that gamers must achieve. As Juul (2003, p.256) and Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p.80) argue, the game system, through the establishment of explicit rules, defines the scope of gamers' actions and constraints, requiring them to operate within these limitations from the onset of entering the game.

In most instances, gamers find themselves obligated to adhere to the predetermined paths set by the game system. This is especially true for novice gamers, such as Participant 12, 13, and 17, who mentioned the necessity of gradually unlocking new features following the game's prompts. Throughout this process, the game system presents them with abundant information regarding the game narrative, including background stories, relationships between the protagonist and other Shikigami characters, allowing them to gain a comprehensive understanding of 'what story the game is telling' (Participant 17). These pieces of information aid new gamers in establishing their cognition and understanding of the game world, laying the foundation for their future decision-making in gaming. Hence, the game system, as perceived by Harrell and Zhu (2009, p.47), plays a crucial role in constructing the narrative environment and providing relevant information. It not only functions as a 'narrator or author' by controlling the development of game events and their presentation in the story world but also exercises control over the characters within the game to shape events (ibid.). Therefore, it can be argued that *Onmyoji* possesses system agency, serving as an 'expressive resource' operating on multiple levels, generating meaning and aesthetic effects (ibid., p.44), and influencing gamers' gaming experiences and decision-making.

Based on my formal analysis of the *Onmyoji* game system, each main plot chapter follows a similar narrative structure (detailed analysis provided in

Chapter 6, see page 255). Gamers are required to gradually assume their roles, watch the storyline, complete challenges, and unlock new characters and tasks following the system's guidance and prompts. Once inside the chapter's scenario, gamers can only progress through this process to fulfil tasks. Deviating from the correct path may result in character death and the need to restart. The game system, through this 'Only Provide the Inevitable Choice' approach (Mitchell et al., 2020), underscores that gamers must take specific actions, deliberately limiting opportunities for autonomous decision-making. Guided explicitly by the game system, gamers are encouraged to follow a predetermined process to achieve 'the ideal outcome' (Krzywinska, 2009, p.271).

The game system does not make gamers feel entirely powerless, as their experience may become negative when they feel they have lost control (Johnson, 2015, p.595), leading to frustration or disgust, commonly referred to as 'ugly feelings' (Ngai, 2005, pp.1-6). For example, some participants expressed that they often need to engage in conversations with NPC characters to advance the game progress and narrative. In these dialogues, they could choose to click icons to initiate conversations, skip dialogues, not listen to NPC narratives, or accelerate dialogues to expedite the game process. However, as noted by Charles (2009, p.289), the autonomy gamers have in such situations is illusory. He views video games as a 'faux-scriptible text' (ibid.), creating an illusion of meaning, power, and active participation for gamers. The game system manipulates gamers' experiences by offering a sense of control, making gamers believe they have more freedom and agency, even though this freedom and agency are constrained and effective only within the game's framework (Burch, 2009). Therefore, while gamers may sense a certain degree of control, their desire for unrestricted exploration, decision-making, and influencing the game's progression is suppressed and diminished by the game system.

When cut-scenes appear in the narrative of the game, gamers lose the choice to skip them. To successfully complete chapter tasks, gamers must face the screen and temporarily forfeit their freedom (Harrell and Zhu, 2009, p.47) until the cutscene ends. Cut-scenes are often used to provide a diverse and immersive way of presenting plot developments, emotional changes in characters, and story twists (Newman, 2008, p.52). Juul (2005, p.135) argues that these cut-scenes may become non-interactive elements of the game because they hinder gamers from taking any game actions (see also Harrell and Zhu, 2009, p.47). Especially when the gamer's intention is not to acquire information, 'the gap of experience' may arise between the glorious audio-visual presentation of cut-scenes and the gamer's limited operation (Johnson, 2015, p.596). When gamers 'feel involuntary' or 'become automatized' to some extent, conflicts emerge between their agency and the game system or technology (ibid., pp.595-596), leading to 'the limitations of our ability to control a game and our ability to interface with its control schema' (p.602). The lack of a sense of control can potentially limit gamers' performance and exploration in gaming. This highlights the significance of game design and technology in shaping the gaming experience for gamers.

However, in my project, participants are not entirely passive in experiencing the cut-scenes, which to some extent refutes Juul's (2005, p.135) argument. Some gamers, such as participants 13 and 19, have shared experiences of actively engaging in online discussions while watching the cut-scenes. These choices not only allow gamers to exert more autonomous control over the game's progression but also enable the gaming experience to align more closely with individual tastes and preferences. Particularly, when interactive functions such as real-time comments and interactive discussions are introduced, it not only helps gamers better understand the game narrative but also provides them with a pathway for communication and interaction. As participant 13 expressed, 'It's interesting, and it makes me feel like many

gamers are facing the screen just like me'. Real-time comments make gamers feel they are not merely playing the game in isolation but are participating in a larger community, where they can share gaming experiences, assist each other, and exchange ideas. By expressing their perspectives, they construct their sense of identity, aligning with the arguments presented in Chapter 4. Therefore, I align with Klevjer's (2002, pp.194-195) viewpoint, acknowledging that while cut-scenes create a coherent narrative framework for the game, within this framework, gamers' thoughts and expressions remain unrestricted, and their actions still signify on a discourse level.

Gamers' Agency: Intentions Matter

Johnson (2015, p.596) reminds us to pay special attention to gamers' gaming intentions, a point with which I strongly agree. Gamers' current gaming intentions crucial for understanding their gaming experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 4, gamers' intentions to a certain extent shape their expectations, judgments, and the value they attribute to the game (see page 107). This not only influences their experience of uncertainty (discussed in Chapter 6, see page 299), but also determines whether the narrative information conveyed by the game system can be effectively received and understood.

Through the study of participants' gaming experiences, I have found that gamers' perception of agency depends on whether their gaming intentions align with the game's expectations. For instance, the game system aims to create a narrative-driven experience through the main storyline chapters, providing an immersive sensation. Some gamers happen to have a strong interest in the game's narrative and a desire for exploration. When the goals or expectations of both align, even if gamers have limited autonomy in the immersive process, they do not find it dull or passive when watching cut-scenes or reading lengthy texts.

In my project, participants who value the plot and claim to be ‘The Plot Party’ (in Chinese, ‘剧情党’) always follow the path set by the game system step by step to obtain information, and their willingness to explore the plot helps them feel more immersed and happier to regain agency. For example, Participants 3 and 14 both expressed their willingness to explore the narrative in the game, and experiencing the main storyline of the game can bring them a lot of fun. The game system provides rich narrative information, and they would ‘not skip any character dialogue or plot, and I read each character’s personal biography carefully to understand their background stories’ (Participant 3), ‘just like reading a novel’ (Participant 4). Despite the apparent limitations on gamers’ choices, confined to observing the information provided by the game, they still perceive their actions as significant, resulting in a sense of agency and control. Participant 3 thinks that participating in the plot sequence ‘is a cognitive process that is very interesting to me’, and participant 4 also thinks that he still retains the ability to think independently, ‘I can stop and think at any time during the reading process, which allows me to have a deeper understanding of the characters in the game’. Searching for clues, analysing information, making inferences, and successfully completing tasks, when gamers believe that their choices or actions in this process are meaningful and accept the values constructed by the game system, their behaviours are able to drive the plot development and become a part of the game narrative meaning making.

When the game system provides narrative information to gamers, a conflict of intention arises when the gamer’s goal at that moment is to quickly engage in combat. If gamers are forced to explore narrative content in a fixed sequence, they feel a loss of control over the game, and even feel that the game has taken away their sense of autonomy and freedom (Fizek, 2018a, p.202). Participants 1, 9, 13, and 18 all reported such experiences in their gaming experiences. They wanted to engage in combat as soon as possible, and

defeat enemies using their skills and strategies. However, the game system required gamers to explore certain in-game scenes, interact with characters, and collect items before engaging in combat, in order to let them better understand the story. If participants were not willing to follow the predetermined plotline, they felt that completing such tasks was a waste of time. As a result, Participant 9 complains, ‘I don’t want to know what these characters are doing, just let me fight’. Participant 1 even believes that ‘there shouldn’t be any storyline in the game’, and Participant 13 feels that ‘only fast-paced combat can give me a sense of excitement’. Therefore, asserting as ‘The non-Plot Party’ (in Chinese, ‘非剧情党’), they choose to skip or fast-forward through dialogues or cut-scenes as a way of asserting their power.

However, in addition to the main tasks, *Onmyoji* embeds a large amount of narrative information in various subtasks. For example, the game system uses a variety of elements such as text, images, and sound effects to describe the story background and characteristics of the Shikigami on their introduction interfaces. Even when gamers choose to skip plot sequences, the combat mission rules in *Onmyoji* embed content/information related to the narrative. For instance, some subtasks require gamers to solve puzzles to obtain rare rewards. These puzzles typically contain information related to the game’s storyline. Gamers need to carefully observe the mission scene, collect hints, and unravel the puzzle to ultimately complete the task. This also explains why, in my project, participants who firmly claimed never care about the plot still have some understanding of the in-game narrative. As long as they are playing the game, they remain within a narrative environment. For example, Participant 9 repeatedly and firmly claimed in the interview that he is not fond of reading stories, and never pays attention to the plot. His tone was so firm, but in the last day’s digital diary, he described his experience in the game as ‘during the day I am a hardworking member of society, but at night, I transform

into an onmyoji who saves the world by catching monsters and adopting Shikigami'. This indicates that although he feels he does not pay attention to the plot, he is still clear about the role he plays and the responsibilities he undertakes in the game world.

It becomes evident that when the gamers' capacity to act and the restricting level of the game system achieve a relative equilibrium, the negotiation of agency between gamers and the game system implies a state where 'the commitments of the gamer and the meanings represented by the game system come into parity with each other', as proposed by Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2009). Specifically, when the meanings represented by the game during world-building or storytelling align with those recognized by the gamer, or when the intentions behind the gamer's active engagement in the game correspond with the meanings represented by the game system, they experience a deeper sense of agency. When gamers and the game system commit to shared meanings (ibid.), gamers feel that their choices and actions influence the development of the game world or game narrative, enhancing emotional involvement and enriching the gaming experience. Simultaneously, this emotional involvement reinforces the gamers' belief that their actions genuinely impact the story's development, making their gaming experience more meaningful. It is within this gaming state that the constructed identity discussed in the previous chapter (see page 113) and the narrative-related uncertainty to be explored in the next chapter (see page 279) genuinely captivate gamers, stimulating their curiosity and enthusiasm for exploring narrative details.

Agency Negotiation During Transmedia Play

Onmyoji gamers' gaming experience extends beyond the mobile game itself, demonstrating the high level of gamers' participation in modern transmedia

franchise. As Jenkins (2006, pp.95-96) observes, ‘a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best’. In the *Onmyoji* franchise, comics and CGs related to the in-game narrative portray the stories of different Shikigami, aiding gamers in better understanding these characters. TV animations like *Heian Monogatari* present the protagonist Abe no Seimei and Shikigami in their daily lives outside the game. Derivative games, inspired by *Onmyoji*, create new storylines, continuing the traits of original characters. These transmedia narrative works extend the original *Onmyoji* storyline and provide narrative supplements based on the characteristics of different platforms. As discussed in Chapter 4, my participants shared a lot about how they freely explore the game narrative across various media derivatives (see page 143).

These narrative works showcase to some extent the media company’s agency in transmedia content production, coordination, and management operations (Jenkins, 2006, pp.106-107). However, as Alper and Herr-Stephenson (2013, p.366) point out, gamers engage in exploring, collecting, and reinterpreting information across different media works in a creative and collaborative manner, thus also showcasing their agency. On one hand, gamers have the opportunity in this pattern to integrate their creativity and ideas into the game world. This creative process not only expresses their passion for the game but also endows gamers with the agency to participate in the creation within the gaming culture. On the other hand, when fan-created works are recognized by the game developers and become part of the game, it involves the acceptance and negotiation of gamer creativity by the developers. The developers must decide how to incorporate these creative works into the game to maintain consistency and appeal. This process is not a unilateral decision but rather a two-way negotiation, which involves the allocation of power and the co-construction of meaning. Therefore, an exploration of gamers’ transmedia

participation not only enriches my comprehensive understanding of complex gaming practices but also prompts further consideration of how gamers exercise agency in the uncertain gaming environment. The five characteristics of Transmedia Play, as summarized by Herr-Stephenson et al. (2013, p.1), are employed here to analyse the agency negotiation exhibited by participants in their transmedia gaming.

To begin with, the Mobile and Accessible features of transmedia play indicate that gamers can seamlessly navigate between diverse platforms and media using mobile technology. This freedom allows them to select their mode and path of participation autonomously, enabling them to leap from various starting points and shape the trajectory of gameplay based on their backgrounds (Herr-Stephenson et al., 2013, p.1). In my project, participants interested in the game narrative shared their experiences of freely switching between different media platforms to access the stories they are interested in. For example, Participant 5 analysed the attributes of various media works and their narrative content, asserting, ‘CG is just a promotional tool, but because it omits many plots, many people cannot understand it completely. Therefore, we can use other animations to supplement the plot to obtain more detailed content and emotional atmosphere. However, when the plot becomes so complicated that even animation cannot be understood, I will go and read the long text in the game’. Participant 5 further emphasized that ‘form is not that important; what is important is information and its quantity’.

Gamers are more concerned with the information conveyed rather than the medium itself. In this way, they reinterpret and recreate media content, achieving new levels of engagement and understanding of the game world, aligning with the perspective I discussed in Chapter 4 regarding gamers constructing identity through narrative (see page 130). Moreover, this phenomenon highlights the agency negotiation in transmedia storytelling.

Gamers are no longer passively accepting official narratives; instead, they actively interact with narratives across different media, choose the information they focus on and accept to meet their own storytelling needs. Their autonomy and agency drive the development of transmedia storytelling, providing more diverse and flexible possibilities for game narratives. This negotiation of agency in transmedia storytelling is an integral part of the complex interaction between gamers and the game system.

Secondly, the Resourceful and Replayable characteristic emphasize gamers' creative thinking and their ability to construct their understanding of the narrative by utilizing all available narrative elements. Sometimes, to reevaluate, explore, and thoroughly investigate transmedia storytelling, gamers can revisit the narrative multiple times (Herr-Stephenson et al., 2013, p.1). In such cases, gamers are no longer passively consuming narrative content when facing the narrative uncertainty constructed by the game and various derivative media (further discussed in Chater 6, see page 279), they actively engage with diverse narrative elements, thereby creating their own narrative experiences. This can also facilitate the agency negotiation between gamers and the game system, enabling gamers to participate more actively in the game. In my project, participants often drew information from various derivative narratives to resolve confusion and enhance their understanding.

For example, Participant 8 shared that while playing *Onmyoji*, he frequently obtained an R-level (rare) character named Kubinashi. But due to the limited portrayal, he knew very little about this character. However, through other transmedia narrative, he gradually pieced together a story about Kubinashi and documented it in his diary:

> 'Kubinashi has an excellent sense of direction and never gets lost. He threw himself into the war as a messenger, constantly delivering

> letters. The generals praised his ability and believed that his timely delivered letters were the key to the army's victory. However, in the end, the war failed because Kubinashi delivered the right place but the wrong content. He was kicked out of the camp and wandered around with his head in his hand, not knowing where to go.' (Participant 8).

From his written records, it is evident that he has a grasp of the details of this story. In our later interview, Participant 8 explained that originally, he had not paid much attention to this R-level Shikigami while playing the game. Still, by learning about the story through other narrative media, he was moved by the character's perseverance, loyalty, sense of responsibility, and fearless spirit, leading to a deep respect. When he encountered this character again in the game, he spontaneously chose Kubinashi to be a part of his combat team. This agency negotiation illustrates the gamers' agency to search for and interpret information while revealing the power of game narratives. Game narratives not only provide story content but also guide and influence gamers' decisions and emotions.

Finally, transmedia play emphasizes the significance of Social Interaction among gamers, whether within the game or across different media, facilitating a deeper comprehension of the game world and collaborative content creation (Herr-Stephenson et al., 2013, p.1). This characteristic is also evident in the current study. Participant 8 shared numerous chat screenshots with his friend in the diary, documenting their negative discussions about Shikigami named Shokurei and Mishige. Their discussions encompassed various topics, including previews of upcoming characters, opinions of official posters and promotional videos, and detailed discussions about CG narratives. Here is an excerpt from their conversations:

> Participant 8: I don't really understand, is Mishige starved to death?
> The Friend: Can't say for sure, looking at these two is like being a

supporting character (tears).
Participant 8: Is there any connection between her image design and her background story?
The Friend: Well...
Participant 8: I really don’t know what was in their heads when the team designing these two characters according to the official settings. The steamed bun head is also the stereotyping of a Chinese girl in Japanese comics. It’s just too ugly.
Participant 8: I would call the previous female Shikigami as my wives, but this one is just like a cleaning lady in my house.
Participant 8: I didn’t mean to say anything bad about the cleaning lady, but I just can’t think of her as my wife.
The Friend: Me neither...
[...]
Participant 8: Shokurei really embodies the image of a typical Puxin Men in my mind.
The Friend: Mr. Puxin, hahaha, so accurate, hahaha.
Participant 8: He looks really confident, confident, confident, radiating confidence from head to toe.
The Friend: Awesome, now I have a specific image of Puxin Men in my mind as well, lol.

Various forms of media, such as official promotional posters, plotlines, and comics, influence gamers’ perceptions and impressions of game characters. Gamers like Participant 8 and his friend gather information from these materials, gradually constructing interpretations and evaluations during mutual opinion exchanges, thereby forming, or reinforcing their own viewpoints. They criticized the characters' design, which, in their view, is excessively ordinary or unattractive and not align with the narrative positioning of *Onmyoji*. Throughout their discussions and jesting, they continuously raised questions and concerns, attempting to understand and interpret characters and plotlines from different perspectives. When they criticized, they were actually expressing expectations and demands to the game developers and designers (similar examples discussed in page 167).

This evaluative and interpretative process also embodies their assertion and practice of power over these characters. This relates to what I discussed in

Chapter 4 that how participants articulate their identification with characters through affectionate nicknames like ‘wife’, ‘good big son’, ‘uncle’, and others (see page 149). These nicknames not only reveal the gamers’ affection for the characters but also showcases their control and dominance over the characters. For example, when gamers assume the role of a spouse, they pay more attention to the character’s appearance and ability. Conversely, when gamers adopt the role of parents, their focus shift towards the character’s growth and development. Participant 8 and his friend’s discussion here serves as another supportive and interesting example. As men, they used ‘Puxin Men’ to describe the questioned male character, this popular term on the Internet in China is usually widely by women to criticize and satirize men ‘who are ordinary but obsessed with self-confidence’ (Bai, 2022, p.81). Similar but beyond the scope of ‘mansplaining’, it has become an online representation of the behaviour of judging gender in social life (Lutzky and Lawson, 2019, p.9). However, they also regarded those female characters with unique designs as ‘wives’, and degrade those with ordinary looks as ‘cleaning lady’, which shows the objectification and gaze of women by defining the value of female characters (Mwedzi, 2021, p.3). However, regardless of the nature of the relationship, characters in the game seem to occupy a powerless, scrutinized, and dominated position, influenced by gamers’ subjective interpretations and emotional involvement.

Gamers establish a certain evaluation with characters through transmedia gaming, however, their choices are predominantly influenced by game objectives and rules during the actual gameplay. They consider their individual game goals while grappling with the constraints imposed by game design and rules. For example, despite agreeing with Participant 8 and his friend’s criticisms of the two Shikigami, Participant 7 admitted in our interview that she still employed these questioned characters to strengthen her team during the

battles. She clarified, ‘I have to use them because the game has designed their skills to be exceptionally strong’. Nonetheless, she underscored, ‘Although I choose them for battles, it does not alter the fact that I don’t like them’. Akin to the perspective of Royse et al. (2007, p.563) regarding power gamers, this demonstrates the ability to discern between different forms of enjoyment offered by games—such as narrative, social, and competitive challenges—and actively selects based on their expectations and objectives. Consequently, this process of agency negotiation exemplifies gamers’ autonomy and creativity in navigating the gaming experience, allowing them to shape their gameplay according to personal preferences and objectives.

Taken together then and from the discussion detailed above, I argue that gamer-game interactions are a bidirectional and adversarial process. While the game influences gamers’ experiences and behaviours through diverse narratives and game designs, gamers can also exert dominance and control over the game narrative, interpreting and identifying with it. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of transmedia storytelling but also provides valuable insights for further exploration of agency negotiation between gamers and game systems. Moreover, it demonstrates the close relationship between the process of agency negotiation and the themes of identity construction discussed in Chapter 4, as well as the upcoming exploration of uncertainty in Chapter 5. In the context of uncertainty, gamers not only rely on their agency to resolve confusion and questions but also depend on identification with characters to navigate uncertainty. These elements interact and collectively impact gamers’ narrative experiences and game interactions, making them more intricate and nuanced. In the next section, I analysed gamers’ agency negotiation with the game system in the context of random gameplay, providing deeper insights into the interaction between gamers and the game system and revealing underlying power dynamics.

Agency Negotiation in the Random Gameplay

In the preceding section, based on the discourse analysis of participants' digital diaries and diary-based interviews, I explored the interaction between gamers and the game system in *Onmyoji*, with a specific focus on how gamers exerted influence on the game narrative to shape its development. This section continues to analyse in depth the interaction between gamers and the game system in the game's random gameplay. *Onmyoji* features widely embraced random gameplay mechanisms, involving the game system utilizing probability algorithms to generate random events, gamers utilizing in-game currency or items to acquire opportunities for draws, and gamers obtaining game characters of different qualities through different drawing methods. These rules intertwine to collectively construct a game environment with uncertainty, requiring gamers to judiciously weigh various choices. However, the focal point of this section is the agency negotiation manifested in random gameplay, signifying the power struggle between gamers and the game system. In this interactive process, gamers are shapers and negotiators of the game. Through an in-depth analysis of gamers' agency negotiation in random gameplay, we can better understand the interactive relationship between gamers and the game system, and thus better understand the impact of game mechanisms on gamers' behaviour and choices in the game. This aspect, as considered in Chapter 4, is regarded as a form of self-expression by gamers in the process of identity construction (see page 107).

'肝' and the Paper Doll: Delegation of Agency by Gamers

Agency Still Exists in Auto-grinding

Through the formal analysis of the random gameplay in *Onmyoji*, I discover that, in order to increase the chances of obtaining rare characters and

acquiring the in-game resources necessary for upgrading characters, gamers must engage in a substantial number of repetitive tasks to obtain corresponding rewards. This type of gameplay is commonly known as ‘grinding’ (Karlsen, 2011, p.198). In my project, gamers always refer it as ‘肝’ (discussed in Chapter 4, see page 122). It is worth exploring this phenomenon in more depth here not least because examining grinding as an *Onmyoji* practice, providing us with further insights into the agency negotiation between gamers and the game system particularly in relation to two central issues: time and attention.

According to the rules, obtaining rare Shikigami is a probabilistic event. Consequently, gamers often find themselves repeatedly undertaking the same tasks to enhance the probability of summoning a particular rare Shikigami. However, this process typically consumes a significant amount of the gamers’ time and attention. In each of the combat tasks, the game employs a turn-based combat system, where each battle task requires characters from both sides to release their skills in a specified order. This process is analogous to playing poker, where gamers, after observing the opponent’s actions, need to select one of their characters to respond and can only choose one skill from three available options for execution. To ensure the superiority of their combat team, gamers must carefully consider each choice made during the gameplay.

In the initial release of *Onmyoji*, no provision was made for automaton to replace gamers in completing in-game tasks. Consequently, all gaming tasks necessitated direct gamer intervention. Participant 8, during the interview, recounted his early experiences of manually completing tasks: ‘Back then, I was still in college. Whenever my friends and I studied together in the library, we sat together, logged into the game, and then continuously tapped, tapped, tapped on the phone screen while doing our homework’. This example

illustrates that in the early stages of the game, gamers not only had to invest significant time and effort into grinding, but also engaged in physical participation by incessantly tapping the screen, as noted by Cooley (2004, p.1443). While this direct bodily interaction with the screen enhances the gamer's intimacy with the game (ibid.), the specific postures or movements required are associated with the agency of the game, thereby constraining gamer actions (Anderson, 2018, pp.5-6).

However, over time, *Onmyoji* introduced a robotic feature that enables automatic completion of repetitive tasks. In response to this, Participant 8 expressed that this automated function 'really freed up my fingers!' and added, 'I absolutely won't manually grind these tasks anymore'. Similar to Participant 8, in order to efficiently acquire in-game resources, the majority of participants articulated in their diaries and interviews a willingness to delegate substantial, repetitive, tedious, and time-consuming grinding tasks to game robots. While automatic grinding may lead to a mechanized gaming experience, diminishing the interactivity between gamers and game content, I argue that it also reflects a more advanced gaming strategy by gamers – a pursuit of higher autonomy and control, indicative of gamers' desire for success in the game and a profound understanding of the game system. The phenomenon of introducing bots into the game, as pointed out by Fizek (2017, pp.5-6; 2018a, p.210), allows us to scrutinize the behaviour of game machines and the agency they possess. This reflects us to consider how machines shape human gamer behaviour, re-examining the intricate agency relationship between gamers/humans and game machines/non-humans.

Contrary to the historical requirements of game theory for active gamer engagement (Huizinga, 1950, p.8; Caillois, 2001, p.6; Crawford, 1984, p.10), gamers who choose to do automatic tasks appear seemingly passively engaged. Particularly in what Fizek (2018b, p.148) terms 'idle games', these

games can operate almost entirely in an automatic mode, reducing the gamer's need for initiative to a minimum. Human gamers no longer need to interact actively; instead, they delegate tasks to in-game bots. They only need to input parameters in the settings interface, serving as observers or even leaving the game to do other things. Bots can handle the monotonous repetitive tasks that gamers must complete, allowing gamers to upgrade more efficiently (ibid.).

However, my project emphasizes that auto-grinding does not equate to passivity. In fact, it is a way for gamers to interact with the game system by providing intermediaries, namely bots, across a series of levels. Although gamers may not personally execute these tasks on the surface, they still maintain control over the game process by guiding and configuring bots to achieve their gaming objectives. This form of interaction highlights gamer agency, albeit different from traditional interactive methods, it still represents gamers actively seeking autonomy in gaming.

Taking Care of the Paper Doll

In *Onmyoji*, the Paper Doll, known as the '小纸人' in Chinese, serves as an illustrative example of bots responsible for automating task completion on behalf of gamers. Traditionally, our understanding of game bots has centred on perceiving them as entities that respond to gamer actions, their behaviour serving as feedback to the gamers' inputs (Mateas, 2003, p.2). However, the Paper Doll in *Onmyoji* introduces a new dimension to bots by not only representing a response to gamer actions but also possessing the ability to create 'a sense of aliveness'. In other words, 'there is an entity living within the computer that has its own life independently of the gamer and cares about how the gamer's actions impact this life' (ibid.). This implies that the Paper Doll in the game appears to have autonomous agency and behaviours; they seem

have an independent existence within the game world and are concerned about how gamer actions impact their lives.

The Paper Dolls have a specific appearance and change their decorations on specific days. They also send blessings to gamers on certain festivals. Participant 3 shared in an interview that on the day of the Chinese lunar new year, when she logged into the game, ‘a row of Paper Dolls stood on the main interface bowing and sending new year greetings and gifts, which gave me a feeling of being valued’ (as show in Figure 19). Although this is pre-designed by the game designer, it can be seen from the expressions of the participants in their diaries that they view the Paper Doll as independent personalities to some extent, just like the other Shikigami. In the game’s main interface, the Courtyard, the Paper Doll are always shown sweeping the yard, so many participants call them ‘sweepers’. The Paper Doll also address the gamer as ‘my Lord’ in the game. From this kind of address, it can be seen that a power relationship is established between the gamer and the Paper Doll. The gamer assumes that the Paper Doll represent the game system’s service provider in the game, and thus has a certain degree of control and domination over them (this responds to my discussion and viewpoints on the establishment of intimate relationships in Chapter 4, see page 149). The Paper Doll also have the capacity to evoke emotional investment from gamers in the virtual characters within the game world. Consequently, I argue that the Paper Dolls are not merely elements within the game; they represent the distinctive impact of game machinery on gamer emotions and engagement, further enriching the interaction and agency relationship between gamers and the game system.

Figure 19. In the Chinese Lunar New Year of 2018, gamers logging into *Onmyoji* were greeted with this scene on the game's main interface: 10 Paper Dolls lined up, bowing to the gamer in celebration of the new year (Super Game Assistant, 2018).

Gamers delegate the agency of performing grinding tasks to the Paper Doll, yet observations reveal that the Paper Doll is not a fully independent and autonomous entity. The Paper Doll, entrusted by gamers to undertake grinding on their behalf, experiences 'hunger and fatigue' during battles and has a need for 'feeding'. Gamers are required to 'feed' the Paper Doll with items of Sakuramochi so that the paper doll can maintain sufficient energy to assist gamers continuously in task grinding. According to the rules of the automatic function in the game, the value of the Paper Doll's repletion is 100, and no more feeding can occur when this value is reached. Every time the Paper Doll

completes a battle on behalf of the gamer, the Repletion value will be consumed. When it is completely depleted, the gamer needs to feed the Paper Doll again. Gamers need to constantly pay attention to the Paper Doll's energy level and feed it, otherwise the Paper Doll will lose its ability to continue completing tasks. The game system's limit on the Paper Doll's energy to some extent restricts the gamer from completely handing over the grinding tasks to the Paper Doll and encourages the gamer to return to the game to take action after the automatic battle stops.

However, with the introduction of the automatic feeding function, gamers can use the system settings to allow the Paper Doll fighting on their behalf to automatically eat Sakuramochi. When the Paper Doll is full, it will automatically start a new round of battles without the need for the gamer to 'feed' it. The Paper Doll will control the Shikigami participating in the automatic battle to randomly release skills in each round until all the Sakuramochi resources are exhausted, and this entire process can be completed without the gamer's active participation. The introduction of the automatic feeding function makes the game system more intelligent and reduces the gamer's participation in the grinding process. However, the introduction of this feature also reflects the game system's attempt to increase gamers' attention for the Paper Doll by simulating the act of feeding. In this context, gamers have to continuously monitor the paper doll's hunger and fatigue states, taking necessary actions to sustain its operational efficiency. Through the act of 'feeding', gamers are effectively guided to engage with the ecosystem of the Paper Doll, driven not only by the imperative of task completion but also by the desire to fulfil the basic needs of the paper doll. This participation and care give rise to an emotional connection, transforming the Paper Doll from a mere tool or agent into a virtual entity with emotional and physical needs.

Therefore, based on this example, I believe that the core of such kind of

agency negotiating resides in the dual objective of preserving the convenience of automation while concurrently forging a deep emotional connection. This connection serves to convergence gamer engagement with the Paper Doll into an integral component of the holistic gaming experience. Striking this delicate balance gives rise to the gaming dynamic, enabling gamers to harness the advantages of automation while concurrently deriving an emotionally satisfying experience through their interactions with the system.

Gamers' Strategy-making

From the data provided by the participants, it is evident that, both before, during, and after entrusting battles to the Paper Doll, gamers maintain agency in strategizing and dynamically adjusting their strategies. We can see this in Participant 19's comment when he said that 'it's the strategies I've developed that make auto-grinding so smooth'. The agency articulated here is not stripped away by the game system.

Indeed, before activating the automatic gaming mode, participants typically engage in extensive preparation for delegating agency. This preparation ensures that their decisions maximize game effectiveness and rewards. For example, Participant 11 mentioned that she always fully understands the game rules and reward mechanisms before auto-grinding. Participant 10 consulted forums to learn from experienced gamers' game strategies. Assembling a battle team is not a simple process in the participants' view, as different missions require different Shikigami, and equipping them with different Soul sets may yield completely different game results, as noted by Participant 4. Thus, the process of 'picking the most suitable Shikigami' (Participant 16) for a specific task is deemed 'tedious and complex' (Participant 4) and sometimes even takes 'up to an hour' (Participant 5) to start the auto-battle properly. The complexity of this preparation process highlights the depth of gamer

engagement. Gamers understand that only through meticulous strategy and preparation can they achieve optimal results in automatic battles. This underscores once again that gamers are not merely passively awaiting outcomes; instead, they actively participate in the gaming process, enhancing their win rates and gaming experience through strategic decision-making.

In the process of auto-grinding, although participants seem to delegate agency to the Paper Doll, they still retain a certain level of control and initiative to address the uncertainties present in the game. As I detailed in Chapter 6 (see page 262), uncertainty is a crucial element in *Onmyoji*, encompassing factors such as the order of character appearances, skill releases, and opponent strategies, all of which have the potential to impact the gaming progression. Even with the Paper Doll doing the work, these uncertainties still exist. As explained by Participant 18, ‘The active skills of Shikigami in automatic mode are randomly released by the system. In this process, there are always some unexpected situations. The combat sequence that was set in advance is likely to be affected by the random triggering of passive skills’. Therefore, gamers actively employ alternative forms of agency to confront the challenges posed by these uncertainties. For instance, they consult and learn from game strategies shared by other experienced gamers, a phenomenon referred to as Proxy agency by Schott (2006, p.237). This involves enhancing one's own skills in an attempt to regain a sense of control over the game.

As Participant 18 continued to share, ‘I kept watching the screen for a few turns during the automatic grinding. Sometimes I switched to manual mode to make some adjustments’, until Participant 18 believes that the potential risks brought by uncertainties were eliminated to the greatest extent possible, then he felt relieved to leave the screen. Despite the potential alleviation of the gamer's burden through automation, participants still maintain attention and engagement with the game. They might temporarily step away from the screen

but periodically return to ensure the smooth progression. For instance, Participant 3 shared that after entrusting grinding tasks to the Paper Doll, she engaged in chatting with her in-game friend. ‘Unexpectedly, I glanced at the screen and realized I lost, so I quickly analysed the problem with my teammate’, Participant 3 explained. They reopened the automatic mode after identifying the problem, modified the strategy, and resolved the problem. This attitude indicates that, despite employing bots, gamers still value the gaming experience and are willing to take action to ensure the progression and outcomes of the game. Moreover, some participants continued to observe automatic battles not only for the appreciation of game animations and effects but also to gain a better understanding of their Shikigami (Participant 10 and 19). This further emphasizes the proactivity and agency of gamers even in automatic mode. They would not truly adopt a hands-off approach after delegating agency; instead, they consistently observe, engage, and take measures to adapt to the uncertainties of the game.

After the automatic battles end, participants returned to the game to check the results, carefully examining the number of successes and failures, as well as the rewards obtained. More importantly, these participants mentioned that they summarized their experiences and adjusted their strategies, so as to have fewer failures in the next round. This indicates that participants place great importance on the victory and benefits of the game. With their efforts to formulate and adjust strategies, auto-grinding enables them to achieve their expected game goals, that is, accumulating enough resources. Therefore, delegating the agency of grinding to the Paper Doll may be viewed by participants as simply an assistant executing commands under their control. This may be why my participants do not believe they lose control of the game when they initiate automatic battles. In my subsequent interviews, I asked participants whether they thought they would miss out on part of the gaming experience if they did not devote 100% of their time and energy to game battles.

Almost all participants answered ‘no’ immediately. In their view, they put a lot of effort into the game before or during the automatic gameplay, such as consulting strategies, selecting Shikigami, and configuring souls. The successes they achieve are ‘the results of my own efforts’ (Participant 4). Participant 18 even laughed and replied, ‘Only manual operation would affect my gaming experience’. This confidence further emphasizes their sense of control over the game.

However, what participants sometimes overlook is that the physical demands of the Paper Doll and the newly mentioned ‘eating’ requirement impose certain limitations on the gamer's agency delegation, as they cannot indefinitely activate the automatic mode. Additionally, the new feature brings about a need for new resources, namely the important item for replenishing the Paper Dolls' stamina, Sakuramochi. Thus, gamers have another objective that requires completing tasks, which makes the entire process of automatic grinding more complex. The game system utilizes gamers' needs and desires for character levelling by designing complex tasks and random reward mechanisms to maintain their continuous engagement and investment. Gamers hope to obtain more game resources to achieve their goals, so they must complete a large number of tasks according to the game's mechanisms and rules. However, too many repetitive and time/attention-consuming actions and unpredictable results lead to negative emotions such as fatigue, boredom, and frustration (detailed discussed in Chapter 6, see page 287).

Bots in the game help gamers complete some repetitive and time/attention-consuming tasks, thus reducing the burden on gamers, enhancing the efficiency and playability of the game. Nevertheless, to obtain more opportunities to activate the automatic mode, gamers need to spend time and attention accumulating new resources and repeatedly performing certain actions to gain experience or resources. It is evident that both sides are trying

to maximize their own interests through their respective agencies. Gamers hope to obtain more game resources and increase their character abilities, while the game system aims to maintain gamers' continuous engagement and investment to maintain the game's activity and economic benefits. The interaction between gamers and the game system is a form of agency negotiation, and this conflict and compromise are also its important characteristics.

I am arguing, then, that gamers delegating grinding to bots in the game should not be considered a passive gaming behaviour, as it may initially appear. Through this project, observing participants' behaviours and attitudes towards agency delegation, I find that gamers exhibited a strong sense of agency, demonstrating active control and decision-making over their gaming experience by choosing to delegate, formulating strategies, and adjusting plans. They also promptly summarized their experiences and adjusted their strategies after delegation to achieve better results in subsequent gaming. However, this agency is also limited. The rules and resources provided by the game system determine the actions that gamers can take, and these rules and resources are also controlled and restricted by game developers. This further reflects the relationship between gamers' agency and game system agency. On the one hand, gamers' agency is shaped by the agency provided by the game system. Gamers' choices and actions in the game are conducted within the scope of the rules and resources provided by the game system. On the other hand, gamers' agency can also influence the game system's agency, such as their feedback and behaviour affecting the game system's updates and improvements. After exploring this phenomenon of agency delegation, I will further delve into the interaction and negotiation between the game system and gamers regarding time and attention resources to better understand gamers' behaviour, attitudes, and gaming experience.

Agency Negotiation Regarding Time and Attention

In *Onmyoji*, gamers often need to allocate a certain amounts of time and attention from their daily lives to invest in gaming. However, the game system maximizes its utilization of gamers' time and attention through the design and adjustment of the delegation system. In this context, time and attention become a ‘scarce resource’ (Fizek, 2018b, p.147). Therefore, gamers must engage in negotiation and bargaining among time, attention, and the demands of the game system to maximize their agency within this balance and achieve their gaming objectives.

This process goes beyond simple resource allocation; it involves a complex interaction between gamers and the game system. The game system attempts to influence gamer behaviour to advance its goals and agency. Simultaneously, it must balance the degree of design and adjustment in the delegation system to allow gamers to fully enjoy the game, avoiding fatigue and attrition caused by excessive investment of time and attention. Thus, the negotiation of time and attention is not just an interaction between gamers and the game system; it is an integral aspect of the gamer's gaming experience. Understanding how participants manage time and attention resources, and the relationship between this management and individual psychological states and attitudes, is crucial for comprehending various facets of the gamer's gaming experience.

Time and Attention as Game Resources

Through completing auto-grinding tasks, gamers not only accumulate abundant in-game resources but also gain the resource of time and attention by temporarily stepping away from the game. This time and attention can be considered a form of reward (Fizek, 2018b, p.147) as it enables gamers to indulge in their own hobbies and affairs beyond the gaming sphere. From a

broader perspective, the acquisition of this time/attention resource also represents gamer agency. Gamers can autonomously choose how to utilize this period, deciding whether to return to the game, participate in other activities, or simply rest and relax. To a certain extent, this flexibility in time/attention resource acquisition is facilitated by the development of a multitasking gaming mode brought about by the advancement of mobile gaming. Mobile devices not only make games accessible to gamers anywhere and anytime, but also break spatial constraints, allowing gamers to span multiple platforms or tackle various tasks simultaneously (Fortunati, 2005, p.154; Richardson, 2011, p.427). However, while managing daily life affairs, gamers find themselves drawn by in-game tasks, diverting attention and interrupting their routine tasks to return to the game. In most cases, they manage to strike a balance between gaming and every life.

Different types of participants exhibit diverse strategies and agency in managing their gaming time. Participants who are university students, such as Participants 1, 6, 12, and 15, established reasonable time/attention allocation strategies to ensure a balance between their study and gaming. For instance, Participants 1 and 15 allocated a specific half-hour block in the morning after waking up to complete daily in-game tasks, then delegated the tedious grinding tasks to the Paper Doll before attending classes. Once their classes were over, they returned to the game and checked the rewards. Participants 6 and 12, as novice gamers, did not have explicit plans for their in-game progress, casually playing whenever they had spare time. They emphasized prioritizing study over gaming, noting that ‘time invested in the game would not take up too much study time’ (Participant 1). As for participants who are office workers, their jobs occupied a significant portion of their time and attention, yet they demonstrated time/attention management skills. Participants 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 16, and 19 engaged in gaming during their limited post-work hours, typically scheduling crucial gaming tasks during weekdays’ free time. They adjusted their gaming

time based on their needs, leveraged automation programmes to enhance time efficiency, and ensured that they enjoyed the game's pleasures without disrupting their working commitments. These examples highlight the participants' agency in managing time and attention resources.

The multitasking gaming mode illustrates that the automatic gaming mode is a relatively easy way for participants, without the need to constantly stare at or click on the screen, to some extent, freeing themselves from the limitations of the physical connection with the screen (Cooley, 2004, p.143), and giving them a sense of agency to freely manage time/attention. For instance, Participant 5 typically played the game in the evening of weekdays. He went to brush his teeth and wash his face after auto-grinding mode was activated. By the time he returned to the smartphone screen, he remarked, ‘Not only had I finished washing, but the in-game tasks were also mostly completed’. He humorously described himself as a ‘time management master’. During weekends or leisure time, participants often spent more time playing the game, but not all their time was devoted to gaming; instead, they sought a balance between gaming and other activities. For example, Participant 4 mentioned that the longest time he ever spent on the game was ‘finishing an entire Korean drama while auto-grinding missions’.

However, the game system consistently leverages uncertainty within the game to immerse gamers in situations requiring real-time decision-making. While random events and uncertainty add interest and challenge to the game to some extent, it also immerses gamers in a continuous state of psychological suspense (elaborated in detail in Chapter 6, see page 256). In this process, gamers found themselves trapped in a state of ‘time pressure’ (Participant 8 and 19), compelling them to engage in the game more frequently, even if it conflicted with their initially planned work or study time. For example, when faced with continuous failures in auto-grinding, they needed to continuously

come back to the game and adjust their team configuration and equipment choices. Nonetheless, the constant stimulation and reward mechanism from the game reinforces player engagement and continued engagement. This in turn continues to challenge individuals in terms of time management and attention allocation. Consequently, this phenomenon raises questions about whether gamers genuinely have the agency to decide how to allocate their time and attention.

Many participants shared their methods for balancing gaming within their everyday lives. Participants 2, 5, and 20 for example, detailed how they placed their mobile phones next to their computers at work to supervise the auto-grinding during working hours. This behaviour, described by Participant 20 as being a ‘foreman’, involving continuous checks of the in-game scenes to oversee the gaming progress. This behaviour and expression to some extent reflect that gamers consider the game as a task equally important as work, requiring careful management of time and attention. Additionally, some gamers, such as Participant 1, employed alarm clocks to have a better time/attention management. Typically, after entrusting grinding tasks to the Paper Doll, she estimated the time required for the Paper Doll to deplete all its stamina and Sakuramochi, then set an alarm to ensure she returned to the game promptly, fed the Paper Doll again, and initiated a new round of auto-grinding. ‘This’, as she told me, ‘is the way to reach my goals faster’.

These practices highlight the strategies gamers adopt for effective engagement in gaming, further emphasizing the game's impact on their lives. However, it also reveals the game system's competition for their time and attention, reflecting the power relations inherent in the discourse of gaming. Drawing on Foucault's (1980, pp.76-77) theory, the power mechanism of modern society has shifted from the control of the mode of production to the control of the body and time, extracting time and labour from the body and

constantly exercising power through monitoring methods. The introduction of this power mechanism means that people are no longer deprived of wealth and commodities, but of time and labour (ibid.). In *Onmyoji*, the game system uses random mechanisms to force gamers to focus their attention on the game in order to respond to possible uncertainties in a timely manner, and some game tasks that need to be completed within a certain period of time also make gamers feel the pressure and limitation of time. Therefore, from Foucault's perspective (ibid.), the game discourse is also a manifestation of the power mechanism of modern society. It exercises power over gamers by controlling their time and attention.

Gamer's Self-judgment

Gamers incur certain costs, including time and attention, to attempt acquiring rare rewards offered by the game, a game mechanism that scholars liken to gambling (Prati, 2019, pp.235-238; Xiao et al., 2021a, p.2; Xiao, 2022, p.343), raising concerns about potential addiction (Prati, 2019, p.239). However, my project reveals that gamers, when negotiating the agency in time/attention planning between themselves and the game, adjust their gaming engagement based on their psychological or win-loss status. Hence, their behaviours may resemble that of gamblers, but it differs from genuine gambling addicts. As expressed by Participant 4, ‘When I'm in a more relaxed mood and investing in the game, receiving positive feedback from the game makes me happy. But if I have more important things to do, I choose not to do those tasks at that time. So, I don't feel stressed about it’. Participant 4's perspective underscores the nuanced relationship between gamers and games, which need to also be understood within a wider everyday context that includes gamer emotions such as anxiety, pressure, wellbeing. Despite games being unable to consider each gamer's different states at different times when setting tasks, gamers can adjust their levels of engagement. This indicates that gamers can actively

manage and adapt their gaming involvement to achieve agency in time/attention planning.

Apart from being a gamer in *Onmyoji*, Participant 11 also serves as the leader of a gaming guild, responsible for managing members through the QQ chat group and actively participates in the game forum. This implies that she is not only deeply immersed in the game itself but also undertakes numerous social activities related to the game, along with responsibilities for organizing community events. As Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p.71) describes, various mechanisms within the game consistently captivate gamers, engrossing them in the challenges within the game, making it difficult for them to devote more time and attention to other daily affairs outside the game. In such situations, gamers' self-awareness may diminish, and their perception of time may become distorted (ibid.). In the interview, Participant 11 laughed and said that she ‘uses fragmented time to study’, most of her time during the day is spent on *Onmyoji*, but she believes that she is doing what she likes, so ‘it is worthwhile’.

As mentioned in the Chapter 4, gamers use ‘肝’ to describe their behaviours of spending a lot of time and attention playing the game (see page 122). It is also a way of expressing their identity as gamers. The participants' various gaming experiences of ‘livers are going to explode’ (in Chinese , ‘肝都要爆掉了’) also reflect how their time and attention resources are to some extent being seized by the game system. However, since the behaviour of ‘肝’ to some extent represents the participants' proactive choices after considering the investment and potential returns, the allocation of time and attention based on their own voluntary choices no longer seems to be perceived by the gamers as a situation forced by the game.

As mentioned earlier, games often include numerous tasks that need to be completed within fixed time frames (see page 108). This type of time-sensitive game task may cause displeasure and fatigue for some participants. For instance, Participant 16 described these tasks as ‘spending a whole day in captivity in the *Onmyoji* world’. When faced with time-limited tasks, he ‘felt urgent, with a sense of going to work because you must finish on time’. Although gamers may not enjoy these tasks as they disrupt their daily lives to some extent, they still adhere to the game's rules to complete. This is also one of the reasons why Participant 1 set alarm clocks (see page 206). When gamers' current primary gaming objectives, i.e., obtaining in-game resources by completing these fixed tasks, align with the game system's expectations, or when gamers have sufficient time, they usually would not perceive these tasks as encroaching upon their time management agency (Participant 9). Instead, they feel satisfied due to obtaining valuable rare resources, thinking ‘the sacrifices I make are worth it’ (Participant 2, 7, and 15). Over time, some gamers even consider these time and attention-consuming game tasks as daily habits, ‘just like brushing teeth and washing face every day’ (Participant 14), ‘becoming a part of my life’ (Participant 1, Participant 3). However, some gamers believe that when more important matters in life require attention, ‘*Onmyoji* becomes more like a tool to fill in the gaps in life’, (Participant 18) and the significance of the game decreases accordingly.

Therefore, we can see that while the game captures their attention, occupies their time, and even integrates into their lives (Bell et al., 2006, p.424), gamers still maintain agency in this negotiation regarding time and attention. They assess whether it is worthwhile to invest time and attention and whether it aligns with their values and goals. If they deem it worthwhile, they adhere to the game's demands. This process can also lead to the formation of gamer self-identity (Shaw, 2013, p.7), as they perceive themselves as competent in time management and experience satisfaction and confidence from

completing tasks. In addition, this also reflects a practice of time management among gamers in modern society, that is, to find a balance between games and other daily activities. With the development of technology and entertainment, people can spend more time on leisure activities, but this also poses challenges in time management. In this case, gamers need to negotiate between daily life and video games and find a balance so that they can achieve satisfaction and a sense of achievement in both areas. This negotiation process may also lead gamers to form a self-identity in sacrificing their time (Shaw, 2013, p.7), in which they persist in completing tasks to demonstrate their time management abilities, while also bringing them a certain sense of achievement and self-affirmation.

Agency Negotiation in the Regulatory Context

In the preceding sections, I separately analysed the agency negotiation between *Onmyoji* gamers and the game system in transmedia narrative experiences and the randomness gameplay. The combined analysis of these two aspects provides us with a comprehensive view of the complicated interaction between gamers and the game. It suggests that playing games is not a straightforward matter. As articulated by Hall (1989, p.68), ‘What we say is always “in context”, positioned.’ Therefore, in this section, I focus on the agency negotiation between gamers and the game within the unique context of media regulation in China. This section of discussion also constitutes a crucial element on the theme of Uncertainty of Chapter 6.

Media Regulation from the Government

In my Introduction, I provided a brief overview of China's unique media regulatory context (see page 8). In this section, I revisit and conduct an in-depth analysis of this distinctive backdrop's regulatory influence within the

online gaming industry and how it shapes and influences gamers' negotiations of agency in various ways.

Despite some early scepticism in the early 1980s regarding electronic games due to their intense interactivity and immersive nature, the Chinese government gradually began associating the gaming industry with national political, social, and cultural issues, implementing robust regulatory measures (Cao and Downing, 2008, p.518; Zhang, 2013). Since 2004, the government has introduced a series of policies to restrict online games, including the censor of game content (Chinalawedu, 2004), as well as limitations on minors' gaming time (Fung, 2014, p.57; Hu, 2009). Although the government claims these regulations aim to protect minors, Fung (2014, p.58) suggests that these actions are intended to strengthen control over the gaming industry, preventing any viewpoints contrary to mainstream values from entering.

China has consistently employed content censorship as a crucial tool for media regulation. National regulatory agencies continuously issue policies to control the content that exists and is prohibited on the internet. Since 2016, the implementation of the Regulations on the Administration of Internet Publishing Services has been applicable to original digital works, including video games, with educational and ideological content (SAPPRFT, 2016). This regulation aims to ensure that such content does not challenge the legitimacy of the national social and political system, while also safeguarding national sovereignty and security. Additionally, in 2017, the China Netcasting Services Association issued a policy requiring internet platform content to adhere to ‘correct political, value, and aesthetic standards’ (Yu, 2017). These regulations mandate the removal of ‘abnormal’ sexual content, including homosexuality (ibid.). These regulations indicate the extensive power the state holds in regulating and managing the online media industry.

The Chinese government's practice of reviewing and regulating media content, including online games, has persisted for a considerable period. A series of regulations, policies, and review rating guidelines issued by the government clearly define what is not allowed to appear in online games and which content needs to be reviewed (Sybil, 2021). According to these regulations, video games need to ‘comply with the socialist core values, spread positive energy, be conducive to the cultivation of virtues, and have the correct views on history, life, values, and world outlook, etc’ (conceptual orientation); games need to be ‘based on science, historical facts, or reasonable imagination to make serious and clever designs’ (production quality); games need to ‘spread and promote outstanding Chinese culture’ to gamers, ‘advocate scientific spirit’, ‘guide gamers to broaden their horizons, and engage in useful thinking or exploration in new areas’ (cultural connotation) (ibid). In addition, the review requirements specifically mention that the review focus on whether there is inappropriate propaganda of national, ethnic, or religious history and culture knowledge, the use of non-standard language, frequent errors in factual or common-sense knowledge, and so on (ibid.). These review policies and requirements demonstrate the role that the Chinese government plays in the unique media regulation context, with its mandatory scrutiny and regulation of game content to ensure that it conforms to the government's ideology and values. At the same time, these review requirements also have an impact on the production and distribution of the game industry. Only those that meet the relevant regulations and standards can be officially released and operated in the Chinese market.

However, China's stringent game regulations also encompasses vague and uncertain definitions (Zhang, 2012, p.343), which concurrently forms a crucial context in the theme of uncertainty discussed in Chapter 6. This uncertainty makes it challenging for game developers and publishers to predict which content may be deemed as violating regulations. The prohibited or encouraged

game production content in various regulations or rating criteria are mostly difficult to define concretely. For example, the requirement for cultural connotations is to ‘guide gamers to broaden their horizons and engage in beneficial thinking or exploration of new areas’ (Sybil, 2021). However, this regulation does not clearly specify what content belongs to ‘broadening horizons’ or ‘beneficial thinking or exploration’, which ambiguity may lead to game developers' difficulty in understanding and meeting censorship requirements, and may cause subjectivity and inconsistency in the censorship process. This type of uncertainty is described as ‘pocket crimes’ (Knockel et al., 2017, p.2) because of its broad scope, where almost any content could be considered a violation. Different regulatory or rating agencies may have varying interpretations and standards (Zhang, 2012, p.343), placing media companies and ordinary audiences in an uncertain regulatory context. This uncertainty induces ongoing fear (Liang and Lu, 2010, p.109), compelling media companies and users to engage in rigorous self-censorship and enforcement (Zhang, 2012, p.343, Knockel et al., 2015, p.2).

Therefore, it is important to note that media regulation in China involves not only top-down government-level regulation but also self-regulation from media companies and individuals (Zhang, 2006, p.280). As Mäyrä (2019, p.32) stated, ‘technology is fundamentally human activity guided and informed by cultural and ideological meaning structures’. The production and development of video games occur on a technological basis, influenced simultaneously by culture and ideology. The censorship regulations reveal China's top-down media regulatory context, and as a network media product developed by NetEase, *Onmyoji*, its distribution, and consumption processes are also inevitably constrained by government regulatory policies.

The context of media censorship is closely related to the issue of uncertainty, as extensively discussed in Chapter 6. The uncertainty and severity of the

censorship system lead to continuous concerns and fears, compelling stakeholders to take additional preventive measures to avoid potential violations. This poses a challenge to individual and community self-expression and identity while highlighting the significant impact of the censorship system on digital culture and the media environment. Building upon the discussion of top-down regulatory policies in this section, the next section delves into the issues of media self-regulation. This exploration contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of *Onmyoji*'s position in the Chinese media regulatory context, revealing how regulation ultimately influences and shapes gamers' behaviours, experiences, and reactions. It also aids in comprehending the complexity of the gamer experience from the perspective of an uncertain context.

Self-regulation of Game Companies

Responses to Top-down Regulatory Rules

Game companies must develop and release games under government regulatory requirements and respond to the review comments. However, they can also navigate a balance between self-regulation and government regulation to some extent, taking advantage of the uncertainty in regulatory policies to meet the needs of the gaming market and gamers as much as possible. Therefore, this process of agency negotiation is an interactive one, where game companies and the government influences each other, resulting in a relatively stable dynamic equilibrium. In this negotiation between game companies and the government, the narrative, gameplay, and actual gaming behaviours and self-experiences of gamers are inevitably influenced. Therefore, understanding the actions taken by game companies in their self-regulation is crucial for a better understanding of the behaviours and experiences of gamers in the gaming context.

Although *Onmyoji* is independently produced and distributed by NetEase Games, as a game company rooted in China, the game development team is bound to be subject to top-down regulation from the government. The game development team does not enjoy absolute agency in terms of what content can and cannot appear in the game. In my project, I employed the Python programming language to automatically retrieve 450 historical update announcements officially released by *Onmyoji* from June 1, 2016, to October 25, 2022, and found a total of 27 items related to the game's self-regulations (see Appendix 8). By examining all these records, it can be found that many historical revisions recorded under the subtitle 'Experience Optimization' are the result of government regulation, rather than for better user experience as the subtitle suggests. This type of revision record is easy to identify because in most cases, it is preceded by a sentence such as 'due to relevant regulations', 'at the request of relevant departments', or 'in response to relevant requirements'.

Four main areas of revision that have been officially announced by *Onmyoji*. The first and most frequent revision was about the text style in the game. For example, the rectification records on October 31, 2017 indicate that some texts in the game LOGO and game combat interface were changed to Simplified Chinese (YYS, 2017d). The 16 revision records from October 19, 2021 to March 29, 2022 declared that 'The text style in some of the illustrations has been optimized in response to requests' (YYS, 2021a; YYS, 2021b; YYS, 2021c; YYS, 2021d; YYS, 2021e; YYS, 2021f; YYS, 2021g; YYS, 2021h; YYS, 2021i; YYS, 2022a; YYS, 2022b; YYS, 2022c; YYS, 2022d; YYS, 2022e; YYS, 2022f; YYS, 2022g). There is no explicit explanation in the records about what requests were met and what specific changes were made. However, based on my observations and those of my several participants, these revisions are all centred around the LOGO in several core interfaces in the game, changing them from Traditional Chinese or Japanese to Simplified Chinese (Figure 20).

Figure 20. The text in the Logo changed from traditional Chinese (above) to simplified Chinese (below).

It is worth noting that I did not find formal government documents requiring these modifications. Qian's analysis (2018) seems plausible in this context. He suggests that *Onmyoji* was initially planned for release in Japan, hence incorporating Japanese similar to traditional Chinese in some interfaces. However, the simplified Chinese is been seen as the official language of China, emphasizing sovereignty and the mainstream culture. Therefore, this requirement is related to specific top-down regulatory demands, involving the maintenance of ‘national unity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity’ (SAPPRFT, 2016) and the regulation of language use in online games (Sybil, 2021). While there is no official document to support this viewpoint, Participant 4, as a game designer, speculated that such policies might involve sensitive political or cultural issues between China and Japan, and therefore, are kept confidential to avoid unnecessary political disputes or societal resistance.

Secondly, some of the female characters' designs changed in response to the policy, such as Hououka, Sanbi no Kitsune, Kachou Fuugetsu, Jorougumo and Shouzu. The images below show a comparison of the designs of these female characters before and after the changes. By comparison, the skin designs of these female characters in the game were requested to be revised mostly because of their semi-revealing breasts, which were clearly covered by some extra fabric after the revision (see Figure 21 a, b, c, d). Unlike these characters, the area that the female character Hanami was required to modify was not her chest, but her sitting posture. As can be seen in Figure 21(e), before the revision, Kachou Fuugetsu was kneeling on the scroll, with her legs slightly apart, and her very short panty was visible in the side view. After the change, her legs are placed on the side of her body, and her panty is no longer visible. The official announcement said, ‘Her sitting posture is more reserved now’ (YYS, 2017d). Similarly, although there may not be explicit documents stating specific revision requirements, considering the top-down regulatory policies mentioned earlier, I believe that these corrective measures can be seen as the response to the regulation that prohibits the appearance of ‘(vii) promoting obscenity, pornography, gambling, violence, or abetting crime’ in online publications (SAPPRFT, 2016).

(a) Hououka

(b) Sanbi no Kitsune

(c) Jorougumo

(d) Shouzu

(e) Kachou Fuugetsu

Figure 21. Comparisons of the female characters before (left) and after (right) the revision.

Thirdly, the real name registration and authentication were emphasized in the update announcements. Gamers are required to input their real identity information when playing online games. Those who have not completed real-name registration will be unable to use game services normally. This regulation is implemented to comply with the *Interim Measures for the Administration of Online Games* officially promulgated by the Ministry of Culture, and the *Notice of the Ministry of Culture on Regulating the Mid-term and Post-event Supervision of Online Game Operation* officially implemented on May 1, 2017 (YYS, 2017b). The notice explicitly states, ‘Online game operating enterprises should require online game users to register with valid identity documents and keep user registration information; they shall not provide in-game recharge or consumption services for online game users logging in using a guest mode’ (Gov.cn, 2016). Twelve days after the release of the latest notice, *Onmyoji* made the corresponding revisions. The purpose behind the real-name registration is to ensure that game companies have access to gamers' genuine identity information and can take actions against behaviours that violate regulations. This is an important policy adopted by the Chinese government to maintain the development of the online gaming market and protect the rights

of minors (Chinalawedu, 2004). Therefore, *Onmyoji* and other online gaming companies must actively respond to this policy requirement to avoid potential legal issues and market risks.

Last but not the least, *Onmyoji* was also required to rectify content containing bloody violence. According to the update announcement, the game's official team made modifications to both the special effects and the plot dialogues that involved bloody violence (YYS, 2017c). However, the details of these modifications were not explicitly stated in the update announcement, with only a few gamer posts mentioning that the game development team altered the bright red blood originally displayed in the game to black (973.com, 2016). Although there was no prior explicit regulation stating that blood in video games cannot be red, it appears that regulatory authorities associated red blood with ‘bloody violence’. Consequently, the game company adjusted, one of which was changing the originally red blood to black to pass the review.

Such modifications were not unique to *Onmyoji*, as other games also adopted similar practices. For instance, after obtaining the rights to operate *World of Warcraft* in China, NetEase changed the red blood in the game to green, facilitating the game's swift approval. Also, in the Chinese version of *CS: GO*, the colour of blood changed from the familiar red to black (Sina, 2016). However, this practice became ineffective after April 22, 2019, as the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) introduced new requirements in the latest game approval guidelines, explicitly stating that ‘green blood cannot appear’ and ‘liquids of any colour cannot appear in combat systems, and corpses must disappear as soon as possible’ (CDWanBao, 2019). This ongoing censorship and updated requirements compelled game development companies to adapt continually, ensuring their games could smoothly launch in the Chinese market while providing gamers with satisfying gaming experiences.

In summary, as a typical Chinese video game, *Onmyoji* implemented a series of responsive measures when facing top-down regulatory requirements. These measures included modifications and adjustments to text styles, female character appearance designs, the real-name registration system, and violent content. While some specific requirements might not have been explicitly outlined in official documents, the game company employed various strategies to meet the expectations of regulatory agencies while attempting to maintain the game's attractiveness and entertainment. This process of agency negotiation reflects the game company's efforts to find a balance between government regulations and market demands, ultimately shaping the game's content and gamer experience. However, the game company was not merely passively responding to regulatory demands; it also actively engaged in ‘bottom-up self-regulation’ to avoid violating higher-level regulatory policies during the game development process. The next section explores the measures taken by the game company in self-regulation and how these measures influenced the game's content and gamer experience.

Bottom-up Self-regulation

Regulatory authorities in China often avoid direct intervention in media products or service providers and instead require them to adopt their own censorship systems to encourage self-regulation. In 2002, the government initiated a signing ceremony for Public Pledge on Self-discipline for China's Internet Industry with the aim of regulating the behaviour of practitioners and promoting and safeguarding the healthy development of the Internet. Most Chinese internet services and content providers, including NetEase, the developer of *Onmyoji*, have signed this commitment (CCTV.cn, 2002). The self-discipline clauses include ‘not producing, publishing or disseminating harmful information that endangers national security, social stability, violates laws and regulations, and superstitious, obscene and other harmful

information, supervising information posted by users on this website in accordance with the law, and promptly removing harmful information'; 'not linking to websites containing harmful information, ensuring the legitimacy and health of network information content'; 'enhancing network moral awareness, consciously resisting the spread of harmful information', and so on (ibid.). By comparison, the requirements for media content in these provisions are almost identical to the top-down regulatory requirements from the government mentioned in the previous section. It indicates that even though media companies have a certain degree of autonomy in self-regulation, they are still heavily influenced by the government in media content regulations.

However, because the commitment clauses' wording is still uncertain, and punishment seems arbitrary, media companies have to remain vigilant and continue to increase their self-regulation efforts based on the signed self-discipline clauses (Knockel et al., 2015, p.2; see also Liang and Lu, 2010, p.109). Weber and Jia (2007, p.782) argue that media self-regulation represents a more subtle mode of control by the Chinese government to strengthen its regulation over media content and indicates a shift in China's media regulation towards a bottom-up mode. I am more inclined to agree with the views of Liang and Lu (2010, p.105) and Sun and Zhao (2022, p.203), who believe that China's media regulation is becoming a multi-dimensional and dynamic system that combines top-down government regulation and bottom-up self-regulation.

It is consistent with Foucault's (1982, p.789) theory of the operation of power. In this multi-dimensional and dynamic system, government regulation and self-regulation jointly constitute the mode of operation of power. Sun and Zhao (2022, p.214) refer to this way of transferring the power and responsibility of censorship from the state to media companies as 'an approach that combines authoritarian power control and power sharing'. On the one hand, media

companies are constrained and controlled by national regulatory policies, losing a certain degree of agency over content production. On the other hand, media companies also enjoy a certain degree of autonomy as they are granted some censorship power by the state (ibid.). The exercise of power represented by this form of censorship, as Foucault (1982, p.780) believed, is deeply embedded in social structures, and operates in subtle and invisible ways, shaping our cognition and determining the boundaries of institutions.

On one hand, the game company develop self-regulatory policies for gamers' behaviours and online-speech. I find some examples of company self-regulation from the update announcements. For example, the update announcement on 6 May 2017 reads, 'In order to create a better gaming environment, we are strictly censoring abusive comments' (YYS, 2017f). The update on 9 June 2020 shows, 'We have optimised the ban alert in the announcement comment system, which now shows the banned duration of the status' (YYS, 2020). These hints prove that the game company regulates the comments posted by and behaviours of gamers, and that some of the undesirable comments and behaviours are also punished. The types of comments and behaviours that are not allowed are listed in the End User License Agreement (EULA) (NetEase Games, 2023), which are visible to gamers when they sign up for a game account, including what gamers are not allowed to post in the game (same as the regulations in the national regulatory policy), what in-game behaviour is not allowed, and even includes rules for gamers to name their Shikigami and guild in the game (ibid.).

Keyword Blocks has always been an important tool in media companies' self-censorship, filtering and blocking potentially non-compliant keywords in a targeted manner. Knockel et al. (2017, p.3) mention that in order to obtain a release license for a game, the applicant must submit a list of keyword blocks enabled in the game at the beginning of the review in order for the regulator to

test and review the game. The list of keywords that would be blocked is not publicly available, but I was able to obtain some of the types of keywords through participant interviews and some forum posts. These summaries are derived from participants' or other gamers' experiences of the game, but they are not exhaustive.

The first category is abusive keywords. Participant 20 listed some blocked words, such as ‘婊子’ (in English, ‘bitch’), ‘狗屎’ (in English, ‘shit’), ‘操’ (in English, ‘fuck’), ‘废物’ (in English, ‘jerk’), ‘白痴’ (in English, ‘asshole’), ‘该死的’ (in English, ‘damn’) and so on. Participant 5 mentioned words that she once used to complain about her opponent that was blocked out, such as ‘二货’ (in English, ‘foolish’) and ‘SB’ (in English, ‘idiot’). The second type of keyword is suspected of being obscene and pornographic. For example, Participant 7 said that she often describe herself as ‘电子阳痿’ (in English, ‘digital impotence’) to others. It is an internet buzzword that describes a gamer who has spent money on a game but does not play it and is not interested in the game at all. However, the word ‘阳痿’ (in English, ‘impotence’) is also blocked in the in-game chat channel because it relates to the genitals. Additional, Participant 16 shared that he had been blocked for sending the number ‘1’ or ‘0’ alone, and he believes that content related to gay men might be identified as sensitive words by the system. The third type refers to naming methods that are suspected of being illegal. Participant 3 mentions that she had changed her in-game nickname to ‘The Outlaw’ and it did not pass the review. She smiled helplessly and said that she only realized from this experience that there are strict naming requirements in the game.

The phenomenon of keyword blocking mentioned above reflects the daily practice of regulation in the gaming industry. Regulatory authorities review the

content and form of games to ensure that they do not contain illegal, obscene, violent, or other harmful elements. Game developers must actively cooperate with regulations by submitting keyword blocking lists and conducting self-regulation to ensure that the game can smoothly obtain the publishing license and be released for sale. Therefore, regulation has become an inevitable part of the gaming industry, and keyword blocking is one of the specific practices. However, scholars also find that keyword censorship is dynamic in China, with the list of banned keywords being updated as the current political or cultural context changes (Zhu and Fu, p.3636; Ruan et al., 2016, p.20). Media companies must constantly keep up with the current political and cultural context, update their regulation standards in a timely manner, to ensure compliance with local laws and regulations, as well as social moral standards, while protecting their commercial interests. However, gamers may not be able to perceive these changes in a timely manner. They were even been banned or suspended without knowing which rules they have violate. This is also the uncertainties that gamers experienced during gaming, and these uncertainties may bring negative emotions, such as frustration and confusion, and affect gamers' self-expression, thereby reducing interaction and participation within the game community. These are also the main issue related to the theme of uncertainty I paid attention to.

One the other hand, in addition to regulating gamer behaviour and speech, the game company also actively responds to political or public events, reflecting the political nature of video games in China. For example, In *Onmyoji*, well-known Japanese voice actors are hired to voice every game character, which is one of the reasons why many participants liked the game (Participant 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16). However, after the previous voice actor of the Shikigami Tamamo no Mae, Park Romi, made public comments in support of Hong Kong's independence, and the former voice actor of the Shikigami Yamakaze, Toshiki Masuda, made public insulting comments about China, the game

company immediately cancelled the cooperation with these two voice actors (Xiaojianjian Anime, 2021). One more example. The territorial division of the South China Sea shown on the in-game map of *Onmyoji* in the Vietnamese server caused discontent among Vietnamese gamers, who demanded that the game's official map be revised. But NetEase issued a direct announcement to shut down the Vietnamese server, firmly defending China's territorial sovereignty from infringement (Sohu, 2019b). These examples highlight the political nature of games in China, and the challenges game companies face when dealing with political issues. Games have transcended the realm of entertainment, becoming a part of international political and cultural exchange. Game companies must handle political events carefully to avoid potential controversies and impacts. This also reflects the close connection between the gaming industry and global politics and culture.

In fact, *Onmyoji* has been making attempts to respond to the realities of political and cultural life in order to show that they have the same ideology as the state. In 2018, NetEase Games announced that *Onmyoji* would partner with P&G group and that Yuki Onna, a character in the game, would serve as P&G's brand ambassador, using AR technology to cheer on athletes at the Winter Olympics (China.com, 2018). In the face of major social or political events on the national agenda, all entertainment can be stopped at any time. For example, in order to express deep condolences to the martyrs who lost their lives fighting with COVID-19, the State Council of China issued a notice, deciding to hold national mourning on April 4, 2020, and to suspend public recreational activities across the country. *Onmyoji* also suspended its services on that day. The Chinese government's efforts to regulate games and make them part of its national culture have turned what used to be just a pastime into a more political issue. This is largely different from that in Western countries (Ernkvist and Ström, 2008, pp.106-107; Fung, 2014).

Finally, through my project, I found that Accusatory Reporting is a self-censorship measure used in *Onmyoji*, which fully mobilizes the initiative of individual gamers. It is a system that rewards and encourages individuals to monitor private interactions and report problems they consider suspicious (Luo and Li, 2022, p.4). On November 30, 2016, less than three months after the game's official launch, the game's officials updated the in-game reporting function to ‘welcome all *Onmyoji* masters to actively report, the Office will reward randomly selected gamers with valid reports at irregular intervals’ (YYS, 2016a). This mechanism motivates gamers to report other gamers by promising them a certain number of benefits. While such reporting methods are developed by the media companies, the substantive monitoring relies on private actors, i.e. the gamers themselves. Luo and Li (2022, p.5) refer to this type of censorship as ‘participatory regulation’. Gamers' participation in censorship through whistleblowing is voluntary, but this voluntary behaviour takes place in a context of censorship and surveillance, which means that ‘actors are objects and subjects to censorship at the same time’ (ibid.). Therefore, in fact a multi-dimensional and dynamic regulatory system in China should also include the participatory regulation of individuals. Through my project, some participants have voluntarily joined the regulatory queue while experiencing regulation from the government and the company, and others have made other choices when faced with regulation. The participatory behaviour and interpretation of gamers are involved, so I address these in detail in the next section.

When Gamers Face Regulation

Gamers' participation and experiences are inevitably influenced by the regulatory context. However, through my project, I find that gamers exhibit diverse attitudes and responses to regulation. Some are barely aware of the regulations they are subject to, while others are constantly questioning and

resisting control mechanisms. Some gamers even join the regulatory team, without realizing they have become part of this complex and dynamic regulatory system. In the gaming practices of *Onmyoji*, to what extent do gamers aware of the existence of regulation? What attitudes and viewpoints do they hold towards regulation? When facing regulation, what actions do they take? What kind of power dynamics are manifested in this process? Answers to these questions can be found in the digital diaries and interview data provided by my 20 participants.

Gamers' Awareness of Regulations

Different Reactions of the Participants

In order to explore whether gamers are aware of media content regulation during the game, I asked some questions about this topic during the interview and tried to encourage my participants to discuss it. The first question was, 'Do you realize the existence of regulation during the game?' Faced with this more direct question, the participants had three different reactions.

First, most of the participants' first reaction to this question was negative, such as 'I am not aware of it' or 'I have not encountered it'. However, after I briefly explained and gave examples of the word 'regulation', they looked enlightened and said that they had seen similar discussions or information, but they do not think this is commonly the case in *Onmyoji*. As Participant 17 said in the interview, 'My first thought when mentioning regulation was probably pornography, gambling and violence, but I haven't seen some of the bloody scenes in the game so far'. Similarly, Participant 15, who only became aware of this after I cited some of the clues mentioned by other participants, also began to give examples, 'It seems that there is a limit on the amount of time that minors can play, and we wouldn't be able to post insulting words on the chat channel or anything like that. Some of the character designs were too

revealing before and were sent back to be fixed’.

However, most participants tended to use somewhat vague expressions such as ‘seems like’, ‘should be’, and ‘probably’, indicating a lack of absolute certainty. Their responses to some extent suggested that they might have become accustomed to game censorship, developing a numb and insensitive attitude towards the situation. Furthermore, as analysed in the preceding section, due to the game development companies taking into account the requirements of game regulations, inappropriate content in games has been reduced (see page 214), making gamers less aware of the need for censorship. More importantly, there is also a possibility that participants, while answering these questions, were in a context of being monitored. As outlined in the methodology chapter, the in-depth interviews between participants and me were conducted using the application of Tencent Meeting, which is subject to censor and regulation by relevant authorities (see page 92). In such a context, participants may consider the topic sensitive and prefer not to discuss it extensively during the interview. This speculation is validated later.

Secondly, some of the participants gave immediate positive answers in the first instance after hearing the question. For example, Participant 4, 8, 10, 18, 19 and 20 expressed an obvious awareness and knowledge of the censorship and immediately listed some of the things they thought were being censored in the game and gave their opinions. Based on the reactions and explanations of these participants, I believe they have a certain understanding and awareness of the entire regulatory context. Compared with the first type of participants, it is obvious that there are differences in the awareness and impact of game censorship among different gamers.

I think the reason for this difference, to some extent, might be related to the participants' own level of cognition. Those participants who can actively give

affirmative answers and provide in-depth interpretations generally have higher education or overseas study experience. Although this project did not impose restrictions on academic qualifications and occupations when recruiting participants, I find that different levels of cognition would affect participants' sensitivity and awareness of this topic to some extent. Participant 4 claimed to have ‘internal secrets’ as a game designer. Although he is not from the *Onmyoji* development team, he believed that he had some understanding of the Chinese game production environment. Participant 10, 18, 19, and 20 all have more than 2 years of overseas study or research experiences, which enables them to have a deeper understanding and cognition of game content regulation by being exposed to a wider range of cultural and social backgrounds.

The third type of participants became alarmed when they heard this question. This corroborates the speculation I made earlier (see page 229). For example, Participant 9 opened his mouth in surprise when he heard my question and then asked me in return, ‘Is this something we can discuss here?’, ‘Are the police going to knock on my door later?’. Participant 12 also confirmed with me, ‘Will our interview be monitored? Will my expressions be monitored?’. There are some participants who did not show caution, but who habitually tried to replace or omit sensitive words in their statements that they thought might be regulated. The responses from these participants suggest that they have a clear awareness of the game content regulation, and they have some fear and concerns about discussing this topic. Our interviews took place on the Tencent Meeting software. In this context, Participant 9 acknowledged that he is particularly cautious about communication and sharing on online platforms like this one. He later explained to me, he has a friend who is responsible for the media regulation and has shared with him some of the consequences of violating regulation requirements. Just as speculated earlier, this attitude is also evident in other participants; they mentioned frequently encountering shared experiences regarding the consequences of certain behaviours.

Consequently, they approach sharing their own opinions with extra caution. This reflects that gamers are consciously and unconsciously negotiating regulatory control in various aspects. In the broader context of regulation, it indicates that gamers are actively or passively responding to regulatory control in various facets of their lives. These findings hold methodological significance, as discussed in the methodology chapter (see page 92) and are revisited in the concluding chapter (see page 337).

Gamers' Attitudes on Regulation

In fact, each participant provided examples of content regulation in *Onmyoji*, even those who initially gave negative reactions. These examples largely echo the analysis presented earlier (see page 214). For instance, some participants mentioned changes to the design of some female characters, however, they believe that such content is ‘easy to change, just wrap the chest’ (Participant 7), and has minimal impact on their gaming experience (Participant 3 and 16). Others highlighted regulations concerning game narratives and cultural issues. For example, Participant 13 argues that ‘some originally bloody, dark, violent, and erotic content (in the Japanese Yokai culture) has already been revised’, since ‘pure evil is impossible in Chinese video games’, which ‘should definitely be in line with the mainstream Chinese values’ (Participant 3). Furthermore, the strong correlation between media regulation and political stance has been noted by some participants. In addition to the previous incidents about changing voice actors, Participant 8 brings attention to the omission of Seimei (the main protagonist of the game)'s surname – Abe, the same as the previous Prime Minister of Japan – in the game, He believes that this is possibly to avoid historical and political associations. Moreover, participants also mention regulations beyond the game, such as the continually existing of pixelating images in some game-related videos on the Bilibili platform, which ‘strongly reminds me that regulation is happening’ (Participant 10).

The diverse instances of sharing indicate that gamers are not completely oblivious to censorship and modifications in the game; instead, they possess varying degrees of observation and understanding regarding these regulatory measures. In China's intricate and multi-layered regulatory landscape, gamers occupy a central position. Their attitudes and interpretations are crucial for a deeper understanding of the practical effects of regulation, also aiding in recognizing the complexity of gamer gaming practices. In my study, different participants exhibit varied attitudes towards censorship and modifications in the game. These divergent attitudes and perceptions also reflect, to some extent, the diverse needs and expectations of gamers regarding the overall gaming experience.

Consistent with previous arguments on media effects (Anderson and Dill, 2000, p.782; Poole, 2004, p.356; Buckingham, 2006, p.9; Livingstone, 2007, p.6; Newman, 2013, p.68; Harris, 2014, p.52), many participants express supports for media regulation, primarily because they believe that some regulation is necessary for minors, who ‘have not yet formed a complete set of values’ (Participant 1), particularly as some ‘uncontrolled’ ones may make various adaptations of the game content (Participant 9). Without regulation, particularly for pornographic or violent content, it could become unmanageable (Participant 9) and even ‘affect the public order and morals of society as a whole’ (Participant 17). However, some critical participants argued that content regulation acts ‘like a heavy shackle’ that restricts the freedom of cultural creation (Participant 5) and ‘prevents some authentic expression from being fully represented’ (Participant 16). Therefore, some participants advocate for the introduction of a rating system to better balance regulation and creative freedom. For example, Participant 2 suggests the need for ‘clearly defining which games are suitable for adults and which games are suitable for minors, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all approach’. While Participant 5 also believes that addressing this issue at the policy level is a better approach, he

expresses concerns that, due to the long-term influence of Chinese traditional culture and ideology, some inherent Chinese values could not be fundamentally changed.

Perhaps it is this general feeling of helplessness, that leads some participants to believe that all they can do is comply. For example, Participant 3 considered herself to be ‘constantly adapting within the rules’. She explained that ‘although there may be some dissatisfaction in the process of adaptation, the content has been changed, and I cannot ask them to change it back’. Consequently, she gradually becomes less concerned with regulation and focuses on choosing what she enjoys and ‘just have fun’. As Participant 15 also believes, ‘After all, playing games is for pleasure, there is no need to think too much’. Some participants show a more indifferent attitude toward regulation. For instance, Participant 7 comments, ‘I’ve seen too many absurd regulations; I’m numb to them’. Participant 19 even likens herself to a ‘frog in warm water’, feeling like she is gradually adapting to the warmth, aware of the changes happening but unable to change the reality.

However, regardless of their previous attitudes, all participants express support for regulations related to political stances. They all stress that safeguarding national sovereignty and integrity is an unwavering bottom line. Even a game like *Onmyoji* should adhere to this. As Participant 15 mentions when discussing the replacement of voice actors due to political speech, ‘There are countless voice actors; if one is inappropriate, we can replace them at any time’. Participants 9 and 14 also emphasize that liking a particular culture (such as Japanese Yokai culture) does not mean gamers are willing to compromise on the fundamental principles of own home country.

Gamers’ gaming experiences unfold within the framework of power dynamics. According to Foucault (1982, p.778), power is a pervasive relationship that

runs through various social practices and institutions, encompassing language, knowledge, authority, regulation, and rules. In this power relationship, individuals are continuously shaped and constrained, leading to the normalization and standardization of their bodies, minds, and behaviours into what Foucault (1995, p.138) termed ‘docile bodies’. Therefore, these reactions and attitudes of participants towards media regulation demonstrate how gamers are continually influenced by discourse within such a socio-cultural context. However, Foucault (ibid.) also notes that human subjects are not passive objects completely governed by power; they can also gain some degree of agency and autonomy in power relations through various means, such as expressing dissenting opinions and taking action against power. For instance, many creative forms of cultural expression have emerged in the context of Chinese media regulation to express criticism and dissatisfaction (see also in Wallis, 2011, p.426). These behaviours reflect that individuals or gamers in my project are not merely passive subjects of the regulatory system; they are actively seeking ways to evade and circumvent regulation to protect their agency of self-expression. Supportive examples will be given in the next section.

Gamers’ Actual Responses to the Regulation

In China's intricate and multidimensional regulatory system, gamers' roles extend beyond being subjects of regulation. As mentioned earlier, gamers ‘are objects and subjects to censorship at the same time’ (Luo and Li, 2022, p.5). In my project, I observed that although gamers have different attitudes, they all acted with varying degrees of avoidance or circumvention in response to regulation, trying to gain some agency to do what they wanted to do and say what they wanted to say. Also, it is worth noting that some gamers, to some extent, voluntarily or unwittingly participate in the regulation, but they may not necessarily be aware of being in the regulatory context. In this section, I

elaborated on the complex and varied positions that gamers occupy within the regulatory context in China. From this, we can observe the interplay between regulation and individual behaviour, and how the regulatory ecosystem influences gamers' gaming experiences and social interactions.

Gamers Circumvent the Regulation

The regulatory measures, whether top-down state regulation or company-led self-regulation, have imposed certain restrictions on gamers' behaviours. However, my project revealed that gamers are not merely accepting and complying with the regulations wholesale. Instead, they find ways to circumvent regulation, thereby competing for agency.

On the one hand, as mentioned in the previous section (see page 223), gamers consistently encounter challenges with keyword regulation in their gaming practices. However, they often used homophones or add special characters to circumvent such regulations. For instance, as mentioned previously, Participant 7 often referred herself as being ‘电子阳痿’ (in English, ‘digital impotent’). The word ‘阳痿’ (in English, ‘impotent’) is likely to be blocked. Instead, she used ‘杨伟’ (literally these two Chinese characters look like a name of a boy) in her digital diary because the two terms have the same pronunciation in Chinese. She also employed other homophones such as ‘铜’ (in English, ‘copper’) for ‘同’ in ‘男同’ (in English, ‘gay’), ‘淦’ (in English, ‘water seeped into the ship’) for ‘干’, and ‘焯’ (in English, ‘to boil or to scald’) for ‘艹’ which are both abusive words that mean the same as ‘fuck’ in English. In his diary, Participant 9 complained about the game design, using ‘踏马的’ instead of ‘他妈的’ (in English, ‘damn it’), which is a swear word pronounced the same way. Participant 8 used English words instead of certain Chinese characters

that might be blocked. For example, when expressing his love for a character in his diary, he wrote ‘Strength is the best spring medicine’, literally translating the word ‘春’ in ‘春药’ (in English, ‘aphrodisiac’) to ‘spring’. Participants 3 and 12 also reported that they sometimes added spaces or special characters to phrases they thought might be blocked when arguing with other gamers. Furthermore, participants used alternative vocabulary to avoid mentioning politically sensitive words. For example, Participant 8 replaced the name of the national president with ‘someone’, since the name of the country's top leader cannot be mentioned on Chinese social media platforms except in official news reports. Participants 9 and 15 also avoided using the word ‘government’ during our interviews, using substitutes such as ‘the above’ or ‘the Lords’.

From these examples, it is observed that gamers employ a variety of language tactics to evade the blocking mechanisms of the game. When confronted with regulations, gamers possess agency to use ingenious tactics to assert their freedom of expression. The fact directs us to consider the extent to which work arounds (such as the language and character alterations noted above) are also really common. If this is the case (and I believe it is), then we also need to note that the participants in my project are so used to navigating and negotiating censorship issues they may well be less ‘seen’ or ‘considered’. Following this, my overt questions about censorship would also be difficult to answer because I am asking gamers to comment on activities that have become so ‘mundane’ (in Meghan Morris (1990, p.34)’s use of the term) they may not necessarily be ‘seen’. To a certain extent, the workarounds gamers use to express themselves both reflects their sensitivity to censorship and restrictions, as well as their proactive and everyday response to power dynamics they frequently negotiate.

On the other hand, participants also utilize Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) to circumvent domestic network restrictions and access or publish content

prohibited by regulatory policies. In fact, I already mentioned such examples in Chapter 4 (see page 166). For instance, Participant 15 used to enjoy writing love stories about male characters in the game, including some explicit homosexual sex scenes. However, such content is sensitive and easily prohibited by both top-down regulation policies of the government and self-regulatory rules of media companies. Participant 15 mentions that she and other like-minded creators use VPNs to publish their fan works on social platforms based on foreign servers. When they want to access such works, they continue to use VPNs to bypass regulations. This demonstrates conscious workarounds that serve specific purposes and may be less ‘everyday’ than the language workarounds discussed above. Similarly, Participant 16 indicated that he often circumvents regulations to view content of interest, describing himself as somewhat ‘rebellious’, stating, ‘Being told not to watch something only piques my curiosity’. Participants 18 and 19 also expressed their experience with ‘climbing the wall’ (they liken the Internet regulation to a wall), saying, ‘this wall can't stop me’. This process also reflects power dynamics between regulatory authorities and individuals. Despite regulatory bodies having a degree of control and regulatory power, gamers seek unofficial avenues to achieve their goals. This at the very least, indicates that gamers consciously negotiate these systems and in so doing demonstrate autonomy and agency.

Yang and Jiang (2015, p.225) understand these workarounds as ‘networked social practices’ that tactically use ‘circumvention or resistance’ to regulations. As they argue, however, it would be overly simplistic to claim these workarounds are always driven by political resistance. Such acts can also be a form of cultural expression and a medium for maintaining social interaction (ibid.). Just like when I continued to ask participants whether they thought their workaround tactics were a form of resistance, most of them gave negative answers, even those who had expressed critical attitudes towards regulatory

policies. For my participants, such behaviours were motivated by the desire to self-express oneself more accurately (Participant 5 and 7); to communicate more convenient (Participant 3); or to maintain existing social interactions (Participant 19). As Participant 19 explained, sometimes it is just a form of imitation, ‘everyone says it this way, if I don't use these popular terms, I will look strange’. Therefore, participants see themselves as seeking ways of self-expression that are achievable and identified by the community, rather than engaging in political resistance. This is also connected to the point I discussed in Chapter 4 (see page 163), that these seemingly workaround tactics against regulatory policies are also alternative ways for gamers to express their self-identity and identification. Moreover, this behaviour has gradually evolved into a social practice, becoming a shared culture within online communities, just as what I sought to do when I devised my recruitment strategy discussed in Chapter 3 (see page 99), reflecting people's ability to continuously evolve and adapt in the digital world.

Most participants do not perceive their actions as a form of resistance against regulation policies, but that does not necessarily mean they are not forms of resistance (these actions can be both resistance and social practice). What it does imply, for me at least, is that some of the activities discussed by my participants have developed over time due to their prolonged exposure to the regulatory context, not least because many of them are well aware of the consequences of being subjected to regulation. Similar to those participants who became alert when I brought up the topic of media regulation (see page 230), some participants in subsequent interviews asserted themselves as law-abiding citizens who would not engage in inappropriate actions. For instance, Participant 15, after admitting to frequently using VPN to access domestically restricted content (see page 237), promptly emphasized her commitment to following certain rules, stating, ‘I won't spread the information I access through VPN to others’. Participants' viewpoints and attitudes may be influenced by

their prolonged exposure to a regulatory environment, leading to internalized and compliant reactions to the regulatory system. This aligns with Foucault (1995, p.138)'s concept of ‘docile bodies’, indicating that they have gradually become accustomed to the presence and influence of power, even engaging in self-regulation to adhere to the rules to some extent.

As observed by Ruan et al. (2016) and Sun and Zhao (2022) in their research, media censorship in China is a dynamic process, particularly with regard to the censorship of keywords in media content. However, as Participant 8 said, ‘it's impossible to completely block it. People's mouths are free, people's thoughts are free, you can control what people write and say, but you can't control their thoughts, they always find a way to get around the rules’. Gamers' various expressions and behaviours to circumvent regulations will also make corresponding adjustments according to the dynamic regualtions. However, as long as it is not politically sensitive vocabulary, Participant 9 believes that media companies, including video games, are actually tacitly allowing users to use these homophonic words, ‘like an unwritten agreement between the company and the gamers, as long as you don't go too far, I won't strictly regulate you’. In this tug-of-war, Participant 8 believes that the current dynamic balance has been reached among gamers, the game company, and the government, ‘the authorities have achieved their purpose, and those who want to bypass regulations have also achieved their purpose.’ Therefore, within the framework of media regulation, the power dynamics among individual users, media companies, and the government create a dynamic equilibrium, highlighting the complex relationship between power and freedom of expression. It also illustrates how people adapt to and respond to the existence of power in a specific societal context. In this context, all parties continuously negotiate and adjust their respective interests, constituting a crucial characteristic of China's media censorship environment.

In such context, participants expressed satisfaction with the current state of dynamic balance and even believed that the existence of media regulation to some extent is necessary. Participant 8 shared many details about the regulation of *Onmyoji* during the interview and expressed some incomprehension, but by the end of our conversation, he expressed that media regulation is necessary to some extent, saying ‘If there was no censorship one day... Oh my god, I can't imagine that scene’. Participant 8's statement indicates that he has adapted to a lifestyle under regulation. This indicates the effectiveness of media regulation policies to some extent, which in turn reflects the complexity and dynamic censorship rules that make some gamers ‘back off’ (Participant 3). She believes that she has to ‘think hard about what words and terms to use when inputting text so as not to be blocked’, but ‘after carefully making a choice’, she has lost the desire to express herself. ‘It's really troublesome to do this’, Participant 3 said helplessly, ‘I think this is where regulation plays its role’.

Therefore, we must recognize that this game of power is not played on an equal footing. The government and game companies possess greater resources and control, enabling them to continually upgrade regulatory measures and tighten censorship rules. In contrast, gamers have limited means, relying on techniques such as homophones and VPNs to protect their expressive space. Thus, this process of agency negotiation underscores the fact that the relationship between gamers and media censorship resembles more a restriction imposed by upper-tier authorities and the grassroots users' responses. While the government and game companies may tacitly allow gamers to evade regulation within certain limits, it is merely a surface-level compromise, with true power firmly held in their hands. Therefore, despite the interaction and interdependence among gamers, game companies, and the government, the complexity and uncertainty in the media censorship environment primarily reflect the imbalance of power.

Gamers Participate in the Regulation

Although gamers may seem to always play the role of being regulated, some gamers actively participate in the regulation. In Chapter 4, I analysed one situation where gamers would take action to intervene in game narrative or design when it does not meet their narrative expectations or mainstream aesthetic and cultural values, thus trying to achieve their own gaming experience (see page 168). This reflects how gamer behaviours and aesthetics are largely influenced by the mainstream discourse in wider society. In this section, I further explore how gamers engage in the media regulation, emphasizing that gamers may not necessarily be aware that their participation actually constitutes a significant aspect of the media regulatory dynamic in China. This complex and dynamic process involves gamers' attitudes, behaviours, and feedback, all of which influence the formulation and adjustment of regulatory rules. Therefore, a key perspective of my project is that media regulation is not merely a unilateral action by the government and game companies; gamers' reactions and behaviours also play an undeniable role, even if they may not always be fully aware of it. This complexity highlights the diversity of the Chinese media regulatory context and the potential influence of gamers.

Participatory regulation refers to a new mode of regulation that involves a large number of users participating in the process of regulating and filtering information on digital and social media platforms (Luo and Li, 2022, p.4). The emergence of this regulatory model is mainly because traditional centralized regulation mechanisms are unable to meet the growing demand for censorship of digital content, especially when individuals can use creative works and VPNs to evade censorship, which presents many new challenges to media content regulation (ibid., p.3). Therefore, digital and social media platforms have begun to introduce ways for users to participate in regulation, including

community management, reporting mechanisms, and content moderation. In this mode, users can participate in the regulation and filtering of digital content by submitting complaints, reports, comments, likes, and other means (ibid., p.13).

Some gamers who have transitioned into community managers or leaders are granted regulatory powers by the game company. For instance, Participant 1 noted in her diary that she volunteered to be one of the hosts of the *Onmyoji* hot topic on Weibo. This feature on Weibo allows users with shared interests to form communities where they can share updates, express opinions, and engage in discussions (Ma et al, 2021, p.64). Strict rules are in place to filter out individuals who lack genuine interest in the topic. Hosts have the ability to moderate posts, highlight important content, and recommend the topic to other users (Ma et al, 2021, p.66). These roles afford them a level of influence over the direction of discussions and user behaviours. As Foucault (1982, p.792) suggests, this emergence of power is institutionalized through the rules and processes governing the hot topic, which regulate behaviours and authority of the managers.

Participant 1 highly valued and had high expectations for the opportunity to be one of the hot topic hosts. She described in the diary, ‘I looked back at the previous announcement, counted my supporters, and confirmed that I should be on the list of selected candidates. I anxiously waited for the current moderator to contact me, refreshing my Weibo messages every ten minutes….’ In a subsequent interview, Participant 1 introduced some of the actions she took when she succussed became the host, such as she often ‘look for any violations and try to maintain a good posting environment for everyone’. This behaviour reflects her values and contribution to community order to some extent. However, as mentioned earlier, when I asked if she was aware of media regulations in the game, her initial reaction was to deny it. Even after I provided

several examples related to regulation, she did not believe that she had actually experienced them.

In the context of social media platforms, operations and rules are often seen as natural, universal, and inevitable knowledge generated by power and are rarely questioned or thought about (Foucault, 1995, p.27). Especially in China, the media content regulation includes not only political threats, such as those that threaten territorial sovereignty, but also seemingly harmless non-political content, such as illegal operations on games and social media. As Yang (2021, p.3) believes, ‘it normalizes censorship policy and desensitizes citizens to censorship activities’. Therefore, Participant 1 may not have realized that she was actually exercising regulatory power and believed that everything she did was just to help maintain order and a good user experience in the hot topic. This also reflects the impact of power systems on individual subjectivity, as described by Foucault (1982, p.778), power systems can influence individuals' cognition and behaviour and even submerge their subjectivity in them.

Participant 11, as a community manager, serves as the leader of an *Onmyoji* guild. From her accounts, it is apparent that she undertook significant efforts in organizing and managing the guild, including promoting activity within the guild, leading discussions, and establishing rules and guidelines to ensure that certain topics cannot be discussed in the chat group. ‘Just like how every country has its own laws, every family has its own rules, every guild also has its own orders’, she believes that the formulation of rules is aimed at better safeguarding freedom, but this also raises a crucial question: can rules restrict freedom, and who has the authority to establish these rules? Her role is both a leader and a rule-maker, involving issues of power, namely how she exercises this power to influence the behaviour of guild members.

When discussing her management responsibilities, Participant 11 showed a

sense of pride on her face, indicating her satisfaction with the contributions she makes to maintaining order within the guild. However, it is interesting that when asked about her awareness of the existence of media regulation, she spoke very little about it. She believed that, as a student studying abroad, she was unlikely to be influenced by the regulations that commonly occur in the mainland of China. However, even though her physical location is outside China, as the leader of a guild in a Chinese mobile game, she is still subject to constraints on her behaviour and speech imposed by regulatory policies while participating in the guild and the game. Therefore, the experiences of Participant 11 reflect a more widespread issue, suggesting that gamers in gaming communities may unwittingly become part of the regulatory ecosystem.

In fact, all gamers are endowed with the authority of regulation; it is just that some are aware of and utilize this power, while others are not. The Accusatory Reporting mentioned earlier (see page 227) grants ordinary gamers the power to monitor the speech and behaviour of others, aligning to some extent with regulatory mechanisms established by governments or platforms In *Onmyoji*, every gamer is empowered with the option to 'report' via the game interface when they encounter content related to advertising, insults, obscenity, cheating, politics, terrorism, and other inappropriate topics. Reported gamers, after an official investigation, may face penalties such as muting or even account suspension. It must be acknowledged that this mechanism significantly enhances the efficiency of self-censorship for the gaming company.

During interviews, some participants discussed their experiences with reporting others and expressed various motivations and attitudes. For instance, Participant 18 mentioned reporting gamers suspected of cheating in the game, stating that he ‘reported decisively’ because he was ‘using the modest power to uphold the fairness of the game’. This reflects how gamers choose to exercise reporting power to maintain the fairness of the game. Participant 20

also reported gamers who repeatedly posted ‘repetitive and non-substantive messages’ in the chat channel. Such reporting action aims to uphold the quality and harmonious atmosphere of the game community. Participant 6 mentioned reporting individuals with overly aggressive comments on Weibo, highlighting how reporting behaviour extends beyond in-game interactions to social media platforms, encompassing a wider range of speech. In general, this reporting mechanism empowers gamers to monitor community speech and behaviours. While motivations for reporting may vary, game development teams typically prioritize issues reported by a large number of gamers and take proactive measures to address them. This mechanism reflects gamers' active engagement and sense of responsibility within the game community, intertwining with game platforms and government regulatory mechanisms, leading to complex impacts and consequences.

Similar to the regulatory policies (see page 210) and self-regulations of media companies (see page 214) mentioned earlier, the criteria for reporting also suffer from ambiguity or uncertainty. This has created a set of reporting strategies that individuals consider effective, and the reporting mechanism becomes a tool for certain individuals or groups to suppress voices that disagree with their ideologies (Wang and Ge, 2022, p.13). Wang and Ge (2022) examined such situation regarding behaviours of celebrity fans, and similar occurrences also take place on social media platforms related to *Onmyoji*. For example, *Onmyoji* gamers once discovered that four out of the eight hosts in the hot topic of Weibo were fans of one controversial celebrity. These hosts had previously implemented lottery rules favouring the celebrity’s fans and had abused their power to silence some ordinary gamers from posting. This incident sparked widespread dissatisfaction among *Onmyoji* gamers. Eventually, under pressure from gamers, these hosts resigned from their positions (ACG Fans, 2020). This illustrates a complex dynamic: while fan-gamers may perceive themselves as ‘Fandom police’, regulating discourse

and punishing behaviour perceived as deviant, they are, in reality, using their power to advance their own interests rather than uphold government-endorsed values. It also reflects the collective consciousness and rebellious spirit of gamers, as they unite to confront some managers who abuse their power, thus protecting their own interests and power.

As Wang and Ge (2022, p.6) suggest, ‘the power of fandom police is illusory’. Ultimately, fans who exercise their reporting power are also in this multidimensional and dynamic regulatory context, being ‘exploited by the state to censor media users’ comments and products, with the ultimate consequence of perpetuating censorship and heteronormativity, thereby exacerbating the self-censorship and mutual reporting of media users’ (ibid.). Wang and Ge (2022, p.5) argue that this is a ‘two-way exploitation between fans and state power’. Therefore, it is clear from the above discussion that in the specific regulatory context of China, agency negotiations between the government, media companies and individuals are constantly taking place. The government's up-down regulatory policies keep media companies and individuals in a regulatory context, while media companies and individuals lose some of their agency to create and express themselves. Whether consciously or unconsciously aware of the existence of regulations, individuals are not entirely passive in their online participation and employ tactics to circumvent it in order to seek the agency to express themselves. At the same time, individuals are empowered with a degree of state power that allows them to be alert to the online-speeches and behaviours of others. Individuals also spontaneously gaze at the creations of media companies, unconsciously acting as monitors of mainstream cultural politics and aesthetics. Individuals can also abuse their power for their own group's benefit, although they may forget that they are also under a higher level of regulation. So, as the Chinese old saying, there is a policy at the top and a strategy at the bottom, it is hard to tell who has the real agency and who does not.

Summary

In this chapter, I explored gamers' gaming experiences in transmedia narratives and random gameplay. I situated these experiences within the broader context of China's media regulatory landscape to explore the agency negotiation between gamers and the game, as well as within the framework of regulatory discourse. In this intricate interplay, gamers' gaming experiences are influenced by various factors, including the innovative design of the game, regulatory policy constraints, and individual active participation.

Through formal analysis of the game system and discourse analysis of interviews and diary excerpts, I have found that the game system, acting as an agent, can significantly impact gamers' gaming practices in various aspects. In certain situations, the game system operates through independent rules and algorithms, shaping the trajectory of gaming. As in my project, the game system determines the probability of unpredictable in-game events or manage the production, distribution, and value of rare resources through rules and algorithms, creating a challenging experience for gamers.

However, concurrently, gamers are not passive consumers but rather active agents who play a powerful role throughout the gaming process. This agency is manifested in gamers' individual choices, such as deciding on action paths in the game based on their personal gaming intentions. The flexibility of these choices provides gamers with a personalized gaming experience, allowing each gamer to make unique decisions based on their preferences, strategies, or goals. This agency is also evident in gamers' adaptability and strategic abilities. Faced with the challenges and changes introduced by the game system, gamers demonstrate impressive adaptability. They not only comprehend and accept the system's changes but also flexibly adjust their strategies to better achieve personal goals set within the game. Therefore, the

interaction between the game system and gamers is a multi-layered, multidimensional, and complex process. The rules and algorithms of the system bring depth and challenges to the game, while the agency and flexibility of gamers add personality and depth to the overall gaming experience. This bidirectional influence and interaction constitute a complex agency negotiation between gamers and the game system, permeating the entire gamer gaming experience and shaping the dynamic development of the game world.

I deeply recognize that discussions on agency negotiation between gamers and the game system cannot be divorced from specific contexts, particularly within the unique media regulatory environment in China, which involves more complex factors. In this specific context, the responses of the game system and the behaviour of gamers are both subject to the constraints and guidance of regulatory policies. For instance, content censorship in the game requires developers to handle certain sensitive or specific themes, directly influencing aspects of narrative and character design within the game. Additionally, restrictions on game content limit the information gamers can access, impacting their understanding and expectations of the game. In this context, gamers exhibit a more cautious and rational aspect in agency negotiation, attempting to find their own gaming space within the regulatory framework. They achieve personalized interpretations of the game through specific interaction methods and social means both within and outside the game, while also avoiding potential regulatory risks. This behaviour reflects gamers actively seeking balance in a complex regulatory environment, maintaining their agency in the gaming experience. Therefore, the findings of my project underscore the importance of considering the additional layers that emerge within this context when understanding the negotiation relationship between gamers and the game system.

In summary, these findings allow for a more comprehensive understanding of

the multi-layered and complex dynamics of power between gamers and the game system in the digital entertainment domain. The attention to the issue of agency negotiation aligns closely with the issue of identity discussed in the preceding chapter and anticipates the issue of uncertainty to be addressed in the following chapter. In the exploration of identity, I focused on how gamers construct their identities through the autonomy and decision-making afforded by the game. In the upcoming investigation of uncertainty, I delved into how uncertainty influences these interactions between gamers and the game system.

Chapter 6 Uncertainty

In the earlier discussions regarding gamers' identity construction (Chapter 4) and agency negotiation between gamers and the game system within a regulatory context (Chapter 5), the theme of uncertainty consistently surfaced. This was particularly evident in the previous Chapter, where I dedicated substantial sections to discussing the regulatory context that is filled with uncertainty and the diverse perceptions, attitudes, and coping strategies adopted by gamers in such a context (see page 210). While my primary focus was on the agency negotiation between regulatory authorities, the game company, and gamers, I consistently underscored the pervasive uncertainty stemming from the regulatory context. Building upon this background, this chapter delves into a detailed exploration of the theme of uncertainty, specifically revolving around the unknowns derived from game narratives, gamers' subjective probability assessments, and issues encountered during the strategic decision-making process.

A thorough investigation into gamer decision-making and emotional experiences related to uncertainty was crucial. Gamers participating in transmedia gaming male adjustments or decisions to obtain and maintain pleasure and challenges in this uncertain context. However, this also suggests that gamers may undergo negative emotional experiences triggered by uncertainty, such as anxiety, disappointment, and frustration. This once again interconnects the three important themes of this thesis (identity, agency negotiation, and uncertainty) and compels us to re-examine the complexity and diversity of gaming practices and their significance in gamers' lives.

Uncertainties in the *Onmyoji* System

To investigate uncertainty within *Onmyoji* in order to ascertain how it might

frame gamers' identity and identification construction, as well as agency negotiations in gaming, I first employed the method of Formal Analysis to examine the types of uncertainty that the game system provides. The results of this analysis then were compared to uncertainties as they are described and discussed in participants' digital diaries and interviews with me.

In Chapter 3, I identified game elements from four aspects: Background Settings, In-game Scenes, Character Settings, and Items and Props (refer to Table 1, 2, 3, and 4, see page 75). My aim here was to analyse in detail how these elements interact with each other to establish *Onmyoji* as a system contributing to uncertainty in both narrative and gameplay. This approach allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how uncertainty impacts gamer behaviours and decision-making processes. I add to these discussions here, concentrating on the game narrative and gameplay components.

As Costikyan (2013, p.94) suggests, the game narrative is a key source of uncertainty, influencing how gamers anticipate story developments and interact with them (see also Moulard et al., 2019). Uncertainty in game narratives not only impacts gamer engagement but also shapes the meaning gamers derive from the game (Malaby, 2007, p.102). *Onmyoji* markets itself as a story-driven mobile game, and its narrative has consistently been cited as the primary reason for its long-term gamer retention (Fu, 2019, p.69). Hence, the formal analysis of narrative design in *Onmyoji* constitutes a crucial component of this project.

Moreover, gameplay, such as rules, goals, and objects, is also widely acknowledged by scholars as a significant source of uncertainty in games. For example, Malaby (2007, p.106) argues that game rules inherently contain uncertainty, leading to unexpected events and unpredictable outcomes. Costikyan (2013, pp.82-83) contends that game mechanics may introduce

uncertainty through asymmetrical resources or concealed information, creating obstacles for gamers. Kumari et al. (2019) also suggest that uncertainty is linked to the arrangement of game elements. These arguments in a certain sense echo to what Guardiola (2019) says, ‘gameplay emerges from the emotionally charged interaction between the gamer and game components’. This once again demonstrates the necessity of integrating the findings of formal analysis of the game system with the articulations of gamers in diaries and interviews.

Uncertainties in Game Narratives

In relation to my formal analysis of the game narrative, I focused on three aspects that may provide uncertainty for gamers: character dialogues, the plot sequence, and narrative choices.

Uncertainty Related to Dialogues

Dialogues in video games are one of the key elements that drive the development of game narratives. They convey clues about actions or tasks in the game, or information about character traits, through text or voice, to assist in building a shared fantasy and help gamers better understand and immerse themselves in the game world (Rouse, 2004, p.313; Mäyrä, 2017, p.272). According to Mäyrä (2017, p.273), dialogues in video games are essentially interactive or dynamic, including dialogues with created characters, dialogues related to gameplay, and negotiated dialogues that occur between gamer characters. The focus of this section is on dialogues related to characters and plot, which help us analyse how information in the game narrative is discovered or ignored by gamers through dialogues, providing us with an opportunity to study uncertainty.

With the continuous advancement in game design technology, a reduction in in-game textual information has led to more details being gradually revealed through dialogues or audio-visual narrations (Mäyrä, 2017, p.281). Upon entering the main interface of the game, referred to as the ‘Courtyard’, dialogues between characters are automatically triggered. These conversations introduce the identities and personalities of several main protagonists while introducing a mysterious visitor (Figure 22 and 23). These dialogues serve not only as a means of information delivery (main plot, character relationships, character traits, and thoughts) but also provide ‘a dramatic frame and tone for the actual gameplay activities’ (Mäyrä, 2017, p.281). This implies that story-driven dialogues are intricately woven together with gameplay tasks, a characteristic present in *Onmyoji*.

Figure 22. A visitor emerges in the primary game interface, The Courtyard (taken from in-game screenshots).

Figure 23. Dialogue between characters in the Main Story (taken from in-game screenshots).

In *Onmyoji*, gamers delve into the rich narrative of the game through interactive dialogues, further enhancing their immersive and authentic gaming experience by vividly experiencing each character's unique personality traits through Japanese voice acting. This interactive dialogue and sound experience allow gamers to deeply immerse themselves in the game world, providing a more engaging and authentic gaming experience. The dialogue content is closely related to the game's plot and character relationships. Gamers are guided by the system to trigger dialogues by clicking on the icon above the character's head when facing dialogues in different chapters. Once the screen is tapped, the character will utter a series of statements beyond the gamer's control. Gamers cannot anticipate what the next line or plot will be, increasing curiosity and a sense of involvement in the game's plot and characters. This uncertainty becomes particularly significant when the game chapter includes unskippable anime-style cutscenes, as dialogues in these situations encompass ‘stage directions’ or ‘set directions’ along with descriptions for the accompanying character animations, as pointed out by Rouse (2004, p.313). The accessibility

and understanding of this information may impact gamers' comprehension and cognition of the game's characters and plot.

While gamers may have the option to skip dialogues in certain situations, the sequence of dialogues is pre-designed, and the narrative information within the dialogues does not pause based on gamer choices. Opting to skip dialogues can leave gamers uncertain about what transpired and the tasks they need to complete next. Some narrative dialogues in the game also include options that require gamers to make decisions, adding to the gamer's subjective involvement and sense of control. Simultaneously, it introduces an element of uncertainty, as gamer decisions may significantly impact the game's progression and outcome. I analyse uncertainty related to narrative choices at the end of this section (see page 258).

Therefore, through analysis, I argue that dialogues related to characters and plot can be considered a primary source of uncertainty in game narratives. These influence gaming experiences and shape perception of characters and narratives. More importantly, this has bearing on the amount of agency a gamer feels (related to the discussion in Chapter 5, see page 176).

Uncertainty Related to the Plot Sequence

Dialogues in games are typically closely intertwined with chapter plots. Once triggered, the narrative of the chapter gradually unfolds before the gamer through the dialogue. In each chapter of *Onmyoji*, the dialogues between characters, cut-scenes, and in-chapter battles collectively constitute an event that takes place within the framework of what Aarseth (2012) calls compulsory narration. It can be observed that the processes of different events unfold similarly: a visitor appears in the Courtyard, triggering dialogues to enter the chapter narrative, triggering dialogues to introduce the backstory, a conflict

arises and battle is triggered, the battle ends and investigation begins, assistance is provided to resolve the problem, defeat monsters and tame Shikigami, and cut-scenes for sublimation (sometimes appearing at some point in the middle). The gamer's actions are very limited, and the completion of the chapter narrative in the game is set as an obligatory goal that the gamer must achieve. Once in the chapter scene, the gamer can only complete the task by following this process (see Figure 24).

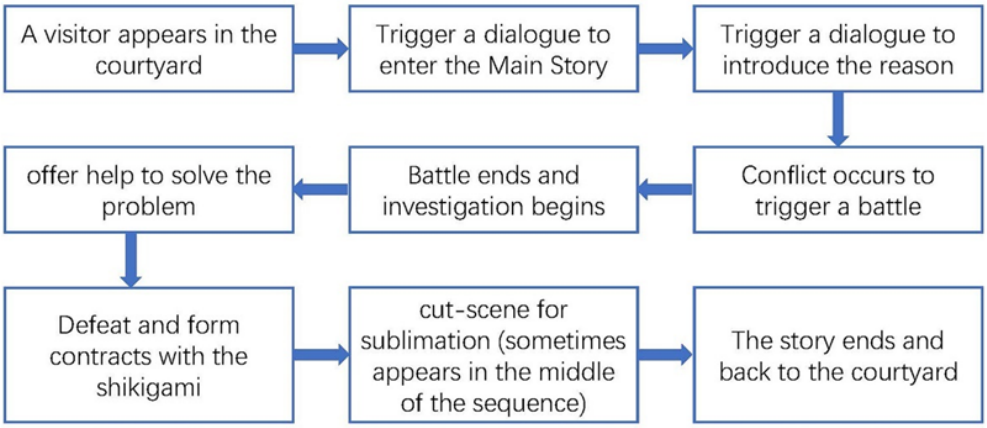

Figure 24. The narrative sequence of an event in Main Story of Onmyoji.

However, this seemingly deterministic plot sequence also contains uncertainty. Firstly, the storylines and endings in chapter narratives are usually unknown, and gamers do not know how the game will develop and end. At the end of each chapter, clues to the next chapter's storyline usually appear, just like in all television series, where each episode always ends with a suspense. For example, at the end of the first chapter, the cut-scene tells the story of Seimei and his mates helping the Inugami defeat Kyuumei Neko, and just as the group leaves, the Kyuumei Neko, who was supposed to be dead on the ground, crawls up with a wicked smile. Behind a giant stone, a masked mystery monster is watching everything that happens. This unidentified monster seems to point to the ultimate boss in the *Onmyoji* storyline, but the puzzle can only be solved by unlocking the next chapter's storyline bit by bit.

The use of music and sound effects in chapter storylines also helps to create a tense and suspenseful atmosphere, as Moulard et al. (2019, p.223) suggest that suspense is a dynamic process that can bring people a sense of uncertainty experience. In the game, suspense is an emotional experience closely related to uncertainty. When gamers realize that the game's outcome is still unknown, the suspense begins and lasts until the final result is resolved. In addition to the uncertainty before the game's outcome, suspense also brings emotional experiences triggered by this uncertainty, such as hope and fear (ibid.). Therefore, in game research, understanding suspense can help us better understand the importance of uncertainty for gamer experience and how to use this emotional experience to create more engaging gaming experiences in game design.

Next is the uncertainty associated with tasks and objectives. Through my re-examination and analysis of hidden tasks in the game plot, I found that the mission objectives in chapter narratives are relatively ambiguous. In such cases, gamers may need to interpret mission objectives gradually through continuous exploration and experimentation, thereby adding complexity and challenge to gaming. In most combat-type missions, the skills, and stamina of the gamer's Shikigami play a crucial role. However, due to a lack of sufficient guidance, gamers need to discover the optimal solutions through continuous independent exploration and experimentation. For instance, determining which combination of items enhances a character's abilities and identifying the battle scenes where the most valuable rewards can be obtained. Throughout this process, gamers may also experience uncertainty about whether they can complete the tasks, further heightening the tension and excitement of gaming. This aligns with Costikyan's (2013, p.23) perspective that game tasks encompass not only physical tasks (objectives gamers must accomplish) but also psychological tasks, involving the uncertainty gamers feel about their ability to overcome challenges presented in the plot.

An analysis of the narrative sequences in *Onmyoji* reveals that while the narrative sequences may seem similar, the uncertainty inherent in the game is manifested in every gamer action. In other words, the uncertainty present in the game narrative is closely tied to the choices and behaviours of the gamers, as previously highlighted in Chapter 4 (see page 107), which, to some extent, influences the gamers' identity construction in gaming. The uncertainty in the game narrative goes beyond mere plot development; it is deeply embedded in the gamers' interactive and decision-making processes, motivating them to shape a unique gaming experience and identity. This interrelation further underscores the close connection between uncertainty in the game and gamers' identity construction. Focusing on uncertainty in narrative sequences also prompts a consideration of strategic thinking and decision-making in the game and how these factors interact with uncertainty to shape the overall gamer experience. In the following sections, I delve into other sources of uncertainty related to decision-making and gameplay, exploring how these impact gamers' gaming experiences.

Uncertainty Related to Narrative Choices

In the formal analysis, I discovered that while gamers typically have limited control over the narrative sequences and plot outcomes in the main storyline, they are granted the power to make choices in those side storylines. These choices not only provide gamers with opportunities to access additional narrative information but also have the potential to alter the course of events, offering gamers a firsthand experience of uncertainty.

Side storylines play a crucial role in *Onmyoji* as they centre around the story of a particular Shikigami or an unexpected occurrence in the game's setting of Heian-kyo. They furnish additional details that enrich the game's overall world-building. Through completing these quests, gamers can delve deeper into the

stories and backgrounds of the Shikigami, gaining understanding of their personalities and characteristics, which, in turn, allows them to immerse themselves more fully in the game world. Moreover, some side quests also involve the history and cultural background of Heian-kyo, providing gamers with a more extensive comprehension of the game world. Typically, gamers are afforded more agency inside quest tasks and can shape the game's development and outcome through their decisions and choices. This experience is indeed one manifestation of uncertainty. Therefore, the intertwining of interactivity and uncertainty in side storylines significantly contributes to enriching the gamer's gaming experience.

For example, the side quest about the Shikigami character Fukengaku tells the story of his three lifetimes of love with a beloved woman. To gradually unlock the plot, gamers must follow the character's introduction and complete many mini-games. As gamers explore, dialogue between characters, scene changes, and cut-scenes provide a significant amount of information about the plot. In the last cut-scene, the beloved of Fukengaku, in order to end the curse between them, resolutely jumps off the cliff. Fukengaku follows suit, attempting to save her. However, in the tense atmosphere, the game system presents a crucial choice: if Fukengaku chooses to descend the mountain, he will be able to regain a peaceful life, but if he decides to jump with his beloved, they will continue to be affected by the curse. Subsequently, the gamer faces a pivotal moment of decision, needing to choose between two options: Descend or Proceed (Figure 25).

Figure 25. Two options on the screen for gamers to choose, Descend or Proceed (taken from in-game screenshots).

The two options correspond to different endings of the story, and the gamer who makes a choice will not be able to go back and will have no way of knowing the other ending. This situation makes gamers feel as if they are immersed in the character's life, evoking strong emotional responses. As Lankoski (2007, p.8) points out, when gamers can make significant choices in the game, especially accompanied by captivating music and sound effects, they may unconsciously mimic the character's emotional experience, immersing themselves in the story. Gamers face various uncertainties, including the uncertain development of the plot, incomplete information, uncertainty about

the correctness of their choices, and uncertainty about what the other ending might entail. This uncertainty drives gamers to continue exploring the game world, and they may even try different choices multiple times to unlock various plot possibilities. This example further highlights how the uncertainty of choices in game narratives influences gamers' experiences and emotional responses, which is the focus of exploration in the next section (see page 279).

Overall, I conducted a formal analysis of potential uncertainty in the game narrative of *Onmyoji*, with a focus on dialogue, narrative sequences, and gamer choices. Through this analysis, I found that narrative-related uncertainty adds a level of challenge and intrigue to the game, fostering subjective engagement from gamers and enhancing their immersion and identification with game characters. However, this narrative-related uncertainty does not exist in isolation; it often intertwines with uncertainties in other gameplay elements and is influenced by gamer-generated uncertainties. Uncertainty in the game is not a singular type but rather multi-layered and diverse. Gamers' goals and motivations significantly determine their perception of uncertainty. The uncertainty presented in main and side storylines primarily builds upon gamers' interest in the narrative, as they aspire to unlock new plot points and explore side storylines until the resolution is revealed. Conversely, some gamers are more focused on in-game rewards and achievements, aiming to complete tasks for rewards while showing less interest in the narrative content. For these gamers, the uncertainty in the game narrative may not hold the same level of importance.

However, the game typically affords gamers the opportunity to make choices, granting them a degree of agency and decision-making power. When gamers make choices in the game, they exercise a form of subjective agency, closely related to my discussion in Chapter 5. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into the analysis of uncertainty related to gameplay, aiming to better

understand the intricate relationship between the uncertainties introduced by the game system and those arising from gamer behaviours. This will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how uncertainty operates in the game and how it influences gamer experiences.

Uncertainties in the Gameplay

In addition to unlocking the plot, there are many other gameplay systems in *Onmyoji*, such as the summoning system, cultivation system, and battle system, which also provide some degree of uncertainty. Through a formal analysis of the rules of these gameplay elements, I summarize the uncertainty that exists in these gameplay elements as uncertainty related to random mechanics.

In the various rules and mechanics of *Onmyoji*, probability is the most frequently mentioned term. The outcomes of many random events are associated with specific probabilities. Objectively, such probabilities can be understood as ‘features of the world’ (Stoutenburg, 2019, p.5103), parameters measured or defined by game designers based on their trust or confidence in predicting outcomes, i.e., ‘the actual chance of one thing or another thing happens’ (Power et al., 2019, p.4; Rowe, 1994, p.746; Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p.204; Stewart, 2021, p.97). In *Onmyoji*, these probabilities are used to quantify the likelihood of characters, items, or skills appearing. This known probability seems to provide game designers with a way to make uncertainty manageable, where the game system constrains actions or outcomes through a set of rules (Bogost, 2008, p.122; Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p.204). However, as Teigen and Keren (2020, p.300) argue, probability merely provides a definition of the results of random events, and the process of events occurring remains imbued with randomness.

Uncertain Probabilities

Using the Shikigami Summoning as an example, it is one of the pivotal gameplays in *Onmyoji*. In my project, the desire for acquiring rare and powerful Shikigami is prevalent among the majority of participants. While gamers can obtain specific Shikigami characters by completing chapter storyline tasks, the primary method of acquiring Shikigami is through summoning. The game categorizes Shikigami characters into different grades, including N (Normal), R (Rare), SR (Super Rare), SSR (Super Super Rare), and SP (Special). These grades typically reflect the rarity and strength of the Shikigami. Higher-grade Shikigami often possess elevated attributes and more potent skills but are also more challenging to obtain. SP-grade Shikigami, being the special and rarest characters, come with unique stories and backgrounds.

The outcomes of Shikigami summoning rely on a mechanism of random drops, and each grade of Shikigami has distinct summoning probabilities. For instance, SP-grade Shikigami have the lowest summoning probability, while N-grade Shikigami have the highest. Gamers need to spend in-game currency or real-world currency to purchase summoning scrolls and then use these scrolls to summon Shikigami. Since the summoning results are random, gamers cannot predict which Shikigami they will obtain. This uncertainty poses a challenge for gamers seeking to acquire their desired Shikigami. They may achieve their desired Shikigami in one summon, need multiple attempts to successfully summon a specific grade, or, in some cases, may not get any at all.

This type of random virtual reward gameplay, which requires specific conditions to be met for activation, can be classified as a specific manifestation of the ‘loot box’ in video games, a phenomenon that has garnered significant attention from scholars (Prati, 2019; Moshirnia, 2018; Xiao et al., 2021a; Xiao

and Newall, 2022; Xiao, 2022; Brady and Prentice, 2021; Larche et al., 2021; Nicklin et al., 2021). Gamers only have the chance to obtain various digital assets randomly distributed by the game, such as in-game currency, characters, skins, upgrade items, etc., when specific triggering conditions are met (Prati, 2019, p.219). The design purpose of this mechanism is to incentivize or induce gamers to use real-world currency or in-game currency to have opportunities to acquire more desired rare items (ibid., p.223).

This random mechanism is considered similar to gambling, as gamers need to pay a certain cost to try to obtain valuable rewards, and luck is often seen as a significant factor in winning something of value (Prati, 2019, pp.235-238; Xiao et al., 2021a, p.2; Xiao, 2022, p.343). It is the similarities between loot boxes and gambling that have generated criticisms relating to their addictive nature (Prati, 2019, p.239). Thus, scholars have called for the strengthening of regulations and self-regulation, and governments and game companies should promote information disclosure to provide reliable protection to gamers. China is currently the only country that has included this measure in its laws (Xiao et al., 2021a, p.4).

In 2017, the Chinese Ministry of Culture released a notice to regulate the operation of online games, which explicitly required that ‘online game operators should disclose the results of randomly selected participants on the official website of the game or in a prominent position in the game’ (Gov.cn, 2016). This includes the names, performance, content, quantity, and probability of all virtual props and value-added services that may be drawn or synthesized. It is the first time that the probabilities of ‘Randomised Pull Mechanics’ were exposed to gamers, enabling them to have a clear understanding of their draw results (Gov.cn, 2016). Since then, *Onmyoji* has disclosed all the probabilities related to random draw gameplay, such as the probability of drawing different Shikigami in the summoning system (YYS,

2017). Table 5 below lists the probabilities of gamers drawing characters of different rarity using different items.

Table 5. Probabilities of Summoning Shikigami in *Onmyoji*

Items & Shikigami	N	R	SR	SSR	SP
Mystery Amulet	/	78.75%	20%	1%	0.25%
Jade	/	78.75%	20%	1%	0.25%
AR Amulet	/	78.75%	20%	1%	0.25%
Broken Amulet	87%	13%	/	/	/
Note: During the period when the probability of obtaining specified SP/SSR Shikigami is increased, if an SP or SSR Shikigami is summoned, the probability of obtaining the specified Shikigami is calculated based on the current probability of occurrence.					

Figure 26. Different sets of Souls with varying attributes and effects (taken from in-game screenshot).

Xiao and Newall (2022, p.2) argue that the disclosure of probabilities for potential rewards to gamers is a form of ‘information-based intervention’. By providing more information and transparency about probabilities, the disclosure method aims to help gamers better understand the operation of such random mechanisms and potential outcomes and increase gamer certainty. However, a survey of Chinese video game gamers indicated that 85% of loot box buyers reported seeing the disclosed probability information, suggesting that this information is widely known. However, within this group, only 19% believed that seeing this information reduced their spending on loot boxes (Xiao et al., 2021a, p.4). This suggests that, despite the accessibility and visibility of probability information in the game, information disclosure does not always effectively increase gamer certainty or reduce their impulsive spending on random gameplay. As I delve into in the subsequent section, participants in my project have unique perspectives and opinions on the awareness and disclosure of these probability details (see page 290). I extensively explore their viewpoints to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these probability details impact gamer behaviour and decision-making. This contributes to revealing the strategies gamers adopt when facing uncertainty in the game and how they navigate this information to achieve their goals in the game.

From the probabilities disclosed by *Onmyoji*, the success rate of obtaining a specific rarity of Shikigami is fixed since the probability of each summon is fixed. However, after numerous summonses, the probability of a gamer obtaining a specific Shikigami gradually approaches the overall probability of that Shikigami. Nevertheless, when this probability event is placed in the context of continuous interaction between the gamer and the game system, while clear numbers provide certain information, gamers still feel uncertain about the process and results. In the actual gameplay process, there are many other uncertainties brought by the random mechanism.

Profit-driven gaming companies continually innovate and introduce more complex and secretive gameplay (e.g., Sohu, 2019a) to enhance the complexity of random mechanisms within the game. For instance, gamers returning to the game after a period of inactivity may participate in exclusive ‘Probability UP’ summoning events, which promise in the gameplay introduction that ‘SSP/SP Shikigami is guaranteed within 60 attempts, and the selected Shikigami is guaranteed within 120 attempts’ (as shown in Figure 27). By committing to increased probabilities for specific numbers of attempts, the game system seems to convey an illusion to gamers that after a series of failures, their chances of obtaining rare rewards will be elevated. This psychological strategy to some extent can stimulate gamers' expectations and motivation, encouraging them to participate more frequently in the game. However, as noted by Xiao (2022, p.370), gamers may remain unaware of the rules and execution of this ‘Pity-timer mechanic’ in the game system. In this process, they remain uncertain about whether they will receive rare rewards in the first 59 attempts and when the promised high-probability special attempts will occur. Consequently, gamers may continue to invest more attempts and resources to enhance their chances of obtaining rare rewards.

Figure 27. Probability UP Summoning Event for Returning Gamers After a Prolonged Absence (taken from in-game screenshot).

Although the information provided by gaming companies may appear to help gamers better understand the random mechanisms in the game, these details are often applicable only to relatively simple decision environments. Overly complex random mechanisms can increase uncertainty in gamers' understanding (Xiao et al., 2021b, p.6). Even if gamers comprehend the data and mechanisms, they may interpret them in a simplistic and not necessarily accurate manner (Xiao and Newall, 2022, p.4). These findings resonate interestingly with my project. I observed that when random mechanisms become overly intricate, gamers may experience more uncertainty about how they operate. Gamers might adopt a simplified thinking process when dealing with uncertainty, perhaps to alleviate cognitive burden or streamline decision-making. I also found that gamers uninterested in the operational details of game mechanics may not invest much time and effort in understanding this information. They might focus on other aspects of the game, leaving uncertainty to the natural course of the game. I delve into these findings further in the following sections, providing more details to discuss.

Uncertain Mechanisms

In *Onmyoji*, complex random mechanisms permeate almost all core gameplay elements, with one particular gameplay mode, known as Hyakki Yagyo, exemplifying the uncertainty brought about by these random mechanisms. This gameplay draws inspiration from Japanese folklore, wherein, according to the legend, various bizarre supernatural creatures' parade through villages when night falls and no one is on the streets (Yokai.com, 2023b). This gameplay integrates the legend into the game world. Gamers are given 250 'beans', and according to the mechanism, they can throw a certain number of beans at the moving monsters in the procession. Hitting monsters yields fragments, which could be used for synthesizing into a complete Shikigami. The crucial aspect here is that gamers can freely adjust the number of beans

thrown each time, ranging from 1 to 10. Additionally, the game randomly generates monsters of different rarities, with higher rarity monsters having a lower appearance probability and awarding more fragments when hit. Bird-shaped items frequently appear in the game scene, and hitting them provides various effects, such as increasing accuracy, freezing monsters, reducing their moving speed, or accelerating the bean-throwing speed (Figure 28). However, when gamers run out of fortune beans or time, the game automatically enters the settlement interface. In this gameplay of Hyakki Yagyo, gamers cannot accurately predict which demons will appear, whether they can successfully hit them, and ultimately, how many fragments they will obtain. This uncertainty adds layers of challenge and enjoyment to the game, simultaneously reflecting the complexity of random mechanisms in the gaming experience.

Figure 28. The scene of the Hyakki Yagyo gameplay (taken from in-game screenshots).

The cultivation system in *Onmyoji* incorporates a significant amount of randomness that introduces uncertainty for gamers, as previously mentioned. To improve the abilities of their characters, gamers must complete various side quests to obtain important items called ‘Souls’. The type of Soul obtained from these quests is determined by the specific task completed and the date on which the game is played. For instance, in the Souls Zone, the Souls obtained by the gamer after winning battles will differ each day. Consequently, gamers must adjust their gameplay according to the Soul Dropping Calendar provided by the game system. However, even with this information, gamers cannot ensure they will obtain the desired Soul on a given day.

Additionally, when purchasing high-level Souls from the in-game store, the Souls available are also randomized. Furthermore, there are a total of 49 different Souls, each with 11 different bonus attributes, and each Shikigami has six equipment slots for Souls, each with varying effects. Only when the appropriate Souls are placed in the correct slots can the strongest effect be triggered (see Figure 29). Lastly, having the appropriate Souls is insufficient to enhance a character's abilities; gamers must also upgrade them. Souls have levels, and upgrading involves combining surplus Souls with the useful ones for the gamer. Each time a Soul is upgraded, its primary attribute is increased, and a random secondary attribute is either enhanced or added. Nonetheless, even if a gamer attempts multiple times to find the most suitable Soul combination for the Shikigami they want to cultivate, there is no guarantee that the most potent effect can be triggered during battle. For example, the Shy Soul has a 23% chance of putting the target enemy to sleep for one turn when causing damage (see Figure 30). However, there is no certainty as to which turn this effect will be triggered in battle.

Figure 29. Souls of a Shikigami (taken from in-game screenshots).

Figure 30. Introduction to the attributes of the Shy Soul in *Onmyoji* (taken from in-game screenshot).

In the game mechanics, the sense of randomness and uncertainty is inherently intertwined, particularly prominent in the release and enhancement of character skills within the combat system. Specifically, while characters in *Onmyoji* possess distinct skills, some of these skills require meeting specific probability requirements for activation, and gamers have no control over when these skills will trigger. For instance, as mentioned in Chapter 4, the character Miketsu elicited complaints from gamers due to the unpredictability of her skill activations during battles (see page 158). According to the game's description, the stronger effect of her first skill has only a 5% chance of being triggered, while the probability increases to 40% for the second skill. If the strongest effect is triggered, its potency can significantly aid the gamer in winning the battle. However, if it fails to activate, Miketsu becomes essentially a bystander in the fight. This necessitates gamers to remain vigilant and make strategic decisions to gain an advantage at crucial moments.

Additionally, if a gamer opts to use the auto-grinding mode for more efficient tasks completion, the game system make decisions automatically, further increasing uncertainty (discussed in Chapter 5, see page 199). In each battle, gamers can choose between 3 to 5 Shikigami characters, each with 3 active skills and 1 passive skill, with each skill having random triggering effects. This implies that gamers need to carefully assess and select the skills for each Shikigami to maximize their effectiveness in battle. However, when these decisions are left to the game system to determine automatically, the order of combat and skill release is no longer under gamers' control, and they can only passively observe the outcome of the battle. Consequently, even if gamers make optimal choices during the preparation phase, the final result remains subject to the influence of random events.

Typically, this kind of random mechanism is complemented by elements such as sound, animation, creating a tense and thrilling atmosphere to enhance

gamer engagement and emotional involvement. Such atmospheric creation also provides gamers with a sense of ritual (Moshirnia, 2018, p.88), allowing them to experience a unique sensation when opening animations or encountering random deviations, thereby deepening their immersion and belief in the game. At the same time, this sense of ritual also provides gamers with an ‘opportunity to engage in superstition’, where they ‘ascribe[ing] meaning to random deviations in opening animations or combinations’(ibid.).

For example, in *Onmyoji*, gamers, when summoning, are required to tap on the Amulet and draw any symbol on the presented Amulet to complete the summoning process (Figure 31). During the first summoning, the game system also prompts gamers to silently recite a spell in their hearts to enhance the sense of ritual of the summoning. These game rules have always encouraged gamers to increase their belief in summoning, implying that the symbols they draw and the spells they recite may make the summoning result more in line with their expectations. As for which symbols to draw on the Amulet to obtain a rare character or what kind of Shikigami will be obtained after the summoning, gamers may have no idea. This randomness adds uncertain factors to the decision-making process and makes it impossible for gamers to completely control the outcome of events in the game. This situation intertwines the sense of ritual with uncertainty, thereby enhancing the emotional depth and allure of the game. In the next section, I presented the vivid empirical evidence provided by the participants in my project, contributing to a better understanding of the specific manifestations of uncertainty and the sense of ritual in actual gaming experiences (see page 299).

Figure 31. I drew a pentagram on the Amulet to summon a Shikigami (taken from in-game screenshot).

Through the above discussion, it becomes evident that the summoning system, cultivation system, and battle system are replete with randomness. Even though these random mechanisms are mostly defined by exact probability numbers, they render the game process and outcome unpredictable, thereby causing uncertainty for the gamer. Therefore, random mechanisms can be perceived as tools that the system uses to generate and control gamers' experiences of uncertainty. Moreover, as suggested by Costikyan (2013, pp. 82-83), when gamers encounter randomness in a specific gaming experience, they may interpret it as luck within their cultural context, perceiving low probability events as signs of the gods' favour and good fortune. Gamers face various challenges in the game due to randomness, which may stem from other gamers dealing with randomness (ibid.). In turn-based games like

Onmyoji, where gamers have both distinct strategies and randomness, any decision a gamer makes can lead to uncertain results. Hence, this analysis emphasizes that uncertainty associated with random events in gameplay is also linked to a gamer's uncertainty regarding strategy formulation and performance.

Navigating Uncertainty in *Onmyoji*: Some Insights

This analysis reveals that uncertainty is a core feature of the game. Based on programmed settings, the game system establishes fixed dialogue, narrative sequences, and choices, as well as predetermined probabilities for in-game character or item acquisition, and for the occurrence of random events. The uncertainties constructed by game mechanisms, as argued by Babrow (2001, p.558), represent the features and nature of the game itself, which translates into unique gaming experiences for each gamer. This also highlights that the agency possessed by the game system defines and frames game rules (Juul, 2003, p.256; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.80), constructing possibility spaces (Bogost, 2008, p.122), and guiding and even controlling gamer experiences (Alaszewski and Coxon, 2009, p.204; Muriel and Crawford, 2020, p.142). This tells us that gamers are not the only agents shaping game interaction, and the gaming mechanisms, which generate randomness and uncertainty, need to be included in our understanding of gameplay.

As I analysed the sources of uncertainty in the game, I observed that as a gamer, my own perceptions were continuously and involuntarily immersed in the experience. For instance, despite the game system consistently attempting to define these uncertain random events with precise numbers (probabilities), as a gamer, I still felt an indeterminate level of uncertainty in the actual gaming experience because I didn't know if these low-probability events would occur in the next moment. Even the numerical probabilities used to describe these

events might, at the time of playing, only be discerned by me as ‘high probability’ or ‘low probability’. Additionally, some uncertain events that the game may encourage me to explore might be overlooked by me due to misalignment with my gaming objectives. It appears that the degree of uncertainty felt by gamers is subjective and closely tied to their specific gaming experiences. As Ballantyne and Kampa (2019, p. 225) suggest, probabilities are fluctuating. The probabilities discussed here are not the explicitly defined ones in the game rules; instead, they are the probabilities felt by gamers during the gaming experience, similar to my own experience. Elements such as the items, skills, specific performances, expectations, emotions, or other random game elements that gamers possess in the game can influence the probabilities they perceive of achieving their goals in this process (ibid., pp. 225-230). This realization has led me to understand that during the gaming process, gamers also have agency in defining their own gaming experiences. The choices they make, the strategies they formulate when facing the uncertainty provided by the game, and their current performances all contribute to complicating the experience of uncertainty.

This reminds us that, as many scholars suggest, besides understanding uncertainty in games from an ontological perspective, we should also approach it from the epistemological standpoint, considering gamers' actual gaming experiences. Despite being constrained by game rules, gamers can explore the possibility space constructed by different symbols in the game system through various configurations (Bogost, 2008, pp.120-121). As articulated by Malaby (2007, p.102), we need to recognize that ‘every game is an ongoing process’, and ‘it always contains the potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself’. As gamers deepen their understanding of game rules and mechanics, they may follow the guidelines to complete tasks or experiment with various methods to obtain more generous rewards. Gamer practices within the possibility space

constructed by the game system can, in turn, introduce new gameplay or endow the game with new meaning through their unique interpretations (Malaby, 2007, p.103). Gamers experience the inherent uncertainty within the game, but simultaneously, through their gaming practices, they create uncertainty. Therefore, each gamer's unique game practices result in their experiencing diverse levels of uncertainty, depending on their game preferences and objectives.

What is more, different emotions experienced by gamers in the game can also bring about various forms of uncertainty. This must be considered when assessing the degree of uncertainty in research. Lankoski (2007, p.7) demonstrates in his study that games can expand emotional impact on gamers by anthropomorphizing characters. As mentioned in the previous analysis, involving gamers in narrative choices and strengthening the emotional connection between gamers and characters through gamer empathy contribute to emotional uncertainty as a norm in the gaming experience (see page 258). Gamer emotions may fluctuate with the progression of the plot, the richness of characters, and the completeness of the game world, making emotional uncertainty a common element in gamer experiences (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.379; Bar-Anan et al., 2009, p.126). However, such emotional uncertainty still varies from person to person, as each gamer's emotional investment and emotional experience capacity differ.

This analysis also shows that in game narratives, the increase in suspense, a key source of narrative uncertainty, is believed by scholars like Ballantyne and Kampa (2019, p. 220) to enhance the enjoyment of the game (Moulard et al., 2019). However, in gameplay, despite many scholars (Silvia, 2012, p. 157; Lin et al., 2012, p.452; Fuster et al., 2014, p.295; Kuang, 2017, p.7; Lo et al., 2019, p.37) arguing that uncertainty provided by game systems enhances gamer emotional experiences and enjoyment, uncertainty may also lead to negative

emotions such as frustration, disappointment, anxiety, and tension, as well as a sense of unfairness, especially when gamers face excessive uncertainty in the game (Costikyan, 2013, p.86). This highlights that a gamer's specific gaming experience is not only related to the type of uncertainty they encounter but also to the quantity of uncertainty (Bar-Anan et al., 2009, p.126).

In summary, uncertainty is a complex concept within the gaming context. It is linked to the meanings constructed by the game as complex symbolic systems, intertwined with gamers' abilities to experience, perceive, and engage in meaning-making within specific gaming practices. Importantly, the understanding of uncertainty is connected to the identity construction and the negotiation of agency in the interaction between gamers and the game. Therefore, in the following section, I analyse how participants in my project, as gamers of *Onmyoji*, exercise their agency in perceiving and interpreting uncertainty in concrete gaming practices, and how this, in turn, influences the construction of their identities and identifications. This not only allows me to move beyond formal analysis in the examination of uncertainty in the game but also enables a deeper understanding of the complexity of the concept of uncertainty in gaming. Furthermore, it provides robust empirical support for my arguments regarding identity construction and agency negotiation.

Gamers’ Perceptions of Uncertainty

Uncertainty is widely acknowledged as a crucial factor contributing to the appeal of games (Malaby, 2007, p.107; Costikyan, 2013; Kumari et al., 2019; Power et al., 2019, p.1033; Ballantyne and Kampa, 2019, p.220). However, this very appeal is inherently characterized by a sense of uncertainty (Taylor et al., 2015), as different attractors that influence gamers during gameplay interact with each other, and it is impossible to fully comprehend what types of attractions and to what degree gamers are attracted. In the subsequent section,

I return to the diaries and interviews to undertake a secondary analysis of this data specifically in relation to the theme of uncertainty. Through data analysis and classification, my analysis concentrates on three sources of uncertainty closely related to gamer gaming experiences: uncertainty associated with game narratives, uncertainty stemming from subjective probability, and uncertainty resulting from strategy making.

Uncertainties Associated with Game Narratives

As suggested in previous sections, the narrative of *Onmyoji* is a key element to the game since its launch, which has now developed into a transmedia narrative strategy with game storylines at its core, collaborative storytelling on other multimedia platforms, and encouragement of user participation in co-creation (Lei and Yu, 2021, pp.71-73). The formal analysis of narrative uncertainty in *Onmyoji* in previous sections explored how the game creates a narrative system in which various narrative elements are interconnected and form a complex whole. One of the most shared themes by my participants is their experience with the game narratives, which is also a significant source for the uncertainty they feel. By comparing the actual experiences of gamers with the formal analysis conclusions, we can better understand why and how uncertainty in game narrative affects gamers' gaming practices.

For Novice and Experienced Gamers

Among my 20 participants, four were novice gamers who had just started playing or had less than two months of experience, while the other participants had three to five years of experience in *Onmyoji*.

The novice gamers recorded their feelings in their diaries. They learned about the game's story background through elements such as the opening animation, music, sound effects, and dialogue, and played as the protagonist Abe no

Seimei by exploring scenes, triggering dialogues, completing tasks, and entering chapter storylines by clicking on different icons in the game interface. For them, all narrative elements gradually presented in the game from the moment they entered were unknown. For example, Participant 17 shared three keywords in her diary to describe her feelings on her first day as a new gamer: ‘first experience, curiosity, and difficulty’. She stated that she had no gaming experience and found it difficult to start playing the game, as she was uncertain about what she was supposed to do in the game. After spending some effort exploring the first chapter of the storyline, she realized that the Abe no Seimei she played seemed to be helping a visitor to the Courtyard find out the truth about their friend's murder. Therefore, she wrote down her understanding in her diary, ‘Finally understood what I was doing in the game - being a detective!’.

Like her, Participant 12, as a novice gamer, expressed having similar experiences, trying to eliminate feelings of uncertainty through exploration and discovery. As shown in the previous section, dialogues and cut-scenes in the storyline of *Onmyoji* carry most of the storytelling function (see page 252 and 256). All the game elements presented to novice gamers, as well as the embedded narratives, strongly attract their attention. Driven by curiosity, they followed the narrative logic of the game step by step to unlock chapter after chapter. ‘These stories in the game created a fascinating feeling [...] I found that my current understanding of Shikigami was superficial... the stories behind them are well thought out, but I cannot see them all at present’ (Participant 12). Participant 12 saw the process of exploring the game as ‘peeling away layers of mist’, behind which lies the uncertainty she found intriguing. But because she was a novice gamer, all the unknowns in the game were ‘novel and interesting’ to her, so she enjoyed deciphering them.

Therefore, these novice gamers acknowledged that they did not skip dialogues or fast-forwarded through cut-scenes in chapter storylines. ‘This made me

clearer about what I should do next', as explained by Participant 6. For them, they needed these narrative descriptors to understand what the game is about. For novice gamers, as they faced and tried to overcome these uncertainties, they continuously made attempts and provided explanations for the characters. They also positioned themselves within the game context to reflect on the meaning of their actions and purposes. According to Shaw (2013, p.3), this ongoing process of clarifying their purpose in the game is also the process of constructing their identity as gamers.

Participants with 3-5 years of extensive gaming experience provided a diverse range of opinions and explanations regarding uncertainty in relation to narrative. When asked during interviews whether they would skip dialogue or accelerate cut-scenes in chapter plots, almost all participants responded affirmatively or partially affirmatively. Some participants were familiar with the narrative details due to their long-term gaming experience, and uncertainty gradually diminished with increasing familiarity. As Participant 7 stated, 'I am already familiar with these plots and do not want to repeat them'. However, this does not imply that they are uninterested in the narrative. On the contrary, they chose to explore various aspects of the narrative.

As mentioned earlier, in *Onmyoji*, when one storyline cannot continue, there are various concurrent side quests or event tasks that provide rich narrative elements (see page 130). For experienced gamers, they preferred to focus on the details that may be overlooked by most gamers. For example, Participant 7 shared in the interview about the love story she discovered between the Souls named Pearl and Shy. While these Souls are just game items for the majority of gamers, she discovered a hidden story behind them. She believed that these two souls do not perfectly match in terms of attributes but are not entirely conflicting, and the game official did not overly promote this storyline. However, she appreciated the design as 'stopping at the right point, because

love is inherently absurd’. In our later interview, she further explained why she likes these hidden stories, ‘Playing the game for a long time can be boring, and when I saw these hidden stories, I felt pleasantly surprised and find it very interesting’.

As an emergence, these elements that bring surprises to gamers are considered as ‘an interaction between the rules of the game and the fuzzy ways in which humans understand games’ (Juul, 2011, p.57). The game system combines rules or items in unexpected ways, giving gamers a different feeling from the usual gaming experience. As Costikyan (2013, p.13) suggests, ‘the uncertainty is in the path the game follows, in how gamers manage problems, in the surprises they hold’. In the game, gamers may not accurately predict the timing, location, and manner of events occurring, and these events would change based on gamer behaviours. Therefore, this changing and surprising uncertainty makes the gaming process more attractive, providing gamers with positive experiences.

In addition to the surprises provided by information predetermined and hidden by the game system, participants also mentioned some surprises defined by gamers. For example, like other participants who enjoy surprises, Participant 11 expressed, ‘I really like the relationships or plots hidden between unpopular characters. I won't miss any clues’. She shared her discovery of hidden and ambiguous relationship clues between the Shikigami Shuten Douji and Asura in the character dialogues of the game's side quests. Most gamers believe that another character has a bond with Asura, even though both are male characters. Similarly, Participant 20 also excitedly shared her narrative discoveries during the interview. She analysed the main plot, side plots, and character biographies together, uncovering a complex love quadrangle between Shikigami Shuten Douji, Ibaraki Douji, Kijo Momiji, and the protagonist Seimei, concluding that ‘it's a clichéd and dramatic story of 'he

loves him, he loves her, but she loves him', highlighting the intricate relationships between the characters.

Gamers' self-defined interpretations of characters can be understood through Malaby's (2007, p.108) concept of 'semiotic contingency', which Costikyan (2013, p.13) also considers a primary source of uncertainty in video games. According to Malaby (2007, p.108), 'the unpredictability of meaning that always accompanies attempts to interpret the game's outcomes'. In other words, when gamers face uncertainty, they often try to understand and interpret the results of the game. However, due to the presence of uncertainty, the meaning of game outcomes is often challenging to predict and interpret accurately. This unpredictability increases gamers' speculation and conjecture about the game results, making their interpretations more subjective and uncertain. Similar to the participants in my study who interpreted fragmented information about characters in the game based on their own (possibly external) experiences, this process of interpreting narrative symbols in the game can be subjective and partial. It may differ from the narrative constructed by the game, and even gamers in different contexts may have different interpretations. This uncertain process of interpretation undoubtedly enhances gamers' interest in exploring and discovering various possibilities in the game.

For the Plot Party and the non-Plot Party

Through data analysis, I discovered that the uncertainty associated with narrative has different effects on gamers with varied gaming purposes. Some participants, oriented toward game narratives, identify themselves as 'The Plot Party' (in Chinese, '剧情党') – a self-coined term by gamers who prioritize the storyline of the game (also discussed in Chapter 5, see page 180). These participants not only focus on gameplay mechanics but are more dedicated to the underlying story and plot of the game. They enjoy delving into the game world's background, relationships between characters, and searching for

hidden clues and backstories. When in-game information is insufficient to satisfy their understanding of characters and their stories, the rich array of derivative and fan creations of *Onmyoji* provides them with numerous options. As mentioned in Chapter 4, comics and CG animations related to the game narrative individually tell the character stories of different Shikigami, allowing gamers to deepen their understanding of the in-game characters (see page 143). Television animations like *Onmyoji*: *Heian Monogatari* depict the protagonist, Abe no Seimei, and the Shikigami enjoying their relaxed daily lives outside the game (see page 137). Furthermore, derivative games based on *Onmyoji* adapt the original characters and create new plotlines (see page 136).

Derivative works play a crucial role in alleviating the uncertainty associated with game narratives. Through these works, gamers can better understand the narrative plots in the game, especially those that may appear vague or insufficiently detailed within the game. This situation is vividly described in the experiences of Participant 5 and Participant 8, both of whom felt a sense of uncertainty due to the vagueness of some in-game narrative elements. Participant 5 expressed, ‘Sometimes the feelings brought by the game's plot are a bit vague. So, with the help of some derivative animations or other materials officially released by the game, I can have a complete understanding of the plot’. Participant 8 also had doubts about some game narratives, ‘The portrayal of the Orochi storyline is too brief! What is the ultimate goal of this character? What has he done for that goal? All of these are too vague’. Therefore, they turned to other related derivative works to find clues. Gamers recognize that various forms of derivative works play a crucial complementary role in enhancing their understanding of the narrative. However, as emphasized by Participant 5, ‘The form is not so important; what's important is the information and its quantity’. This indicates that, in such situations, the accessibility and quantity of information are crucial for gamers to eliminate uncertainty.

Understanding the narrative and characters of a game allows gamers to deeply immerse themselves in the game world, enhancing their enjoyment of the emotional experiences it offers. Even characters that are typically overlooked in the game can be better understood and appreciated through comprehensive presentations of their stories in derivative works. For example, Participant 8 shared the story of Kubinashi in Chapter 5 (see page 186), illustrating how gamers can connect with and appreciate characters on a deeper level. Some gamers even compare narrative connections between different media works, leading to a more comprehensive understanding and identification with the characters. Participant 5 noted differences in the narrative perspectives of the character Shiranui in *Onmyoji* and its derivative game *Baiwen Pai.* She believed the former conveyed a poignant love story while the latter elevated the narrative to explore the essence of true freedom. Similarly, Participant 8 initially disliked the Shikigami named Kachou Fuugetsu but gained a newfound appreciation for the character after experiencing an animation featuring her. ‘My friend and I were amazed; this character is simply a fairy who descended to earth!’ (Participant 8). This illustrates how experiencing characters through various media can eliminate uncertainty and misconceptions, allowing gamers to fully grasp their inner worlds and enjoy the emotional experiences within the game.

Furthermore, participants identifying themselves as ‘The Plot Party’ indicate that the curiosity arising from uncertainty is an important motivator for gaming. These participants mentioned specific narrative types in the game that spark their curiosity, typically those allow them to make choices and engage in reasoning. Participants 8 and 10 both mentioned their favourite event plot in the game, which was about the Shikigami named Yato no Kami. This event activity required gamers to progressively search for clues and deduce the truth. ‘Every day, I had to find clues in the game and then guess who the murderer is. I felt very involved. I wanted to know what happens next...’, Participant 8

recalled this experience vividly. He explicitly described many details of the plot, despite the event having occurred a long time ago. His excitement was evident as he recounted, gesturing enthusiastically and repeatedly emphasizing, ‘This story was really interesting, very interesting.’ Similarly, Participant 10, who used to skip most of the game narratives, felt a ‘strong sense of engagement’ in this event. It is evident that their enjoyment lay in the continuous satisfaction of their curiosity throughout this process.

Participants 19 and 20 shared their involvement in the Fukengaku event. Similar to the cases I mentioned earlier (see page 259), they ‘eagerly unlocked the plot’. After making choices in the final chapter, they ‘began to wonder if making different choices would lead to varied outcomes’ (Participant 19). However, they also acknowledged that ‘this is parallel to life; once a choice is made, there's no room for regret’ (Participant 20). Participant 8, who also took part in the fate choice, revealed that to satisfy his curiosity, he even replayed and made different choice using another game account. Despite discovering that the final outcome did not significantly differ after trying two different choices, Participant 8 found the process of exploring different options to be enjoyable.

As Bar-Anan et al. (2009, p.123) argue, moderate uncertainty can trigger curiosity, enhancing emotional engagement. When people face experiences of positive emotions, uncertainty can also intensify these emotional responses (ibid., p.126). This implies that in gaming, uncertainty can spark gamers' curiosity, encouraging them to participate more actively and invest more deeply emotionally. However, the ‘pleasure of uncertainty hypothesis’ proposed by Wilson et al. (2005, p.19) also requires us to pay attention to the boundaries of uncertainty. Although uncertainty can stimulate curiosity and positive emotions, as uncertainty decreases, curiosity weakens, and associated positive emotions decline (ibid.). This is reflected in the perspectives of

Participants 7, 8, 10, and 17. For example, they all expressed dislike for two new Shikigami, Shokurei and Mishige (also mentioned in Chapter 4, see page 148 and Chapter 5, see page 187), citing their perceived ‘ordinariness’ as the primary reason. In their view, *Onmyoji* is set against the backdrop of Japanese Yokai culture, so any bizarre character design in this game is reasonable and interesting. However, these two characters did not evoke any desire for them to continue exploring. ‘They are too ordinary, like people living around me’ (Participant 8), ‘They are like two ordinary people playing cosplay in the world of *Onmyoji*’ (Participant 15), ‘I'm not curious about them at all; they shouldn't exist in this world’ (Participant 7). Even Participant 17, a novice gamer, has the same feeling. She emphasizes that she ‘preferred to have a bit of curiosity about characters, gradually exploring and understanding their personalities through plots or dialogues’. Exploration of the unknown can bring positive emotions to her, but if too much information about the character was known and there was not much uncertainty, ‘I was less interested in this character’. This highlights the balance issue of uncertainty in the game. Understanding gamers' perceptions of uncertainty help us understand how games can better meet gamers' expectations and needs.

However, when uncertainty becomes excessive or irrational, it may lead gamers to feel confused, dissatisfied, and lose interest (Bar-Anan et al., 2009, p.123; Wilson et al., 2005, p.19). In my project, some gamers with years of experiences in *Onmyoji* complained about the slow updates to the main storyline, with too much associated uncertainty, causing them to lose interest in exploring the game narrative. As explained by Participant 15, ‘The storyline of the first chapter was released six years ago, and now only 28 chapters in the game. The main storyline was really exciting a few years ago. But now I have nearly forgotten what the main story is about... So, it's better not to watch’. Excessive uncertainty interrupted gamers' narrative experiences in the game, making it difficult to attract them to invest time and energy in exploring the main

storyline sequence. In addition, novice gamers also faced the same issue. Even though they explored the sequence of events that are certain to happen in the game (see page 255), they still encountered a lot of uncertainty, mostly related to the ways the game conveys plot information and the understandings of gamers. For example, Participant 6 expressed a lack of understanding of many aspects of the game plot, using words like ‘seems’, ‘apparently’, ‘probably’. They also used expressions like ‘bitter smile’, ‘confused’, and ‘emo’ to describe the frustration and annoyance they felt when facing too much uncertainty in the game.

Certainly, not everyone was interested in the storytelling of the game. Some participants identify themselves as ‘The non-Plot Party’. They prioritize the design of game mechanics and challenges, enjoying enhancing their skills rather than focusing on the narrative development. ‘I even felt like there shouldn't have a plot. Just go straight to the battle’ (Participant 1), ‘Don't make me read such lengthy dialogues; I just want those battles. I don't want to know what happened’ (Participant 9). Understanding or not understanding the plot does not affect the gaming experience of these gamers because they have their own gaming preferences or objectives. As mentioned by Participant 18 and Participant 3, ‘I have more important things to do’. Participant 13, although a novice gamer, has a gaming goal cantered around battles since entering the game. He acknowledged that he was in the game for the ‘thrill of being able to start quickly’, and therefore, he chooses to overlook some narrative content. When exploring the narrative was not their gaming objective, the game plot would not arouse their curiosity, and it did not introduce uncertainty.

However, despite some gamers asserting themselves as ‘The non-Plot Party’, they still possess a certain awareness of the game narrative. This reflects the concept of ‘narrative descriptors’ mentioned by Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p.400), where elements such as graphics, text, sound effects, animations, etc.,

in a game contribute to constructing a narrative environment. Although these gamers frequently skipped dialogues and fast-forwarded through cutscenes to avoid narrative elements, they cannot entirely escape the narrative environment. For instance, Participant 18, despite not liking the game story, still formed some confusions and questions on specific plots. Similarly, Participant 1 pieced together some plot information through discussions on social media. She expressed uncertain views like, ‘The current storyline seems to deviate from the initial setup’. Even if gamers may primarily focus on other aspects, they still sense the presence of the narrative in the game world, leading to a continued sense of uncertainty.

In summary, both novice and experienced gamers, whether narrative-oriented or combat-oriented, experienced uncertainty introduced by game narratives at various stages of gameplay. However, when facing these uncertainties, gamers with different gaming experiences or objectives made distinct choices and interpretations during the actual gaming process. On one hand, this analysis prompts a reflection on the findings related to identity and identity construction in Chapter 4. When gamers confront and resolve uncertainties associated with game narratives, they form an identity regarding what type of gamer they are. This also involves gamers' identification processes with the game characters and how they identified with these elements. On the other hand, this analysis revealed that the generation of narrative uncertainty in gaming is a dynamic process, demonstrating the agency negotiation of gamers and the game system as discussed in Chapter 5. The game system has the agency to construct uncertainty, which depend on the settings of characters, locations, events, etc. However, gamers also have the agency to resolve or introduce new uncertainties. Each action and choice made by gamers may lead to different outcomes, influencing the subsequent game progress and narrative in diverse ways. Therefore, uncertainty related to narratives gradually forms throughout the entire gaming process with gamers.

Uncertainty Stemming from Subjective Probability

Davidson (1991, p.130) argues that the probability theory is insufficient to explain uncertainty because it relies on objective, measurable probabilities, while uncertainty involves subjective, immeasurable probabilities. He acknowledges the role of personal beliefs and perceptions in shaping uncertain situations, known as subjective probability (ibid.). Subjective probability may vary due to factors such as individuals' backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. Even under the same objective conditions, individuals' subjective probability assessments may differ (ibid., p.131). Although Davidson (1991)'s discussion is based on economic decision-making environments, his viewpoint is crucial for analysing gamers' experiences of uncertainty. Despite gamers' uncertainty experiences being influenced by the objective probabilities defined by the game's random mechanisms, gamers always have an inherently uncertain understanding of various objects and relationships in the game world (Babrow, 2001, p.558).

As shown by the formal analysis of the game's random mechanism, the likelihood of the appearance of virtual characters or item props and the realization of other value-added services in the game is described by determined numbers (see page 265). However, I found that when facing random gameplay with objective probabilities, gamers (me also) perceived and experienced something that cannot be characterized by concrete numbers. There is a difference between gamers' subjective probability that they truly perceived, articulated, and understood and the objective probability that exists. This can be seen from participants' descriptions of ‘probability’ in their diaries. For example, Participant 16 described frequent occurrences of low-probability events in game battles and helplessly stated that ‘this kind of thing is really uncertain and has no relation to the numbers written down’. Although the victory or defeat of the game may depend on some probability, gamers cannot

accurately describe them with specific numbers. Therefore, they can only play the game in the context of uncertainty and unpredictability, rather than relying on specific numbers or probabilities to make predictions.

When gamers experience low-probability events in the game, they often incorporate various subjective factors into their analysis and interpretation of the process and outcomes of these events. These factors include emotions, states, experiences, knowledge, beliefs, and the environment, among others. For example, some participants, upon facing defeat in battles or not obtaining rare characters, question the authenticity and fairness of the objective probability settings, stating that there is a ‘black curtain in the game mechanics’ (Participant 5) and that the ‘designers adjust the probability based on the gamer's game status’ (Participant 10). Some participants also connect low-probability events with the gaming environment. For instance, Participant 19 registered an additional gaming account because she ‘heard that there are bonuses in the new server, and the probability of dropping rare Shikigami is high’. However, she admitted not knowing exactly how high this probability is. Some participants view their continuous attempts in the game as dedication to it, considering the occurrence of low-probability events as the game's unfair response or feedback, such as ‘the game hasn't given me a bit of positive feedback’ (Participant 7). For gamers who consistently have negative experiences with low-probability events, their subjective perception of probability is smaller than the objective probability.

On the contrary, some participants expressed that, through continuous efforts, obtaining rare characters is no longer a low-probability event for them. As one participant stated, ‘Drawing Shikigami is something that I am sure will happen’ (Participant 16). In this case, the gamer's perceived subjective probability may be greater than the objective probability. Some participants also mentioned that, despite seeing the public information about probabilities (see page 265),

they still struggled to truly understand these complex random mechanisms. As Participant 20 said, ‘I recognize all the words in the sentences describing the skill trigger probability, but I don't understand. Anyway, just play the game’. The probabilities that gamers perceived during the actual gameplay are no longer those expressed in numerical form. After all, they ‘do not recite numbers in their heads or directly measure a degree of belief’ (Smith et al., 1991, p.313). Instead, these probabilities are ‘derived by cognitive processes internal to the individual’ (p.317).

Let me illustrate with the experience of Participant 6 documented in the diary. As mentioned in the formal analysis earlier, *Onmyoji* disclosed the probabilities of obtaining different rare Shikigami when gamers use various items for summoning (see page 263). However, during specific events, the game employs the ‘Pity-timer mechanic’ observed by Xiao (2022, p.370), aiming to attract and encourage continuous gamer engagement. Participant 6 noticed the information explicitly indicating objective probabilities within such a mechanism. He also shared his past success experience that he had previously summoned a SP Shikigami during similar event. Drawing on an understanding of the rule and past experiences, Participant 6 made a judgment about the objective probability, feeling that ‘it should be higher than usual this time’. With expected goal in mind, Participant 6 ‘quickly summoned more than 30 times in a row’, but the final outcome did not meet his expectations. From a rule perspective, random events are independent, and the probability of summoning Shikigami each time is fixed. Even if the probability increases, it does not guarantee that a gamer will definitely obtain rare Shikigami. Despite the ‘Probability UP’ term on the summoning interface is prominently presented in a particularly noticeable way, usually in bright yellow and large font (see page 267), in reality, Participant 6’s expectation of ‘summoning a few Shikigami that I don't have’ remained unpredictable, and this fact had an impact on his emotions. In this process, Participant 6 truly experienced a subjective

probability lower than the objective probability, introducing uncertainty into the relationship between what he believed and what objectively existed.

Therefore, the concept of subjective probability can contribute to our understanding of uncertainty, focusing on ‘the relationship between belief (in the broad sense) and knowledge’ (Smith et al., 1991, p.295). Knowledge is certain and rational, but gamers typically cannot attain all knowledge. Hence, gamers rely on the information they grasp and infer to make predictions about whether certain events will occur and to what extent, all while attaching their own expectations. In this process of inference, beliefs gradually form (Smith et al., 1991, pp.294-296). When there is a significant gap between subjectively constructed beliefs and objectively existing knowledge, meaning a difference between subjective probability and objective probability, uncertainty becomes apparent. Babrow's (2001, pp.598-560) argument supports this viewpoint. He argues that from an epistemological standpoint, uncertainty is related to the ‘qualities and uses of information’, ‘the nature of the association’, and ‘the nature of knowing’ (ibid.). Essentially, these three aspects ultimately revolve around various ‘relationships’, namely the relationship between individuals and information, the relationship between processes and outcomes, and the relationship between individuals. Influenced by these three relationships, individuals develop unique perceptions and interpretations of themselves, others, and information/knowledge, simultaneously making predictions and expectations about the outcomes in this process.

Subjective Probability and Luck

As Rescher (2019, p.138) suggests, luck is often used to describe the discrepancy between actual outcomes and expectations. Specifically, in video games with random gameplay mechanics, randomness is frequently used to gauge the degree of good luck (Costikyan, 2011, p.83). Prior to the occurrence of a random event, gamers are uncertain about what the future holds and may

make judgments or predictions about possible outcomes. Once an event occurs, gamers evaluate the outcome that has been produced against their prior expectations. Results that meet or exceed expectations are considered lucky, while those that fall short are deemed unlucky (Rowe, 1994, pp.745-746; Rescher, 2019, p.136). This is especially true when the occurrence of an event itself is outside of one's control or occurs in the absence of control, and while luck is difficult to use to explain why something happened in a certain way, it can be used effectively by gamers to describe how it happened (Rescher, 2019, p.138).

In *Onmyoji*, it is the same. Participants similarly regarded the random gameplay as a tool to measure luck, using it to ‘see how many SSR characters I can draw’ (Participant 3). When they obtained rare characters or items that met their expectations, they believed that good luck has come, feeling ‘like I'm the one with incredibly good luck’ (Participant 5) or experiencing a sense of becoming a lucky person (Participant 16). Alternatively, they believed that they received the favour of the game system, saying, ‘I felt like this game might be intentionally trying to keep me’ (Participant 2) or questioning if the game ‘has started to love me again’ (Participant 8). However, when some participants were unable to obtain characters or items with low probability for an extended period, or when the acquired characters or items failed to meet their expectations, they questioned whether the result is ‘really because I got a bad luck’ (Participant 12) or believed that they were ‘really unlucky, not because I don't invest energy in it’ (Participant 8). As Costikyan (ibid., p.86) suggests, when too much uncertainty is introduced by random factors, people tend to attribute success or failure to luck rather than their own skill performance. For instance, after ten consecutive days of complaining about ‘unlucky’ character-drawing experiences in his diaries, Participant 9 concluded, ‘*Onmyoji* won't make me feel frustrated in terms of gameplay; that’s all because of the fortune; it has nothing to do with my skills’. It seems that negative emotions are

somewhat alleviated when individuals, like Participant 9, attribute continuous failures to unchangeable fortune rather than themselves. I believe that this can be understood as their way of coping after noticing and experiencing the agency of the game system, and it is also a way for gamers to come to terms with failure.

However, discussions about ‘luck’ can also reflect the significance of this matter for gamers (Ballantyne and Kampa, 2019, p.160; Steglich-Petersen, 2010, p.362; Stoutenburg, 2019, p.5105). Although some participants felt that they ‘have accepted the fact that they are unlucky’ (Participant 8), they still expressed a willingness to continue striving to change this state, saying, ‘Although it's difficult, I still want to continue playing’ (Participant 19), and ‘Dreams must always exist’ (Participant 13). Most participants shared many efforts they made to make themselves luckier. Grinding, which they referred as ‘肝’ as discussed earlier, is one of the ways mentioned by the participants.

Onmyoji gamers often engage in grinding to gain experiences, in-game currencies, souls, and other specific resources to increase their chances of obtaining rare characters or items. In Chapter 5, I discussed gamers' grinding behaviours of ‘肝’ in the game to illustrate the negotiation of agency between gamers and the game system (see page 191). However, here, grinding also serves as a compelling example to demonstrate how gamers leverage their investment of time and attention resources to mitigate the uncertainty associated with opportunities. In order to accumulate resources, participants stated that they persisted in completing the game's mundane daily tasks, even if ‘doing daily tasks every day feels like working in Heian-Kyo’ (Participant 9), even if ‘there are thoughts of giving up every day’ (Participant 8), because they believed that ‘more effort will result in more resources accumulated, ensuring a guarantee when summoning Shikigami in the future’ (Participant 7). As

observed by Karlsen (2011, p.199), grinding is not something that excites gamers, and many feel bored or even annoyed. However, what gamers truly need are the resources obtained after grinding to achieve their higher goals. Therefore, grinding is considered a process of exchanging time and attention for resources (ibid.). Some participants even demonstrated a high level of dedication. For instance, one participant vividly described in her diary the experience of grinding continuously for four days to obtain a rare character she greatly admired in the game:

> ‘At first, I only logged in with my main account for card draws. Log in! Summon! Daily single draw! A series of smooth operations... No luck this time? It's normal! Let's do a ten-draw! ... The eleven draws ended with three featured characters [hands trembling] ..... Looks like it's going to be a bad day. I quickly logged into my secondary account to draw together. ... 500 another draws and got nothing [brain shaking]. This was the first time I experienced a dual 500-draw on both accounts. Based on my experience, I immediately made a decision that others wouldn't dare to think about: either... grind both accounts for the Top 20. It's time consuming and depends on luck too, but it's the only way aside from drawing cards. Just do it, let's do it!!! ..... But I suffered a breakdown ..... not physically, but mentally ..... A normal person's mentality would have collapsed by now, but I had to continue grinding. So, it took me another four full days. ..... At around 12:30 on the last day, I ended this painful journey, rank No.6. I finally got what I wanted.’ (Participant 11)

Through the experience of ‘肝’ in *Onmyoji* for four consecutive days, Participant 11 vividly expressed her desire and determination for a specific rare character. I extensively discussed the use of the term ‘肝’ in Chapter 4 to illustrate how gamers position and express their in-game states and experiences through the specific language code. This is done to establish closer connections with other gamers, forming a shared gaming culture of experiences and resonance (see page 122). However, I bring up ‘肝’ again here to observe how gamers employed this way of gaming, involving sustained

physiological and psychological investment, to attempt to minimize uncertainty to the greatest extent possible.

Additionally, this gaming journey also present the fluctuations experienced by gamers due to the ongoing uncertainty. From the content of her diary above, initially, she approached the character-drawing process with confidence and excitement. However, as the number of draws increased, anxiety and disappointment started to pervade, especially when her secondary account failed to obtain the coveted rare character after 500 draws, pushing her emotions to the brink of collapse. Despite recognizing that such emotional reactions were abnormal, she decided to change her ‘grinding’ strategy and persisted with full dedication. In the end, she invested a continuous effort over four days, and through relentless dedication, finally obtained the rare character she had long coveted, bringing immense satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment. This experience highlights how the participant's desire for rare characters triggers sustained effort and emotional fluctuations.

This is very similar to what gamblers experience in gambling. As pointed out by Larche et al. (2021, p.160), gamers already experience feelings of excitement and stimulation before obtaining rare rewards. As they attribute subjective value to unknown rare items (Nicklin et al., 2021, p.18), generate expectations, and make subjective judgments, these feelings continue to accumulate and increase, possibly leading to fluctuating changes, which ‘can lead to similar increases in physiological arousal’ (Brady and Prentice, 2021, p.430). Such physiological activation may even prompt gamers to no longer be satisfied with merely spending time and effort grinding repeatedly for opportunities but instead to spend real money (ibid., p.422). In my project, participants also shared similar experiences. Scholars mention the role of ‘near-miss reactions’ here (Moshirnia, 2018, p.87; Karlsen, 2011, p.204). Gamers often perceive previous failures as being close to success, increasing

their motivation to persist in trying. They mistakenly believe that the probability of success in the next attempt is higher, thus continuing to invest time and attention. For instance, Participant 8 shared that he once played the game until 3 a.m. of consecutive failures because he always believed he was affected by low-probability events, thinking, ‘If I persist a little longer, I should win’.

These examples highlight how the random gameplay during the grinding process exposes gamers to the uncertainty associated with future game outcomes. This uncertainty triggers changes in gamers’ inner emotions and mindset, subsequently influencing their choices and behaviours. In this scenario, subjective probability plays a crucial role—it is the gamer's personal judgment of probability, which may not be accurate. As argued by Prati (2019, p.240) and Karlsen (2011, p.196), gamers may fall into the gambler's fallacy in this uncertain experience, mistakenly believing that after a particular game event, the same event or outcome is less likely to happen again.

For example, if gamers repeatedly fail to obtain the desired rare Shikigami characters, they erroneously believed that the probability of getting certain Shikigami will increase in the next draw, even though each draw's probability is independent. This is because gamers often perceived past failures as a form of ‘preparation’ or ‘accumulation’, thinking that they had already invested enough effort or luck. Therefore, as described by Participants 1 and 9, they continuously performed hundreds of draws each time, feeling angry when they finally acquired their coveted character, believing they should not have invested so much. Especially in situations like those mentioned earlier, many participants save all their accumulated resources, waiting to use them when the system indicates ‘probability UP’, as they believed it significantly enhances the chance of obtaining rare characters. Thus, it is observed that gamers are consistently in an emotionally fluctuating state during the grinding process. Subjective probability, as a significant source of uncertainty, continually

stimulates their decision-making and behaviours, shaping the gamers' experience in this random gameplay.

Subjective Probability and Personal Value

Moshirnia (2018, p.88) suggests that gameplay mechanisms involving random acquisition of rare characters or items often provide gamers with an 'opportunity to engage in superstition' by creating a sense of ritual, which is the process of 'ascribing meaning to random deviations in opening animations or combinations'. *Onmyoji* system also uses many animations and sound effects to create an atmosphere when completing random gameplay, which gamers perceive them as hints or omens in the game and act accordingly.

In my project, participants explored and experimented with various methods they referred to as 'character-drawing metaphysics' (in Chinese, '抽卡玄学'), which became a unique gameplay within the community. This example has also been mentioned in Chapter 5 to demonstrate gamers' negotiation for agency (see page 177). Here, I want to discuss it again from the value perspective. Participants in my project firmly believed that in *Onmyoji*, summoning Shikigami characters was, in fact, a 'mysterious and profound study' (Participant 19, Participant 20). This is partly because they put a different value on it. For instance, during the Shikigami summoning process, gamers engaged in drawing symbols. Although the official stance has never explicitly stated any correlation between a gamer's 'drawing' and the character-drawing probability, some gamers drew meaningful symbols that hold personal values, hoping it would bring them luck. For example, Participant 18 consistently drew the number '6' on the Amulet because, in Chinese slang, '666' is a praise indicating extraordinary abilities and respect. Participant 19 drew the Chinese character '多' on the Amulet because it is the name of an important person to her, believing that it brings good fortune. She further explained, 'Maybe

drawing this character doesn't necessarily help me get the character I want, but if drawing a different symbol doesn't work either, I would feel regretful'. For gamers, these actions provide a unique psychological value, representing personal beliefs or wishes.

Some gamers believed that if they frequently summon Shikigami within a short period, their impatient behaviour might be detected by the game system as 'excessive obsession', leading to an automatic decrease in the probability. To address this, they adopt a strategy of avoiding intensive character-drawings and trying to maintain a calm mindset. This perspective is reflected in the diary of Participant 1, who suggests taking a break when feeling unlucky and trying again after a few days, as there might be a pleasant surprise. Additionally, some gamers thought they can 'borrow luck' from others. They asked friends with good luck to draw for them on the screen or watch videos shared by other gamers on social media who successfully got rare Shikigami (Participant 4). Similar to the phenomenon observed by Mowlabocus (2020, p.574) regarding unboxing videos, gamers increase their understanding of characters or items by observing and imitating others' actions, generating positive emotions, and igniting desires. This process helps gamers establish emotional connections and value identification in the virtual gaming world (which can be related to my discussion on identity construction in Chapter 4).

However, it is crucial to emphasize that, as pointed out by Karlsen (2011, pp.203-204), the randomness in reward mechanisms is only one factor that stimulates gamers' engagement and enthusiasm for the game. The gaming experience is a multidimensional process that requires a comprehensive consideration of various factors, including game objectives, reward structures, and social interactions (ibid., p.205). In my project, participants have diverse motivations for desiring rare characters. For example, some gamers aimed for collection purposes, seeking the identity of a 'Full Records Gamer', which

gives them a sense of achievement and pride, potentially enhancing their status and reputation within the game's social circle (Participant 10 and Participant 16) (mentioned also in Chapter 4 when discuss identity construction, see page 114). Some gamers hoped to obtain rare characters to ‘prove they are not inferior to others’, with the competitive sense arising from social interactions with other gamers being a significant factor drawing them into dedication and investment (Participant 5 and Participant 8). Some gamers desired specific rare characters simply because these characters attract them aesthetically or in terms of the storyline (Participant 7 and Participant 19). Additionally, some gamers believed they need these characters to enhance cooperation and tactical coordination within their teams (Participant 19 and Participant 20). In these cases, the individual acquisition of random rewards may not be the central focus of their attention; rather, it is whether the values they personally attribute to these rewards are acknowledged.

Therefore, as emphasized by Nicklin et al. (2021, p.18), the value of randomly obtained rare characters or items is subjectively defined. As participant 19 expressed, ‘Rare does not necessarily mean the best; for me, what I want and find useful is the most meaningful’. Gamers affirm their efforts and attribute value to their gains. Participant 4 stated in an interview, ‘If I feel it's not worth it, I wouldn't make that choice. I definitely think it's worth it, that's why I do it’. This, to some extent, corroborates Juul's (2010, pp.258-259) viewpoint that when gamers exert effort to achieve positive outcomes in the game, they tightly associate themselves with the game in the interaction process and perceive everyday tasks as valuable practices. Therefore, understanding gamers' motivations and expectations in gaming, as well as their value judgments of rewards, is a crucial factor in delving into how uncertainty influences the gaming experience. It is also obvious that this subjective assessment of uncertainty is also closely linked to their individual expressions and self-identity (discussed in Chapter 4, see page 115).

In summary, the subjective probabilities generated by gamers in gaming trigger uncertainty that pervades the entire gaming experience. Firstly, gamers form subjective estimates of the probability of events based on their own experiences, information, and beliefs. This subjective estimation may deviate from objective probabilities, leading to gamers developing erroneous expectations and judgments about event outcomes. Secondly, the uncertainty introduced by gamers' subjective probabilities is also manifested in their misconceptions about the randomness of the game. In games like *Onmyoji*, gamers often believe that certain events are more likely to occur based on their subjective probabilities. However, the randomness of the game is inherently unpredictable and uncontrollable. This misconception further contributes to the generation of uncertainty. Lastly, the uncertainty triggered by gamers' subjective probabilities influences their emotions and gaming experience. Simultaneously influenced by factors such as competition, social interactions, aesthetics and the given values, this uncertainty can serve as a motivating force for gamers to continue their engagement.

Therefore, understanding and acknowledging the existence of this uncertainty can, on one hand, provide insight into the complex behaviours and psychological changes involved in gamers' gaming experiences due to the multidimensional and intricate nature of uncertainty in gaming. On the other hand, the presence of this uncertainty reflects the interplay between objective probabilities and gamers' subjective probabilities in gaming, as well as the ongoing negotiation and interaction between the game system and gamers (linked to the discussions in Chapter 5). This interaction highlights the active role gamers play in the game and how they shape their gamer identity and role identification processes when faced with uncertainty (linked to the discussions in Chapter 4).

Uncertainty Resulting from Strategy Making

In the previous section, I explored the uncertainty introduced by gamers' subjective probabilities, where I observed various understandings of game mechanics by gamers and their responses to uncertain situations. In this section, I delve deeper into the uncertainty associated with gamer strategy-making.

Almost all participants agreed that *Onmyoji* game mechanics are highly complex. 'Just feeling like tackling a complex essay question and math problem' (Participant 19). While Shikigami skills appear simple, but team composition is complex; while the attributes of souls are straightforward, their combination is intricate; while battle mode is simple, but the intricacies of turn order are complex. When various mechanics interact in a complex and not immediately apparent manner, gamers analyse and respond to these mechanics, contemplating how to play—this is their strategy making process.

I believe there is a close connection between gamer strategy making and the previously mentioned subjective probabilities. On the one hand, the estimation of subjective probabilities directly influences gamers' strategy choices. Gamer strategies often depend on their subjective estimates of the likelihood of their own and other gamers' actions. If a gamer overestimates their chances of winning, they might adopt a more aggressive strategy. Conversely, if they underestimate their chances of winning, they may adopt a more conservative approach. On the other hand, the strategy making process also affects gamers' subjective estimates. If gamers attempt various strategies multiple times without achieving the expected results, they may question the accuracy of their subjective probability estimates and, consequently, re-evaluate those probabilities. Conversely, if strategies consistently succeed, gamers may confidently persist in their subjective probability estimates.

The uncertainty what I discuss here includes Costikyan's (2013) notion of ‘solver's uncertainty’ and ‘analytic complexity’. He posits that solver's uncertainty is related to the inherent complexity of the game mechanics, which are explicitly defined by the game and prescribe the actions gamers are allowed to take. Therefore, gamers must navigate the space of solutions predetermined by the rules within the game (ibid., pp.73-75). Analytic complexity, additionally, arises when gamers are faced with multiple choices and must decide which option will maximize their benefits (ibid., pp.90-91). However, both gamers' analysis and final decisions are based on their understanding of the intricate rules and mechanics of the game. Therefore, in this study, I prefer to combine these two types of uncertainty and consider them together as gamer strategy-related uncertainty.

As Juul (2011, p.55) stated, in most video games, the required strategy is more complex than the rules themselves. Strategy is not just a set of rules that govern actions, but also a conscious plan that gamers devise to achieve specific goals. Gamers obtain and understand information from the rules, predict possible outcomes, formulate the next plan, and implement their strategies and intentions in controlling the game world, ultimately completing challenges and achieving game value (Qin et al., 2009, pp.127-128). These are important dimensions that allow gamers to immerse themselves in the game world. According to Salen and Zimmerman (2003, p.389), the strategy-making process in the possibility space is also, to some extent, the gamer's narrative experience in the larger game trajectory, which is one of the main sources of uncertainty discussed earlier (see page 279).

Emergence Factors Influence Strategy Making

Games often involve various uncertain emergence factors that may result in gamers' strategies being unable to fully adapt to the changing dynamics of the game (Juul, 2011, p.57), thereby giving rise to uncertainty.

Indeed, as discussed in the previous section, random elements in the game mechanics of *Onmyoji* often disrupt the formulation of gamer strategies (see page 272). For instance, while gamers carefully considered the combat synergy of different Shikigami, the objective probability of character acquiring prevented the realization of their planned strategies. Even with a meticulously planned character-drawing strategy, gamers failed to guarantee a 100% chance of obtaining the desired characters to execute their pre-determined strategies. Similar situations occurred in battles where the release of character skills introduced a degree of randomness, leading gamers to experience setbacks even when victory was anticipated. For example, Participant 16 expressed in his diary, ‘Even though my lineup and operations were optimal, I still had a very poor gaming experience due to “luck” factors’. As Juul (2011, p.57) suggests, games provide ‘an open landscape of possibilities’, requiring gamers to continually overturn and redesign their strategies throughout the entire gaming process due to game variations. In this process, gamers may even create new gameplay, which game designers find challenging to anticipate (Juul, 2011, p.58). For example, the gamer-created ‘character-drawing metaphysics’ (in Chinese, ‘抽卡玄学’) introduced in the previous Chapter to increase the character obtaining probability serves as a prime example (see page 299).

The gamers' opponents also created a lot of uncertainty in their strategy making. For instance, in the Gamer VS Gamer (PVP) battle mode of *Onmyoji*, gamers experienced uncertainty regarding ‘what kind of lineup the opponent might use’ (Participant 2) before the battle begins. Unexpected skill usage by the opponent during the battle also disrupted gamers' plans, leading to comments such as ‘I didn't expect the opponent's speed to be so fast’ (Participant 8) and ‘I even didn't know they could play like that?’ (Participant 10). Also, the uncertainty introduced by the opponent's strategy making also

affects gamers' emotions, with Participant 8 even choosing to ‘quit the game’ after continuous suppression by the opponent.

More often than not, these uncertainties guide gamers to adjust their behaviours. When gamers collectively situate in an arena intertwined with various uncertainties, they interact with each other in unpredictable ways. In turn-based games like *Onmyoji*, similar situations frequently occur. Gamers often continually enhance their offensive and defensive capabilities before entering PVP mode, striving to increase their attacking opportunities or respond quickly to damage caused by the opponent. In this process of safeguarding their interests at the expense of the opponent, a considerable amount of uncertainty arises from the opponent's actions (Costikyan, 2013, p.81). As argued by Costikyan (ibid.), gamer unpredictability stems from interactions between gamers since ‘real humans are inevitably sneakier and less predictable than AI routines’.

In addition to the PvP gameplay, the social nature of *Onmyoji* inevitably leads gamers to interact with each other. Within gamer interactions, one individual's actions significantly impact another's status (Costikyan, 2013, p.16). For instance, certain game mechanics required gamers to invite in-game friends to complete tasks together. Some participants mentioned that their game performance was affected because their teammates did not perform well (Participant 15, Participant 18). Other participants expressed that, due to ‘friends who used to play the game together often have stopped playing for a long time’ (Participant 6) or ‘being unable to be online simultaneously with in-game friends’ (Participant 8), they sometimes miss specific gaming events. Therefore, the gamers' process of strategy making is consistently influenced by other gamers, introducing a significant amount of uncertainty.

Therefore, it is evident that gamers’ strategy making process is replete with various emergent uncertainty elements, impacting their gaming experiences

and emotions, thereby rendering the game more complex and challenging. It appears that gamers need to continually adapt to these uncertainties to achieve success in the game.

Diverse Understandings Influence Strategy Making

In playing *Onmyoji*, achieving excellence requires gamers to possess outstanding strategic skills to face various challenges. Gamers not only need to require resources that enhance their in-game capabilities but also comprehend and master complex rules and mechanics. Proficiency in coordinating different resources, mastering the timing and sequence of actions in each combat round, and possessing skills for global planning are essential. At the same time, gamers exhibit varying levels of experience and diverse knowledge backgrounds, leading to differences in their understanding of game rules and mechanics (King et al., 2012, p.422). Consequently, these distinct approaches to strategy making among gamers introduce varying degrees of uncertainty.

My participants shared numerous experiences of dealing with such uncertainties. For some experienced participants, the intricate game mechanics are highly intriguing and demanding of their interest and attention. Participants 2 and 4 mentioned that the game, especially its competitive gameplay, is equivalent to a mental duel, which necessitates continuous speculation about other gamers' intensions and their strategy making. In this process, they confront various uncertainties and adjust their strategies accordingly. 'It's a thinking process', as Participant 2 believed. 'There's also a feeling of being smart because I won in a situation that was originally a disadvantage. It's a satisfying experience' (Participant 4). The performances of these experienced gamers showcase their profound understanding of complex mechanics and their adaptive capabilities in dealing with uncertainty. This highlights that in the realm of gaming, uncertainty is not merely an

obstacle but can also serve as an attraction and motivation, stimulating gamers' intellect and creativity.

Participant 18 demonstrated his expertise of strategy making in his diaries. For instance, on the first day, he extensively documented his explorations on Shikigami skills and best lineup for combat. On the third day, he shared how to maximize profits in certain event, which included the mechanism analysis, experiences of using minimal stamina to complete as many tasks as possible, and advice on how to use rewards to purchase other resources. On the fifth day, he shared three methods for cultivating 6-star Shikigami, including how to complete dungeon tasks with a team, how to obtain and make good use of game Buffs, and which event tasks provide the highest experience points. Almost every day, he used a significant amount of space in the diary to introduce his strategy making process and different insights. In his final diary, he summarized, ‘These game mechanisms are indeed very complex, and understanding them requires time and effort, but as long as you persevere, you will eventually get what you want in the game and enjoy a sense of accomplishment’.

Participant 9, who had similar experiences, jokingly said in our interview when asked how he would recommend the game to others, ‘I have to say, don't play it, run away!’. He explained that the game is too complicated and that it would take at least three to six months to fully understand all the mechanisms to achieve great results. While he has no intention of recommending this complex game to others, he acknowledged that he derived a lot of enjoyment in this intricate problem-solving process. The experiences of these two participants underscore how understanding of game mechanics can help gamers overcome uncertainty and find satisfaction and enjoyment. Their stories also suggest that, although complex game mechanics may intimidate some individuals, for those willing to invest time and effort in exploration, the

challenge and complexity can serve as an attraction in the game, sparking their interest and perseverance.

Experienced participants all mentioned that this game is ‘not beginner-friendly’. Indeed, for novice gamers, the complex game mechanics were the biggest obstacle. For instance, Participant 6, while not a complete novice, found the scoring system and random opponent matching in the PvP mode challenging after a six-month leave. He admitted that he spent a considerable amount of time studying this new gameplay. Participant 12, a newcomer of *Onmyoji* for less than a month, acknowledged feeling confused, finding the game content rich but the mechanics very complex. Participant 17 also faced challenges when start playing the game, not fully understanding the rules and how to level up. She expressed a perplexing emotion after winning battles, feeling uncomfortable with the inexplicable sense of victory. The experiences of these participants highlight that, for novice gamers, the complex game mechanics present a significant challenge, leading to increased uncertainty in their strategy-making process, which in turn affect their interest of the game, as seen with Participants 12 and 17 both admitting to giving up playing the game after participating in my project.

However, there are always gamers who want to avoid these complex problems. For instance, Participants 5, 19, and 20 did not mention anything related to strategy in their diaries, and in subsequent interviews, they explained that they prefer to play Gamer versus Environment (PVE) mode, since they ‘don't need to think too much, I just want to level up easily’ (Participant 5). Participant 19 also admitted that she never participated in the competitive gameplay, ‘it's too complicated, I don't know which character should be employed and what skills are suitable, I'm really bad at these... I don't like the feeling of losing, so as long as I don't play, I won't lose lol’. Participant 20 only was fond of the game plot, and she never paid too much attention to complex mechanics and PVP

battles. She jokingly said, ‘That's why I always play so poorly’. Although they did not like or good at strategy making, they tried to avoid uncertainty through some evasion methods. This reflects gamers' adaptability and flexibility in the face of uncertainty. Each gamer has their own gaming preferences and strengths, opting for ways that suit their enjoyment rather than being compelled to confront aspects of the game they may not excel at or find interesting. This flexibility also supports the gamer agency discussed in Chapter 5.

Referring to others' strategies is a common approach gamer take to deal with the uncertainty of strategy making. This practice, by leveraging the experiences and wisdom of others, helps them quickly understand game mechanics and devise more effective strategies. In the gaming community, there are always individuals who have invested a significant amount of time in exploring the game, and their experiences become valuable resources for others. Taking the NGA game forum as an example, within the dedicated section for *Onmyoji*, there are 17 different categories under the ‘Strategy and Experience Sharing’ subforum, covering topics such as resource acquisition, common dungeon attributes, and arena experience sharing. The ‘Data Query’ subforum includes functional programmes such as Shikigami damage calculators, Soul calculation tools, Soul data records, and mission guides. The ‘Hot Topic Discussion’ subforum alone has over 10,000 posts, where gamers engage in real-time communication, sharing insights, asking questions, and providing answers.

Most participants in my project often visit forums or social media platforms like Weibo to seek strategies shared by others. For example, Participant 2 believes that frequent consultation of others' strategies is necessary to ‘win battles in a short period’ because ‘my brain isn't clever enough’. Participant 3 sees these ‘particularly powerful strategies as shortcuts’, and applying shared strategies is a form of learning, saying, ‘seeing my abilities improve makes me happy’.

Participant 14 even regards game forums as a search engine for finding strategies, stating, ‘whenever I encountered uncertain problems, I instinctively searched keywords in the forum to see if I can find answers’. However, they still encountered a considerable amount of uncertainty, including the applicability of strategies, differences in practical implementation, and the accuracy and timeliness of the strategies. These factors lead to challenges or unexpected situations during their actual gameplay, where gamers have to rely on their judgment to filter and make appropriate adjustments. This ability is also a part of strategy making, reflecting the constant experimentation gamers engage in during the uncertain process of strategy making.

Summary

In this chapter, I employed a formal analysis approach to dissect the uncertainty embedded in the *Onmyoji* game narratives and gameplay, including uncertainties related to dialogue, plot sequences, provided choices, as well as random events. This analysis not only highlights the central position of uncertainty in the game but also emphasizes the close correlation between uncertainty and gamers' subjective experiences, goal setting, and emotions. Based on this, I then analysed digital diaries and interview data to explore participants’ perceptions and interpretations of uncertainty from three perspectives: game narrative, subjective probability, and strategy making. This empirical analysis validates the results of my earlier formal analysis and further underscores how uncertainty, as a complex concept, evolves across multiple levels, shaping gamers' gaming experiences.

I discovered that the complexity and diversity of this issue primarily stem from individual differences among gamers. Variations in gamers' experiential backgrounds, gaming objectives, understandings of game mechanics, and personal values directly influence their attitudes toward uncertainty and their

coping mechanisms. For instance, experienced gamers had a more profound understanding of uncertainty in the game because they acquired skills and strategies for dealing with such situations from past experiences. In contrast, novice gamers found uncertainty more challenging and perplexing, as they had not yet built sufficient gaming experience to effectively handle these scenarios. Gamers who prioritize storylines and character development were more inclined to accept narrative uncertainty in the game, deriving enjoyment from suspense and the puzzles it borught. Gamers focused on completing tasks and collecting rewards were more prone to anxiety due to uncertainty, as it impacted their progress toward specific in-game objectives. Those with a deep understanding of game rules and mechanics were adapt to and leverage uncertainty more easily, incorporating it into their gaming strategies. Conversely, gamers with less knowledge of game mechanics were more susceptible to disruption by uncertainty, as they struggled to effectively respond to variables in the game. Some gamers viewed uncertainty as the essence of the game, believing it enhances their entertainment value and challenges. In contrast, others leaned toward seeking stability and controllability, adopting a cautious attitude toward uncertainty. These findings emphasize the diversity and relativity of uncertainty in gamers' gaming practices, providing a better understanding of the heterogeneity within gamer groups, and offering insights into the impact of digital entertainment on individuals.

In the analysis of uncertainty, particularly when reviewing the regulatory context as discussed in detail in Chapter 5 (see page 210), I once again find a close connection between this concept and the identity issues and agency negotiation analysed in earlier chapters (Chapter 4 and 5). Society is in constant evolution, with changes in political decision-making, fluctuations in economic conditions, and other complex factors creating a game environment full of variables and challenges for gamers. This transforms the uncertainty

experienced by gamers in the game from an isolated phenomenon into something closely intertwined with the uncertainties of wider society. Gamers' choices, decisions, and responses to uncertainty in the game are not just a series of actions within the gaming process; they also construct an identity in situations where the boundary between the game and their everyday becomes blurred. This identity construction is not only a response to the in-game situations but also reflects gamers' thoughts and responses to the uncertainties of real-world society. The uncertainties of society are projected and simulated through the uncertainties in the game, triggering gamers' reflections on identity construction in the real world within the virtual environment. This duality transforms gamers' actions in the game from simple entertainment activities into a form of engagement and reflection on the realities of society. In this context, I once again observe the close connection between uncertainty, identity, and agency negotiation. Gamers are not only interacting with the game system within the internal rules, but they are also making decisions in a context influenced by social factors. Their actions are not only aimed at completing in-game tasks but also at maintaining their agency and autonomy at the intersection of the virtual and the real.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

At this crucial juncture nearing the completion of this thesis, a participant reached out to me through messaging, nearly a year after our initial interview. Coinciding with the seventh anniversary of *Onmyoji*, the participant candidly expressed, ‘Over this past year, I have continued to ardently love *Onmyoji*’. Simultaneously, on social media, other participants with years of gaming experience shared their deep affection for *Onmyoji* and their expectations for the future. Interestingly, a gamer I met five years ago at the *Onmyoji* Carnival in Shanghai also contacted me at this juncture. Although we were strangers at our first meeting, we found significant resonance in the gaming world due to our shared *Onmyoji* gamer identity and spent delightful moments together. However, today, five years later, when I inquired whether she still persevered in the world of *Onmyoji*, she expressed a different sentiment: *Onmyoji* had broken her heart, and now she had started investing her time in other games. Upon probing the reasons, she highlighted dissatisfaction with several mechanisms in *Onmyoji*, asserting that despite investing a substantial amount of time in the game, she felt her expectations with regard to the game had not been met.

Such divergent feedback compelled me to reflect and reconsider my project. Participants’ stories are not merely records of their gaming experiences, they are reflections of complex emotions within particular dynamic (everyday, regulatory, social, cultural) contexts at a particular moment in time which is itself positioned within a longer complex relationship with the game. From love to weariness, from immersion to detachment, from close identification to more strategic gameplay, relations and transitions prompted me to contemplate how we can comprehensively understand gamers' thoughts and feelings within the intricate realm of gaming practices. In the final pages of this thesis, I revisit the key findings in the thesis, discuss the impact of game studies on media

communication research, address the limitations of this project, and provide insights into future research directions.

My Findings and Theoretical Contributions

Identity and Identification

In order to summarize key findings, I will first remind us of the initial research question that prompted my work in relation to identity. My initial question was: **What do gamers' self-expressions tell us about what they value and promote in relation to their own gaming identities?** (Chapter 4). Of course, what I discovered in relation to this research question went far beyond what gamers value and promote not least because this question led me to wider questions around processes of identification, power, subjectivity and uncertainty. However, it is clear form my project that the ways in which gamers choose to express themselves in the game often constitute meaningful decisions, reflecting their individual beliefs, attitudes, and emotions (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.33; Juul, 2005, p.197; Taylor, 2006, pp.110-111). These subjective expressions also involve negotiations with ideologies, as gamers' actions are not only the outcomes of individual choices but are also influenced by social, cultural, and even political contexts (Buckingham, 2008, p.1; Grooten and Kowert, 2015, p.73; Vignoles, 2017, p.6). Therefore, the exploration of this question not only aids in a deeper understanding of gamers' identity construction in gaming but also provides a richer and more comprehensive perspective for the study of gaming culture in the Chinese context.

By observing aspects such as daily gaming behaviours, social interactions, pursuit of in-game items, and linguistic expressions, I find that gamers actively engage with and align themselves with the value framework established by the

game, reflecting their identification with this framework. Specifically, I first conducted an in-depth analysis of participants' daily gaming behaviours presented in digital diaries and interviews, using rich empirical data to demonstrate how digital games, like other public media (Burger, 2015, p.268; Buckingham, 2007, p.81), serve as a platform for multidimensional expression (Taylor, 2003, p.38; Bartle, 2004, p.216). These daily gaming behaviours encompass not only the completion of tasks, check-ins, and in-game social activities but also serve as tangible actions through which gamers demonstrate decision-making processes and behavioural patterns in the gaming environment. This process is not merely about achieving game objectives; it is a means of carving individual traits and shaping values within the game world (Pradantyo et al., 2021, p.4). In my project, some participants documented their planning and prioritization strategies during the completion of daily tasks, making decisions within the framework of game rules (see page 108). This showcases gamers' pursuit of goals, emphasis on efficiency, and even their mastery of self-management skills. Similarly, the unwavering commitment to daily sign-ins for thousands of days conveys gamers' pursuit of loyalty and identity, aligning with the game's set values and serving as strong evidence of their consistent engagement in the game (see page 110). Furthermore, some participants persistently engaged in collecting rare characters or item props (see page 114), demonstrating their appreciation and love for in-game possessions. The pursuit of rare items often involves significant time and attention investment and even includes a certain level of economic input. This goes beyond achieving in-game objectives; it is a way for gamers to emotionally connect with in-game items. Additionally, participants established social identities through engagement in the game community, sharing experiences, and forming teams (see page 118). This interaction shapes shared identifications, value consensus, and also the unique culture within the digital gaming community. Therefore, the observation and analysis of gamers' daily gaming behaviours reveal again that digital gaming has become a more

complex and comprehensive cultural phenomenon, transcending its role as a mere entertainment platform to become a significant space for individual expression, identification, and social interaction (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 131-133; Malaby, 2007, p.99; Richardson, 2011, p.427).

Secondly, through a discourse analysis of gamers' online use of text and linguistic expressions, I analysed how gamers satisfied their self-expression needs and responded to community norms through specific textual information, memes, abbreviations, and other unique forms of language. This distinctive form of language expression, particularly the use of specific vocabulary and terminology, constructs a language community within the digital gaming community. I agree with previous scholars' arguments (Crystal, 2001, p.68; Turner, 2011, p.266; Moje, 2004, pp.16-17; Moje and Luke, 2009, p. 416), suggesting that this use of language is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a crucial means for individuals to position themselves within a community, express shared values and experiences, and articulate personal and social identities. I specifically focused on exploring one of the widely used linguistic symbols among gamers, '肝' (see page 122). This is a very interesting example, illustrating how gamers define themselves within the game and negotiate with the game. This term, originally representing a human organ, has been redefined within the gaming community as a unique way for gamers to express their level of dedication to the game. More importantly, this term and its derivatives encompass gamers' comprehensive commitment from physiological to psychological aspects and complex emotions deeply entwined with the game. Also, the use of '肝' as an expression reflects an internal consensus within the community and is a unique contribution to digital gaming culture. When employing this symbol, gamers establish a tacit understanding among themselves, creating a distinctive social context that allows them to resonate with each other's gaming experiences. This goes beyond mere

language use; it is a creation and transmission of culture and values, injecting rich and diverse meanings into the digital gaming community.

Thirdly, in my project, when observing the establishment of close relationships between gamers and game characters, I find that gamers' experiences go beyond initial assumptions about the characters. Participants identified with characters through transmedia narratives, moving beyond ‘playing’ or ‘becoming’ based on similarity (McDonald DG, 2001, p.254; Livingston et al., 2014, p.7; Trepte and Reinecke, 2010, p.175; Lin and Wang, 2014, p.214; Ducheneaut et al., 2009, p.1159; Soutter and Hitchens, 2016, p.1035). This identification involves multiple dimensions such as aesthetics, culture, emotions, and identity. Building on this foundation of identification, gamers established complex emotional connections with the game characters. This connection even extended beyond the boundaries of the game world into everyday life, as evidenced by the affectionate nicknames gamers use for the characters. I discovered that participants conveyed their identification with characters through different endearing nicknames, reflecting the nature of this identification and also revealing how gamers position themselves in their gaming practices. For instance, when mentioning certain characters, some gamers chose to continue using the appellations from the game's narrative (see page 150), which is essentially an expression of their affirmation of the game's narrative. By integrating the stories, emotions, and character relationships presented in the game into their reflections on everyday life, gamers demonstrate deep understanding of game narratives and emotional involvement. Some spousal nicknames, such as ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ (see page 152), not only reflect gamers' appreciation and identification with the aesthetic, abilities, and values of the characters but also serve as emotional projections. Also, some child-related nicknames, like ‘cub’ ‘my daughter’, and ‘good big son’ (see page 154), express gamers' positive expectations for the characters in the game, showcasing hopes for their future development and

growth. Through such naming conventions, gamers not only enjoyed entertainment in the game but also participated in a story full of emotions and expectations, growing together with game characters. Therefore, these terms carry the gamer's unique expectations for the characters, reflecting that the characters, for whom gamers develop an attachment in the game, are not just fictional images but autonomous entities full of vitality and growth potential (Banks and Bowman, 2016, p.221; Sibilla and Mancini, 2018; Szolin et al., 2023, p.5).

Furthermore, in my project, I also find that gamers, through creative expressions, showcased their identity construction as gamers and fans, emphasizing their identification with game characters in this process. Some gamers employed various creative means, one of which involves the creation and use of memes related to characters (see page 158), as a way to convey their understanding of character settings and express their emotions or gaming states. This form of creative expression serves as a distinctive emblem for individual gamers and the digital gaming community, providing support for the construction of unique identities in the game world. Others, through the appropriation or derivation of existing materials, created entirely new characters, plots, or interactions (see page 163), expressing their unique interpretations of characters or storylines in the game. These behaviours represent an individual's creative expression, injecting more diverse and imaginative elements into the digital gaming community (Ying and Blommaert, 2020, p.230). It is worth noting that, within the unique media regulatory context in China, gamers, in order to navigate regulations, adopt alternative forms of expression, including satire and humour (see page 167). Through these alternative expressions, gamers showe a deep understanding of gaming culture and a strong identification with the digital gaming community in a special social context (Yang and Jiang, 2015, p.225; Lee, 2016, p.1062).

In summary, through investigation of gamers' daily gaming behaviours, linguistic communities, creative expressions, and relationships with game characters, I unveil complex dimensions of digital game culture. This analysis not only delves into the surface phenomena of digital games but also explores their underlying dynamics and interactive relationships. Moreover, I reposition digital games as platforms for cultural expression and creation, integral parts of a complex cultural network co-constructed by individual gamers and communities. This underscores the importance of social cognition and cultural shaping within digital games. By deeply understanding gamers as participants in digital game culture, I paint a picture of them constructing rich and unique individual and community identities within it. This project perspective not only guides a re-examination of the impact of digital entertainment on social cognition and cultural shaping but also reveals, within digital games, the active negotiation processes where gamers actively engage with and influence the value systems set by the game through various forms of self-expression. This negotiation represents gamers active interpretation of the game and in turn impacting those settings through their engagement.

Agency Negotiation

Chapter 4 offers insights into gamers self-identities while simultaneously revealing the nuanced implications of power negotiation within digital games, highlighting the complexity and multi-layered nature of digital gaming practices. In the observation of daily gaming behaviours, I find that gamers engage in subtle power negotiations with game developers within the confines of game rules and design frameworks. How gamers interpret their gaming interactions and how they navigate the realization of their expectations within limited rules entail a form of power negotiation with game developers. This reflects that, as an interactive form of entertainment, the interaction between gamers and the game as a system is not unidirectional but rather an ongoing power dynamic.

For instance, within the digital gaming community, a shared system of linguistic expressions constructs a power structure. Those who understand and employ specific vocabulary are regarded as genuine gamers, thereby endowed with a special status in communication and interaction. This linguistic community serves not only as an expression of identity but also as a symbol of power and status within the digital gaming community. Consequently, gamers, in choosing and mastering this linguistic system, are essentially engaging in a power struggle and identity affirmation within the community. In the intimate relationships established with game characters, gamers actively seek agency in obtaining the initiative in power dynamics. Through selecting intimate terms and emotional investment in characters, gamers, to a certain extent, shape the behaviour and development path of characters in the game world, thereby realizing the potential for power negotiation within intimate relationships. This not only reflects the complexity of power relationships within digital gaming practices, extending beyond game rules to encompass emotional interactions between characters and gamers. In the realm of creative self-expression, gamers infuse their own understanding, emotions, and meanings into gaming practices, demonstrating agency in constructing meanings. This underscores that gamers in digital games are crucial participants in creating and shaping game content. This perspective is extensively explored in Chapter 5, delving further into the research question: **How do gamers negotiate and balance power relationships within their interactions with the video game?**

Firstly, I argue that in the digital gaming practice, gamers are not the sole agent. Unlike previous theories that identified the agency in gaming through ideologies and representational means (Malaby, 2007, pp.95-96; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003, p.66; Nie, 2014, p.507), I emphasize that the game enacts a certain degree of agency. By adopting a formal analysis approach to examine the game narrative and mechanisms, I re-evaluate the role of the game system

and underscore its significance as an independent entity influencing gamers. In my project, I find that the game creates unique experiences through distinctive rules, structures, and mechanisms; these elements are not entirely controlled by gamers. For example, the game may shape a specific narrative experience by designing particular characters, introducing unexpected plot twists, or employing unique artistic styles (see page 176). The game system, as an independent media form, directly influences gamers' sensory and emotional experiences through various elements such as music, visual effects, and interactive design. This emotional experience is not entirely determined by gamers but is a result of the impact generated by the design elements of the game system.

Moreover, during gameplay, the game system also imposes certain constraints on gamers' actions and decisions. For instance, the game guides gamers to accomplish specific tasks through goal setting, reward mechanisms, or penalty systems (see page 191). These design constraints make the game system an active entity, interacting with gamers and exerting pressure and incentives on their behaviour. This re-evaluation helps deepen our understanding of power dynamics within digital gaming practices (Mäyrä, 2019, p.29), shifting the focus not solely onto gamers but also considering the role played by the game system as an independent agent. This perspective expands our comprehension of power relationships in digital games, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the formation and shaping of gaming experiences.

However, gamers also actively engage in shaping the gaming experience. They interpret and reinterpret the game rules, negotiate with developers, and continuously influence the direction of the game. In my project, I focused on analysing the agency negotiation between gamers and the game system, particularly in transmedia narrative experiences and random mechanics.

In their transmedia narrative experiences, I observed that participants watched, accelerated, or skipped dialogues based on their gaming intentions. Even in unavoidable cut-scenes, gamers possessed the agency to actively interpret, provided real-time comments, and engaged in discussions (see page 179). Within this continuous narrative framework, gamers' thoughts and expressions are unrestricted. The primary gaming intention of gamers at a given moment became a crucial factor in determining their gaming actions (see page 181). For instance, gamers passionate about engaging in combat found ways to skip or accelerate the plot, allocating time and focus to enhancing character skills and completing level tasks. Those interested in exploring narratives followed prescribed paths to gather information but simultaneously explored every detail in alternative side missions that may provide additional clues. Additionally, gamers explored, collected, and reinterpreted more information in other derivative media products outside of the game, demonstrating agency in creatively reshaping and processing media content. In this process of transmedia exploration and interpretation, I once again revisited the theme of identity addressed in Chapter 4. Gamers constructed a deeper understanding of characters and their own roles as gamers or other identities during this exploration process. This negotiation of agency not only enriches the complexity of digital gaming practices but also provides crucial clues for a deeper understanding of digital gaming culture.

In participants' experiences of random gameplay, the agency negotiation between gamers and the game system is evident in gamers' flexible interpretations of game rules and strategies for coping with randomness. Particularly, the examination and discussion of the Paper Doll (see page 191) reveal that, although gamers ostensibly delegated agency to a robot capable of automatically completing tasks, they nonetheless demonstrated active control and a pursuit of decision-making authority. For instance, through nurturing behaviours like feeding the Paper Doll, gamers exhibited dominance

and care, granting the in-game bot richer human-like characteristics while also controlling it to better assist in completing game tasks. In the practice of gaming, I believe that time and attention consistently serve as crucial resources subject to active negotiation between gamers and the game system (Fizek, 2018b, p.147). Through mechanisms such as setting daily tasks and timed activities, the game system seeks to maximize the gamer's time and attention within the game. However, in my project, I observed that gamers showcased flexible time management and rational evaluation of game values (see page 203). Gamers rationally weighed whether investing time and attention in gaming was worthwhile, autonomously choosing to complete or delay tasks, and adjusting their gaming time to align with their life rhythms. This behaviour illustrates gamers' flexible coordination between gaming and everyday lives, enabling them to better fulfil personal needs and the gaming experience.

Certainly, this negotiation extends beyond time and attention allocation to encompass the negotiation of values and goals between gamers and the system (Davis, 2012, p.647; Sicart, 2014, p.5; Fonseca, 2016, p.75, p.90; Pradantyo et al., 2021, p.4). Gamers are not passively accepting the game's established values but, through in-depth evaluations of the game, decide whether it aligns with their individual gaming objectives and values (see page 207). This bidirectional negotiation empowers gamers to maintain a degree of autonomy and rational thinking in digital gaming practices. They are not merely passive executors of the game system but active participants and decision-makers. This manifestation of agency renders digital gaming practices more intricate and multi-layered in their interactive dynamics.

Indeed, I find that gamers continually face various challenges and constraints in gaming. These challenges and constraints not only originate from the game system itself but also involve the regulatory context as another influencing

factor (Cao and Downing, 2008, p.525; Zhang, 2012, p.340; Yang, 2016, p.1369; Chen and Yang, 2018, p.4), playing a significant role in the negotiation of agency in gaming interactions. In my project, I focused on exploring the agency negotiation between gamers, the game system, and the regulatory context. The government, as a regulatory entity, shaped digital game content by implementing a series of regulatory policies (see page 210). This top-down regulation compelled the game company to actively respond and self-regulate to ensure their content aligns with regulatory requirements (see page 214). Consequently, the game company not only contended with the constraints of game rules and design but also faced immense pressure from government regulation. This results in the game company having to make careful choices in aesthetics and content during game design, ensuring compliance with regulatory policies while retaining distinctive features that attract gamers (see page 221).

However, gamers within this regulatory context actively engaged in the negotiation of agency. They consciously looked for, or had long adopted strategies for, ways to get along with regulatory rules, expressing their viewpoints and attitudes within the limited framework of rules (see page 228). This manifests in gamers' reinterpretation of game content, evasion, and resistance to censorship, as well as expressing themselves both within and outside the game. This initiative underscores the crucial role gamers play in negotiating agency, making them an undeniable force in digital gaming practices. While gamers have varying degrees of awareness of media regulation, they unwittingly become key elements in the regulatory ecosystem. Taking ‘Accusatory Reporting’ as an example, I observed that gamers, while upholding community norms and collectively defining behavioural guidelines, also exerted a certain degree of oversight over each other's actions (see page 244). This phenomenon of peer regulation reveals the complexity of China's unique multidimensional regulatory ecosystem and illustrates the intricacies of

power structures and norm-setting within the digital gaming community and in keeping with scholars as Wang and Ge (2022, pp.16-17).

Chapter 5 emphasizes the active engagement of gamers in these processes and underscores the significance of the game system as an independent entity. Beyond surface observations, it unveils the evolving, multi-layered, and complex power dynamics in digital gaming practices. By highlighting the far-reaching impact of regulatory contexts on digital gaming practices, my project underscores the complexity of digital gaming culture, offering new research avenues for the intersection of media regulation and digital gaming studies. Particularly noteworthy is the review of identity issues, which were the focus of Chapter 4, revealing how gamers, within the regulatory context, strive for agency through gaming interactions. Crucially, my project, by delving into how gamers flexibly respond to regulatory rules, emphasizes the uncertainty inherent in digital gaming practices. This provides robust theoretical support for the subsequent chapter's discussion on uncertainty.

Uncertainty

Through the discussions in the first two chapters on identity and agency negotiation, it is evident that elements of uncertainty shape digital gaming practices. The construction of identity involves individuals interacting with the game system, and this process itself is a dynamic filled with uncertainty. Similarly, agency negotiation reveals the intricate power dynamics among gamers, game systems, and regulatory contexts, where uncertainty is ever-present. This uncertainty is not merely randomness but involves the diversity of identity recognition, the agency of gamers in gaming interactions, and the dynamism of game rules. Therefore, uncertainty becomes a key perspective in understanding digital gaming practices.

First and foremost, through Chapter 6, I conclude that uncertainty is one of the core features of digital games. My research question driving this chapter was: **How central/important is uncertainty in game design and play? To what extent does thinking of games in relation to uncertainty help us understand the motivational and pleasurable aspects of gaming?** In relation to this question, I find that uncertainty is absolutely central to game design and play, whether thinking about game narratives, digital games integrate linear and non-linear narratives, granting gamers more control and choice (Harrell and Zhu, 2009, p.45; Naftali, 2022, p.1195). Dialogues, plot sequences, and provided choices became decisive factors for gamers in exploring the plot development. Each dialogue and every choice leaded the story in different directions, making each decision by the gamer akin to embarking on a new adventure (see page 252, 255 and 258). In terms of gameplay, uncertainty is primarily manifested in random factors and unknown game rules. The introduction of random factors made events in the game unpredictable, as gamers failed to anticipate the next challenge or the character they might encounter (see page 262). Such uncertainty stimulates gamers' curiosity and desire for exploration, enhancing the challenging and exhilarating aspects of the gaming experience. Meanwhile, the unknown rules of the game increase the learning cost of the gamers. Through continuous trial and error, gamers adapted to the game world, uncovering more strategies and possibilities. These analytical findings lead me to the realization that uncertainty not only injects novelty and innovation into the game but also creates a game world full of variables and discoveries for gamers.

Furthermore, I contend that a thorough exploration of gamers' experiences is crucial for understanding uncertainty in games. Gamers' experiences are reflections of subjective interpretation and unique understanding, further nuancing how we should understand uncertainty within the game (Power et al., 2019, pp.2-3; Kumari et al., 2019, p.352). While focusing on how gamers

incorporate uncertainty into gameplay, I emphasize analysing how gamers strategize and plan to achieve game objectives in unpredictable environments. In the immersive gaming experience, the perception of uncertainty involves gamers' independent subjective identification of the plot, strategies, and game rules. When facing the uncertainty emanating from the game, individual experiences, personal preferences, and unique perspectives on the nature of the game deeply influence the depth and breadth of perception. This indicates that, within the same game context, different gamers may exhibit vastly different perceptions and responses that reflect in turn, multifaceted and nuanced engagements with uncertainty.

By leveraging their own experiences and understanding of the game, gamers actively engage in the shaping and interpretation of uncertainty, making them proactive agents in constructing the meaning of the game. The choices gamers made, the strategies they formulated, and the emotions they displayed are expressions of their behaviour when confronting uncertainty, underscoring the autonomy and creativity of gamers in game interactions. This complexity not only underscores the multi-dimensionality of digital game practices but also interprets the critical role of uncertainty in games at a deeper level. Its significance extends beyond simple game elements, becoming an integral part of the complex and unique interactive relationship between gamers and the game. Consequently, I argue that the presence of uncertainty, to a certain extent, enables gamers to experience a sense of achievement and the pleasure of creativity in exploring the unknown Considering games as experiences of uncertainty also enables a better understanding of gamers' motivations, providing a more comprehensive theoretical foundation for game design and research.

Nevertheless, as Wilson et al. (2005, p.19) and Bar-Anan et al. (2009, p.123) argue, understanding the boundaries of uncertainty is equally crucial. Despite

gamers typically seeking excitement and enjoyment through the challenges and unknowns presented in the game, there are limits to their acceptance and expectations of uncertainty. On one hand, uncertainty such as unknown plot developments, random events, or opponents' strategies are often viewed as integral parts of game design, offering gamers opportunities for challenges and exploration, thereby enhancing the game's playability and pleasure. However, when uncertainty exceeds a certain degree, surpassing the gamers' acceptance threshold, it leads to negative experiences. For instance, if game rules were excessively vague or change too rapidly, gamers felt confused and frustrated rather than immersed in the experience (see page 287).

On the other hand, gamers' individual gaming experiences and intensions play a crucial role in defining their tolerance for uncertainty. Experienced gamers, for example, better adapted to and appreciated uncertainty in the game because of their deeper understanding of common game elements and challenges. In contrast, novice gamers preferred relatively stable and predictable gaming experiences to avoid excessive distress and frustration (see page 279). Some gamers who seek narrative exploration were more willing to embrace narrative uncertainty, as it provided them with more engaging and unexpected storytelling experiences. They appreciated suspense and complex plots, elements that add depth and allure to the game. Conversely, those who seek combat experiences valued the strategic aspects and variability in battles, as it presented greater challenges, turning each battle into a unique experience (see page 283).

I contend that a thorough exploration of the boundaries of uncertainty is crucial for deepening our understanding of how gamers perceive and respond to different types of uncertainty in the game. This attention not only provides valuable insights for game designers at a practical level but also enriches our theoretical framework for digital game practices.

Furthermore, the impact of uncertainty extends beyond the realm of digital games and permeates wider aspects of individuals' experiences within social and political contexts. Uncertainty connected to regulatory context for example, influences entire gaming practices, spanning interactions between gamers and the game as well as wider discourse (Luo and Li, 2022, pp.3-5). In China, the government, serving as the primary regulatory authority, regulates digital game content by enacting a series of policies (Knockel et al., 2017, p.2). The subjective and variable nature of government regulatory policy formulation involve aesthetic standards, value systems, and current political affairs, among other dimensions. The requirements for game content often undergo significant changes at different times and under different policy backgrounds, introducing continuous and evolving uncertainty for game companies. Due to differences in policy interpretation and subjective judgments by enforcers, game companies also encounter challenges and uncertainties in execution (see page 212). Furthermore, the uncertainty introduced by the regulatory context directly impacts gamers' gaming experiences. In this context, gamers constantly monitor whether their behaviour is subject to regulation, assess whether game content aligns with regulatory standards, and evaluate whether their expectations for the game are likely to be met (see page 241). Throughout this process, the uncertainty introduced by the regulatory context intertwines with various aspects of gaming practice, requiring continuous adjustments and adaptations from both game companies and gamers. Together, they collaboratively construct a dynamic and complex ecosystem within the digital gaming landscape.

In summary, my project, while conducting an in-depth analysis of digital gaming practices, thoroughly considers the influences of multiple factors, providing us with a more comprehensive understanding. This allows us to delve into the complexity of digital gaming practices within a specific socio-political context. This complexity arises not only from the uncertainty within the digital gaming

domain but also involves the interweaving of factors such as regulation, societal pressures, and political changes. These factors collectively shape the emotional experiences and behavioural choices of individual gamers, serving as a window for further observation and exploration of the complex power dynamics within gaming practices. Throughout this process, I emphasize the significance of context, considering it as a critical perspective for research, thus offering a unique contribution to understanding the complexity of gaming culture. External contextual factors intertwine with the uncertainty within the digital gaming domain, collectively influencing individual gamers' emotional experiences, behavioural choices, as well as negotiations of identity and values. Within this perspective, the complexity of digital gaming practices presents more nuanced dimensions. Therefore, my project highlights that context is not merely an influencing factor but a key element in shaping the digital gaming culture. This addresses the gap in analysing and presenting complex scenarios within gaming practices under specific contexts.

My methods and their contributions

In my project, I employed four distinct yet complementary research methods. These methods encompass **Formal Analysis**, **Digital Diaries**, **In-depth Interviews**, and **Discourse Analysis**. They respectively provided multi-dimensional data sources for my project, offering perspectives on game design, gamer self-expression, in-depth interpretation, and specific analysis combined with context. The integrated use of these methods not only increased the richness and authenticity of the data but also facilitated a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the complexity within digital game practices.

The methods I employed

Firstly, I employed the method of formal analysis to examine the visual and

narrative representation of game characters in the *Onmyoji* franchise and conduct an in-depth examination of the narrative structure and game mechanics of the game itself, aiming to identify how gamers construct identification of characters in their transmedia gaming and also the interactive nature of gaming as well as elements that could potentially provide or trigger feelings of uncertainty for gamers. This structural approach (Lankoshi and Bjork, 2015, p.23) played a crucial role in my project. Initially, formal analysis helped me to discover the combination of different visual and narrative elements and their effects in conveying meanings (see page 133), which to a large extent influencing gamers' understanding and identification of character-related narratives. Also, this method made a significant contribution to analyse key decision points in the storyline and accurately portrayed the impact of these points on the game's narrative development and the gamer's emotional experience (see page 252). These decision points are not only turning points in the story but also crucial elements in shaping gamer character identity and emotional experience. Then, formal analysis, through exploration of game mechanics, including task settings, reward mechanisms, and difficulty adjustments, identified how the game system shapes gamers' choice and strategy making (see page 263). At the same time, by analysing the diversity in game narratives and the random factors in game mechanics, this method revealed different types of uncertainty gamers may experience in facing branching plots, unknown developments, and exploratory experiences in random game events (see page 278). Ultimately, by focusing on the impact of gamer decisions and how the game system shapes gamer experiences, formal analysis reveals the significant role of game systems for shaping power dynamics. This method therefore prompts further considerations of identity construction and power relations in the digital game.

Secondly, I employed the innovative method of digital diaries to capture various aspects of gamers' experiences in their gaming practices, including daily

behaviours, choices, interactions with game elements, and social engagements. The digital diary played a crucial role in my project, utilizing the WeLog mini-programme developed specifically for my project to provide a more comprehensive, real-time, and multi-dimensional dataset of emotional experiences. WeLog, as a WeChat mini-programme, offered gamers a convenient and intuitive platform to record and share various experiences and feelings in real-time during digital gameplay. It serves as a powerful tool for capturing gamers' self-expression. By reading the recorded daily activities, I captured gamers' actual engagement, including information on time allocation, gaming duration, and frequency, showcasing their level of commitment to digital games and their attitudes and expectations towards the gaming experience (see page 107). The digital diary also provided a means to understand how gamers make decisions in the game. Through gamers' records, I delved into how they cope with uncertainties in different gaming contexts and reveal their reflections on power relations (see page 278). Additionally, the social interactions documented in their digital diaries showcased gamers' engagements with others, sharing experiences, and providing comments on game elements (see page 187, for example), thereby presenting a negotiation of broader identities and agency.

Then, in-depth interviews conducted through the application of Tencent Meeting provided a targeted platform for a critical phase of my project. Serving as a key component for in-depth interpretation of digital diaries and formal analysis results, these interviews enabled gamers to reflect on their gaming experiences. Through one-on-one online discussions with participants, I also discussed their digital diaries, clarified potential ambiguities or uncertainties, and explored specific experiences and viewpoints. In-depth interviews therefore contextualised and extended the digital diaries, enabling a more holistic understanding of gamers' experiences and cognition in digital game practices. They also assisted in understanding the motivations and emotional

states behind gamers' actions; they helped understanding of individual differences among gamers, shaping how I was able to think about the social impacts of identity construction, value and agency negotiation, and uncertainty.

In the final phase of the project, discourse analysis, was employed to systematically examine and analyse participants' written or verbal expressions. This in-depth scrutiny aimed to uncover how participants adeptly conveyed their viewpoints and emotions within specific contexts through diverse linguistic expressions, organizational structures, facial expressions, or body language. Discourse analysis played a unique role in examining subtle differences and implicit information in participants' expressions, revealing gamers' language choices and meaning construction when dealing with uncertainty. By delving into their discourse, I captured emotions, attitudes, and beliefs beneath the surface, further enriching a comprehensive understanding of gamers' psychological and emotional aspects in the context of digital game practices. However, I am fully aware of the polysemy of language and its context-dependent nature, which could lead to misunderstandings of certain expressions. This creates a number of challenges for data analysis. Therefore, when interpreting results, I considered various possibilities, especially by analysing them in conjunction with the specific context in which participants positioned themselves.

The integrated application of these four research methods has provided robust support for drawing conclusions in my project. Each method possesses unique strengths, and their combination allows them to complement each other's shortcomings. By combining these methods, I was able to analyse the complexity of digital game practices from multiple dimensions, laying a solid foundation for formulating research conclusions.

Methodological Contributions

In the selection and application of research methods, my design prioritized flexibility and adaptability, taking into full consideration the unique circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. During that time, most cities in China adhered to strict control measures, with social distancing and restricted mobility becoming part of people's daily lives (VOA News, 2022). Consequently, conducting research in China during this period required me and other participants to stay in our respective cities and voluntarily minimize face-to-face interactions. Against this backdrop, I made flexible choices by opting for the methods of digital diaries and online in-depth interviews, adapting to the social realities of the pandemic. Such choices played a pivotal role in ensuring the smooth progress of the study and effectively obtaining data under restricted circumstances. These arrangements took into full consideration the participants' needs during this particular period, providing them with a convenient and low-risk mode of participation. Also, these online participations provided participants with the opportunity to express their views and experiences more naturally in their own environments, creating a more relaxed and comfortable communication atmosphere. This not only ensured the adaptability of my project to changes in the external environment, safeguarding the acquisition and analysis of data from the constraints of unforeseen circumstances, but also effectively unfolded within the complex social context. Therefore, the flexibility and adaptability of my research methods laid a solid foundation for the sustainability and quality of the project, providing a valuable example for researchers making decisions in uncertain situations.

Furthermore, my project demonstrates innovation in the application of research methods. The digital diary method incorporates various multimedia technologies in its design and execution, not only enabling a comprehensive capture of participants' multidimensional experiences in gaming practices but

also introducing new perspectives and insights to the field. The innovation of the digital diary method lies not only in its use of the WeLog mini-programme on WeChat, providing participants with a convenient platform for recording and sharing gaming experiences, but also in the utilization of multimedia formats, enriching the expression levels of the data. As a lightweight application, WeLog can run directly within WeChat, offering participants a convenient entry point, and reducing the operational burden associated with their involvement in my project. I maximized the multimedia data collection capabilities supported by the WeChat mini-programme, incorporating various forms of expression such as text and images. This design allows participants to record their gaming experiences in a more expressive manner, resulting in richer and more comprehensive research data. WeChat, as the social media platform on which the mini-programme is based, facilitated real-time communication between me and the participants, enabling me to pose questions, clarify doubts, and engage them more actively in the research process. Additionally, I paid attention to the design of the mini-programme interface, ensuring its user-friendliness. Through intuitive operations and a clear interface, I aimed to minimize the learning curve for participants when using WeLog, enhancing its usability. The use of this innovative method allowed for a better understanding of gamers' emotions, attitudes, and experiences in interacting with others during gaming. Moreover, in the course of my research practice, it accumulated a substantial dataset comprising 70,000 words of gaming practice diaries, providing a valuable resource for future in-depth exploration and further investigation.

The innovation of this method also lies in its emphasis on the subjective experiences of participants. Throughout the design, development, and implementation of WeLog, I consistently prioritized the actual needs of the participants, conducting a series of user experience surveys and feedback collection. For instance, in the early stages of design, I gathered expectations

and requirements from participants regarding the digital diary platform. Throughout the design process, ongoing communication with select participants allowed me to incorporate their aesthetic opinions appropriately. After completing the initial prototype of WeLog, I invited several participants for testing. Through observation of their interactions and collection of feedback, I iteratively optimized the interface and functionality of WeLog to enhance user experience. Following the launch of the digital diary mini-programme, I continued actively collecting their usage feedback and suggestions. In the concluding in-depth interviews, I sought their reflections on the entire research process. This approach, which considered aspects such as user interface design and real-time communication, elevated the user experience for participants, providing insights and recommendations for the design of digital tools in future research. I believe that other researchers can learn from this experience on how to design user-friendly and efficient research tools. Hence, my methodological contribution not only played a role in the current study but also offers valuable lessons and examples for similar future research, promoting innovation and development in research methods.

Most importantly, these methods permeated the entire research process, consistently responding to the core themes of identity, agency negotiation, and uncertainty. Using them together endowed my project with a deeper level of reflection and theoretical significance. Throughout the participant recruitment and ongoing communication processes, I continually negotiated my dual identities as both a researcher and a gamer. Regarding concerns about the regulatory context, I considered the constraints arising from media and content regulations in the design and use of research methods. From posting recruitment messages on gamer forums to the design and development of the WeChat mini-programme, I encountered challenges imposed by regulatory constraints. Throughout this process, I adjusted strategies to negotiate this context. In the use of the WeChat mini-programme and Tencent Meeting

software for video interviews, I observed that participants were initially very cautious about expressing preference or opinion which I relate to the wider regulated environment, the specific constraints of the platform and the power dynamics of the research process. This insight provided a deeper understanding of how researchers and other gamers negotiate agency within the context of regulatory discourse. Most importantly, the various limitations, obstacles, and changes encountered throughout the process made me realize the inherent uncertainty in my project, just as what my participants have experienced in gaming practices. By integrating research methods with the focal themes, I exemplified the fusion of theoretical frameworks and research methods. This not only provides methodological guidance for future similar studies but also offers experiences and insights for the development of research methods in digital game studies. The driving force of this methodological approach compels us to consider the selection and application of research methods more thoroughly in shaping research and findings.

Therefore, the flexibility, innovation, and integration of my research methods have rendered them powerful tools. They have not only yielded significant outcomes in the current project but also offer valuable experiences and insights for future researchers. Through the continuous evolution and innovation of methods, my contributions to the field of digital game studies will persist, offering enduring and robust support for our enhanced understanding of culture, identity, and social interaction in the digital age.

Limitations and Moving Forward

Firstly, I acknowledge that my project predominantly focuses on *Onmyoji* gamers in a specific geographic location and cultural context. This specificity may constrain the applicability of my conclusions to other geographic or cultural settings. Gamer attitudes and behaviours towards games can

significantly differ in the social and economic environments of specific geographic locations. Considering the diversity of cultural backgrounds, distinct cultures may hold unique perspectives and expectations regarding game practices, further limiting the generalizability of research findings. The patterns and trends observed in my project may present markedly different characteristics in different cultural contexts. Therefore, future research efforts will aim to diversify the sample, encompassing a broader range of geographic locations and cultural groups, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of digital games, including but not limited to *Onmyoji*, and gamers' gaming practices in various cultural contexts.

Secondly, my focus primarily centres on specific aspects of digital game practices, such as daily behaviours and choices, interactions with characters, and transmedia narrative experiences. This is to the detriment of other considerations, such as participation in esports, diverse understandings and demands of power by female gamers, the impact of game environments on emotions, and the manifestation of neoliberal characteristics in gaming practices, among others. My future research will expand the scope of attention and conducting in-depth investigations into these aspects.

Finally, reflecting on the entire project, I believe we cannot overlook the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the research environment. In this time of uncertainty and tension, gamers faced unprecedented pressures in their lives, work, and physiological and psychological well-being. Such extraordinary environmental factors shaped their enthusiasm for the project and overall gaming experiences. Faced with the various challenges of the pandemic, my participants' emotions, attention, and behaviours may undergo significant fluctuations. The variables and tension in their lives may lead to changes in their level of participation in the study, thereby influencing their practical experiences with digital games. This unique environmental background adds

complexity to the interpretation of research results, necessitating a deeper understanding of participants' life contexts and psychological states during this special moment to grasp their real experiences more accurately in digital game practices. This emphasizes the importance of context in research and also suggests that we need to consider and adapt to specific social backgrounds more meticulously in future studies. Through more vivid research designs and deeper data collection, we can gain a better understanding of how the environment shapes participant behaviours, enhancing the persuasiveness and applicability of research outcomes. Therefore, in my future research, I intend to further explore the experiences of digital games during special moments, building upon this foundation. This will contribute more profound and substantive insights to the field of digital game studies.

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Appendix 1: Consent Forms and Information Sheet

(i) Consent Form for the Research of Digital Diaries

	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet explaining the above research project, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any stage of this project without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
I understand that if I agree to take part in this process of research, my diaries would be the part of the research objects and that I am free to write down anything about gaming experiences, gaming behaviours and gaming feelings in the digital diary.	
I understand that my diaries will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my legal name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	
I agree for the anonymised data collected from me to be quoted in publications, reports, PhD thesis and other research outputs. I understand that any quotations will be used in a non-identifying manner.	
I understand that if I choose to withdraw, I need to let Li Zhao know in writing and I can require to have all data generated by me destroyed seven days later after my withdraw. I understand that data that have been used in published publications cannot be deleted.	
I agree to take part in the above research project, and if I have further questions or concerns, I will contact Li Zhao or her supervisors. I agree to inform Li Zhao should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Li Zhao
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

(ii) Consent Form for the Research of In-depth Interviews

	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any stage of this project without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
I understand that if I agree to be interviewed, it will be audio recorded and will be transcribed into English. I agree that she can take notes on my answers during the interview.	
I understand that I am free to decline to answer any questions, without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.	
I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. I understand that my legal name will not be required in the research, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.	
I agree for the anonymised data collected from me to be quoted in publications, reports, PhD thesis and other research outputs. I understand that any quotations will be used in a non-identifying manner.	
I agree for the data collected to be stored anonymously by Li Zhao for up to four years after the original findings of the study are published.	
I understand that if I choose to withdraw, I need to let Li Zhao know in writing, and I can require to have all data generated by me destroyed 7 days later after my withdraw. I understand that data that have been used in published publications cannot be deleted.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and if I have further questions or concerns, I will contact Li Zhao or her supervisors. I agree to inform Li Zhao should my contact details change.	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of lead researcher	Li Zhao
Signature	
Date*	

*To be signed and dated in the presence of the participant.

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/ pre-written script/ information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be kept with the project's main documents which must be kept in a secure location.

(iii) Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet
信息表

You are invited to participate in research entitled: '*Identity, Agency, and Uncertainty: Exploring Dynamic Mobile Gaming Practices within the Regulatory Context of China*'. This project is being conducted by Li Zhao, a PhD student at the University of Leeds. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand what my study is about and what will be involved if you decide to participate. Please take time to read the following information carefully, and if you would like more information or if there is anything that you do not understand, please feel free to ask me. You do not have to accept this invitation, and you should agree to take part only if you want to.

1. What is this study about?

Taking the mobile game Onmyoji as the main case, and taking the consideration of the specific context of Chinese media regulation, this project is purposed to explore how the national culture advocated by the mainstream ideology and the transnational culture represented in the game at the same time, and whether there is a contradiction between gamers' identification with these two different cultures. To do this, I need to find out how gamers exactly engage in the game, either online or offline, and gamers' perception and interpretations of the collision of different cultures.

2. Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been selected to take part in this project because you are a Chinese gamer of the mobile game Onmyoji. You have been exposed to Chinese culture and played this Japanese-style game. I am interested in how you exactly engage in the game and why, and your perception and understanding of these two cultures while playing.

3. Do I have to take part?

No, your participation is entirely voluntary. If you are not willing to participate in this project, please let me know. You do not need to feel any pressure from anyone. It is entirely up to you to participate in the study. If you decide to participate, you will be given this information sheet and will be required to sign a consent form to demonstrate that you fully understand and agree to the participatory terms.

4. What will happen next if I agree to take part?

If you decide to participate in this project, you will first need to sign the consent formed attached to this information form and return it to me.

Secondly, I will develop a WeChat mini-programme for the session of digital diary research. I will invite you to participate in the testing stage of programme development. After you try out the programme, you can suggest anything that you feel needs to be modified or supplemented. I will fully respect your advice and take it seriously.

During the digital diary phase, you will be asked to use the WeChat-based mini-programme to write a diary as much detail as possible about your gaming behaviours, experiences and feelings during the day for 10 consecutive days. You can also feel free to share your thoughts or ask questions during these days.

After this, you will continue to be invited for a further in-depth interview. The interview will be conducted one on one. I will ask you some questions based on your digital diaries and previous gaming experiences, such as your explanation of specific gaming behaviours, your perception and understanding of different cultural elements embedded in the game, etc. our interview will last for around 60 to 90 minutes. I will try my best to have a face-to-face interview with you, but if the geographical distance between us is too far, the interview will be conducted through Skype of WeChat video call. Of course, the specific time, place and way of the interview will be decided after discussing with you. The interview will be recorded, transcribed into text and translated into English.

5. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

Yes, this study will use strict confidentiality mechanisms to ensure your privacy. First, your legal name and other information that can identify you will not be required. You can tell me a name you want to be called during the diary research and interview, or I will give you a pseudonym for my dissertation writing. Although I will make a code sheet containing your name and your pseudonym in the article, this will only be for my reference and will not be disclosed to anyone other than me. Also, your game diaries and subsequent interview will be recorded verbatim. What will be cited in the paper will be translated into English. After the translation is completed, the original text will be destroyed. All research data will be stored in a separate folder at the University of Leeds M: drive, which is password protected and all paper materials will be stored in a separate lockbox.

6. What are the risks in participating in this project?

I don't think this project will put you at any risk.

7. What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You will be involved in my project, which may be a novel experience for you. In this process, you will have the opportunity to get close to academic research, understand what academic research is, and participate in many interesting academic activities. It is also a great opportunity for you to express your hobbies and ideas. As you share your gaming experiences and thoughts, I will also share with you some interesting findings from my project. Through our discussion, you may be able to re-examine the game and your gaming behaviour from a new perspective. Even more, your experiences and opinions will have the opportunity to appear in international academic publications. At the end of the study, we may form a friendship because we share a common interest in the game, and we may continue to explore this game or others together in the future. I think you will enjoy this experience.

8. What if I do not particularly feel like to do one or more things in the study? / Can I quit halfway through?

If there is anything you do not want to do or answer during the research, you can refuse without feeling pressured.

Of course, you also have the right to quit within 14 days of the end of any stage of the research without giving me any reason or worrying about the consequences. All research materials related to you will be deleted after 7 days of your quit. I will not cite the information and materials provided by you in my final PhD thesis and articles to be published. However, data related to you in published articles cannot be revoked.

9. What will happen to the results of the research?

All data provided by you will be anonymized and stored in a separate secure folder on the University of Leeds M: Drive, as well as in an encrypted portable storage hard drive. The information and materials you provide may be used in publications, reports and graduation thesis and other research outputs. But with no worries, your real personal information will not be used and cannot be identified.

10. Will I be recorded, and how will the recordings be used?

Our interview will be recorded, and some notes will be made according to your answers. The recordings during this project will be transcribed and partly translated into English, and your real personal information will be anonymized. These recordings and transcribed data will only be used for analysis and paper writing. I will not use for any other purpose without your written permission. No one but me can access the original recording.

11. Whom should I contact if I had any further questions about it?

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me, Li Zhao. I am a PhD researcher with the School of Media and Communications in the University of Leeds, United Kingdom. You can email me (me16lz@leeds.ac.uk), send me a message on WeChat (ID: ZF_DUO), or talk to me in person.

If you do not feel comfortable to contact me, you can contact my supervisors, Dr Tom Tyler (T.Tyler@leeds.ac.uk) or Dr Helen Thornham (h.thornham@leeds.ac.uk) in School of Media and Communications, University of Leeds.

Thank you in advance for your contribution to this study.

Appendix 2: Ethics Review Evidence

Re: FAHC 20-036 - Ethics Application - Reviewers Comments_Response

AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>
Thu 01/04/2021 19:31

To:Li Zhao [me16lz] <me16lz@leeds.ac.uk>
Cc:Tom Tyler <T.Tyler@leeds.ac.uk>;Helen Thornham <H.Thornham@leeds.ac.uk>;AHC Research Ethics <AHCResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk>

Dear Li (Tom and Helen for information)

FAHC 20-036 - The Onmyoji world in China: to what extent does young gamers' identification of transnational culture conflict with the mainstream national identity?

Further to the submission of the additional information below (V2 documents – 08/03/2021), I am pleased to inform you that your research ethics amendment application has been reviewed by the AHC Committee and I can confirm this has received a favourable ethical opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Please retain this email as evidence of approval in your study file.

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology. All changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. Please refer to the amendment form or contact the Research Ethics & Governance Administrator for further information (ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk) if required.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms (if you continue to do this by post), risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

Some funders require official confirmation that ethics approval has been achieved. If you require this email agreement in letter form please do let me know. I would be happy to provide this if it is needed.

I hope the study goes well. If you have any questions please do email me.

Best wishes,
Erin
(on behalf of the AHC Faculty Research Ethics Committee)

Erin Pickles

FREC | University of Leeds
Email: ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk

Appendix 3: Recruitment Materials

(i) The Recruitment Poster Design

(ii) The Recruitment Text

Hello, everyone!
I am，

- a big fan of Onmyoji;
- a PhD student at the University of Leeds, UK,
- also, a researcher on mobile games and trans-cultural identity.

You can learn more about me and my project through the link below:
https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/media/pgr/2177/li-zhao

I would like to invite you to join a fascinating academic study on Chinese mobile gamers' trans-cultural identity. You will have an excellent opportunity to be personally involved in academic research, and to tell your story to the world! You are the protagonist!

This project allows us to,
- ✓ co-design a digital diary mini-programme;
- ✓ record gaming experiences and thoughts, including text, pictures, video, etc.;
- ✓ have an in-depth interview online or offline (last about 60-90 minutes).

Getting involved in academic research is easier than you might think!

As long as you are:

- ✓ at the age of 18-25;
- ✓ a Chinese gamer of Onmyoji.

Then, this study will be open to you!

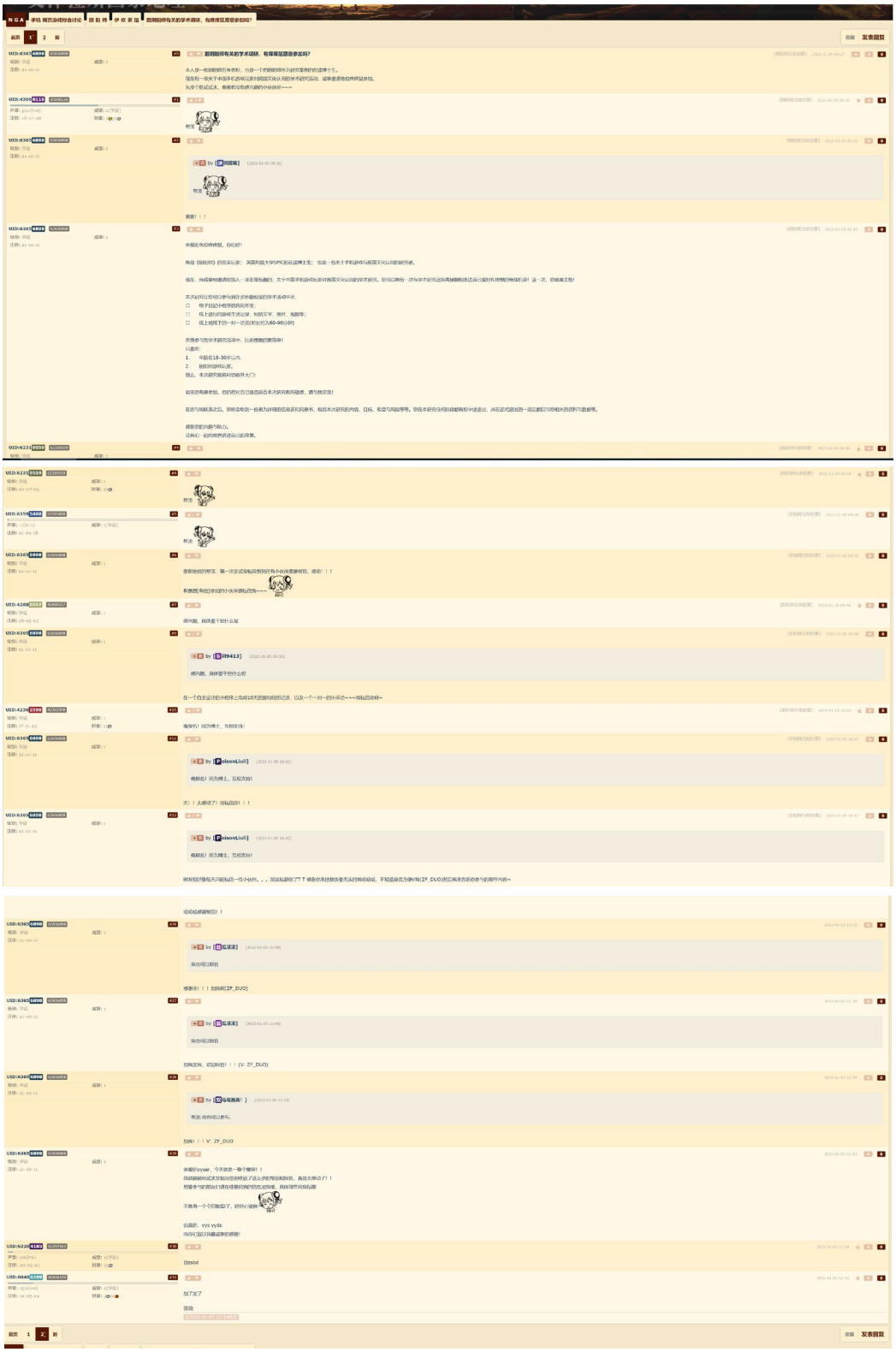
If you are interested in participating in this study, but still have doubts about whether you are suitable, please contact me through:

WeChat: ZF_DUO
Email: me16lz@leeds.ac.uk

After contacting me, you will receive a more detailed information sheet and a consent form, including the research content, purposes, benefits, risks of this study and so on. You have the right to quit at any stage of this study and to withdraw your relevant materials and data 7 days after your formal withdrawal.

Thank you for your interest and support.
Together, let's express ourselves to the world！

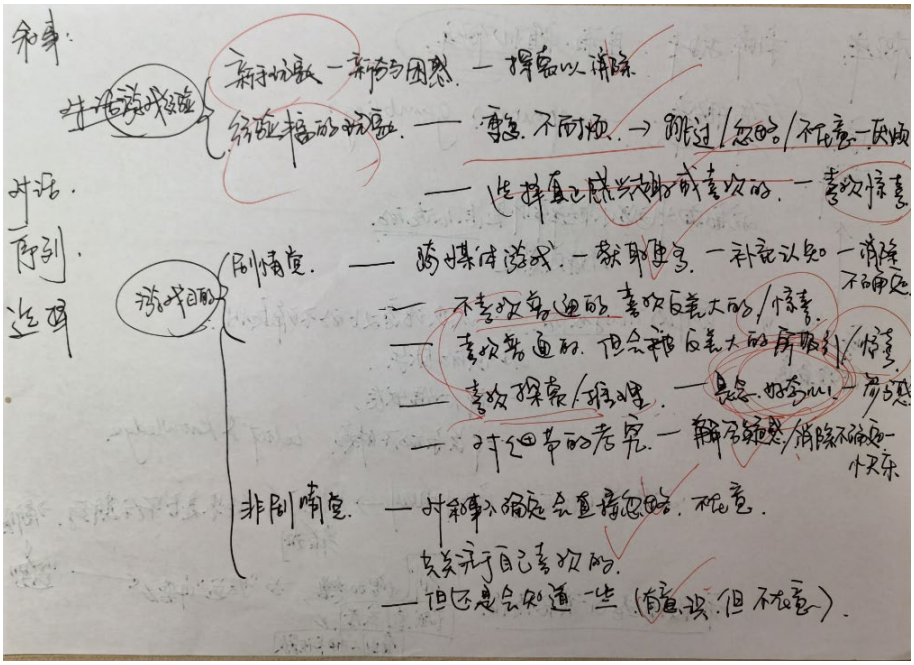
(iii) **Recruitment on NGA Forum**



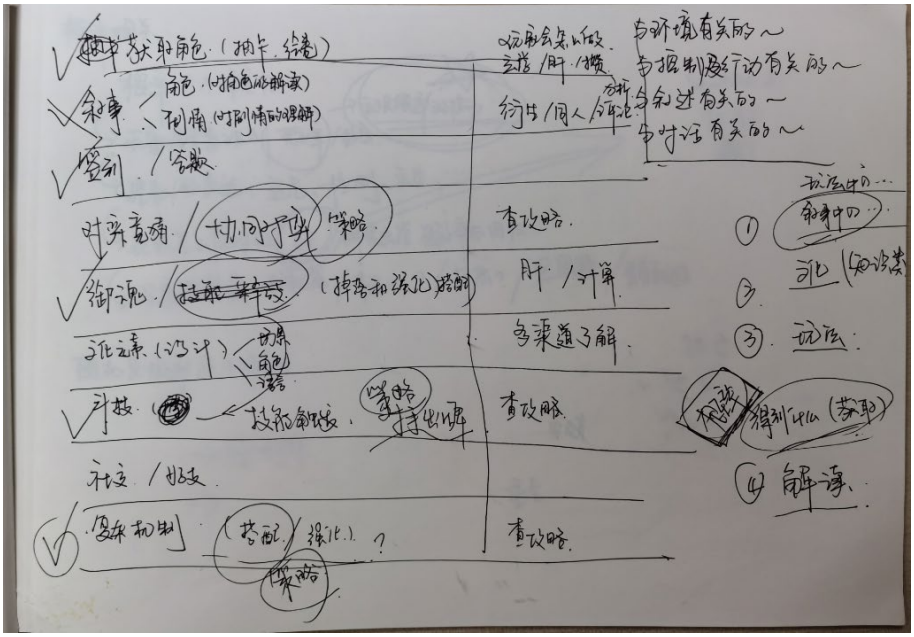
Appendix 4: Formal Analysis

Before the formal analysis of the game's characters, narrative, and mechanics in *Onmyoji*, I replayed the game with three themes in mind: identity, agency negotiation, and uncertainty. I took lots of notes, wrote down key words related to my project during the replay, tried to sort out the logic of the analysis, and tried to draw mind maps of the game system. These notes kept me from getting lost in the formal analysis of the game elements listed in Chapter 3.

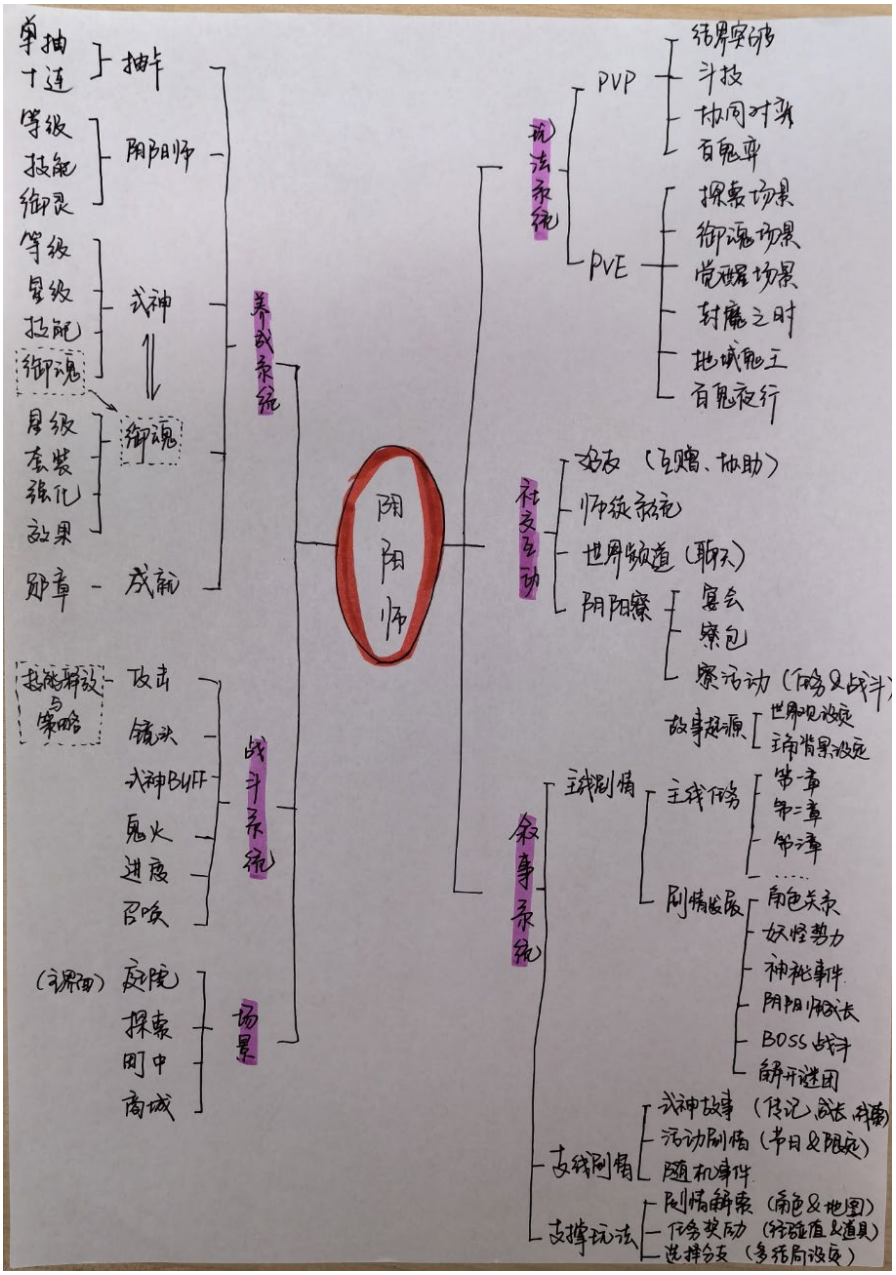
These include notes on the game narrative (dialogues, plot sequence, choices):



Notes on the main game mechanisms I experienced:



A mind map of the game system:

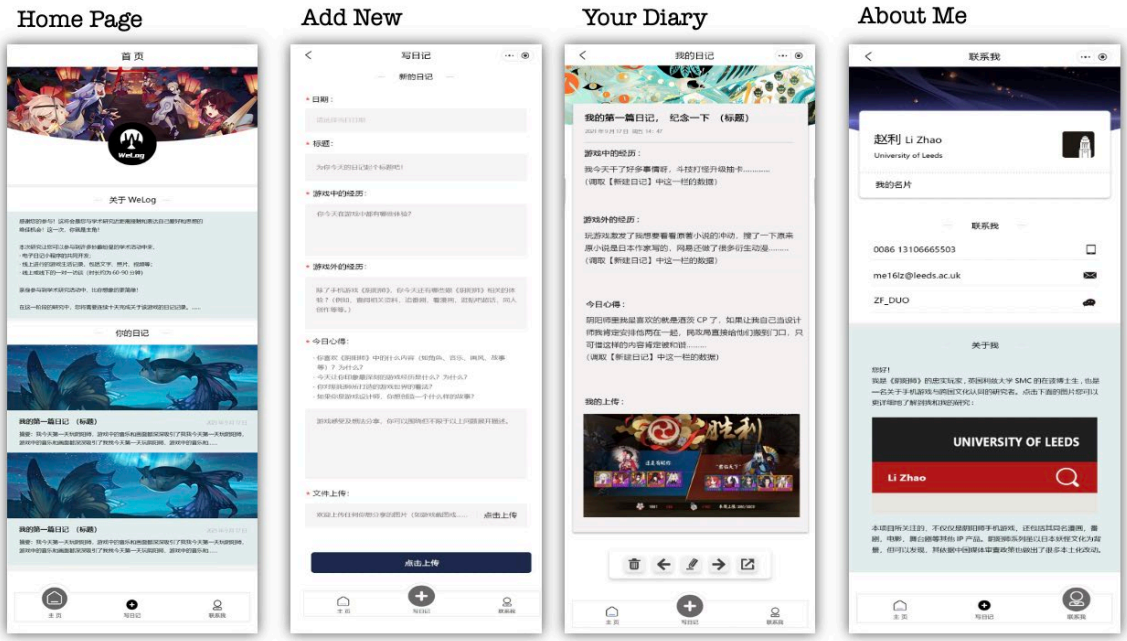


Appendix 5: The Design of WeLog

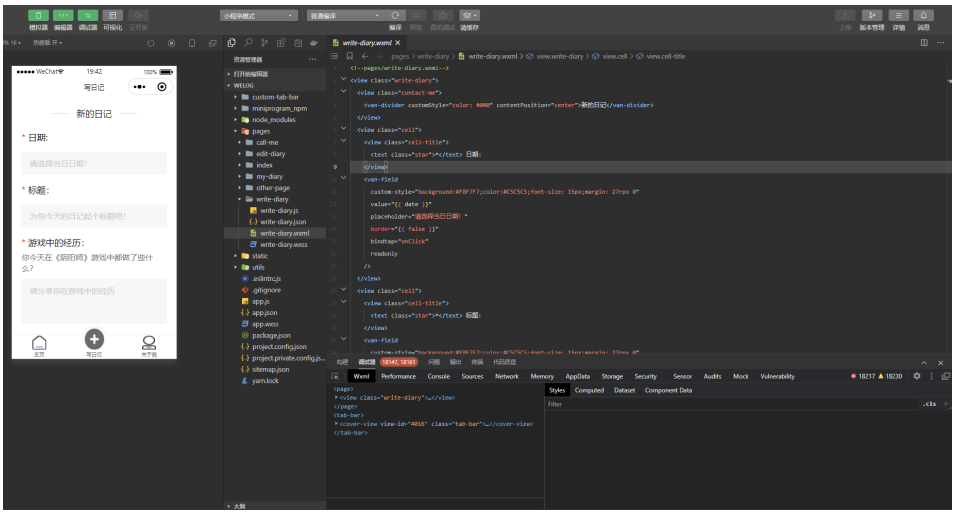
(i) The Logo Design

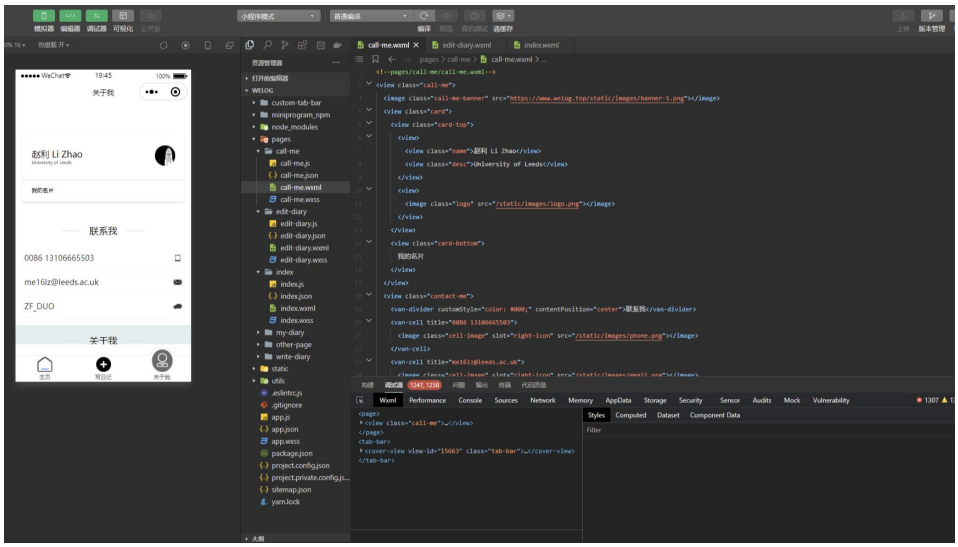
(ii) The Interface Design

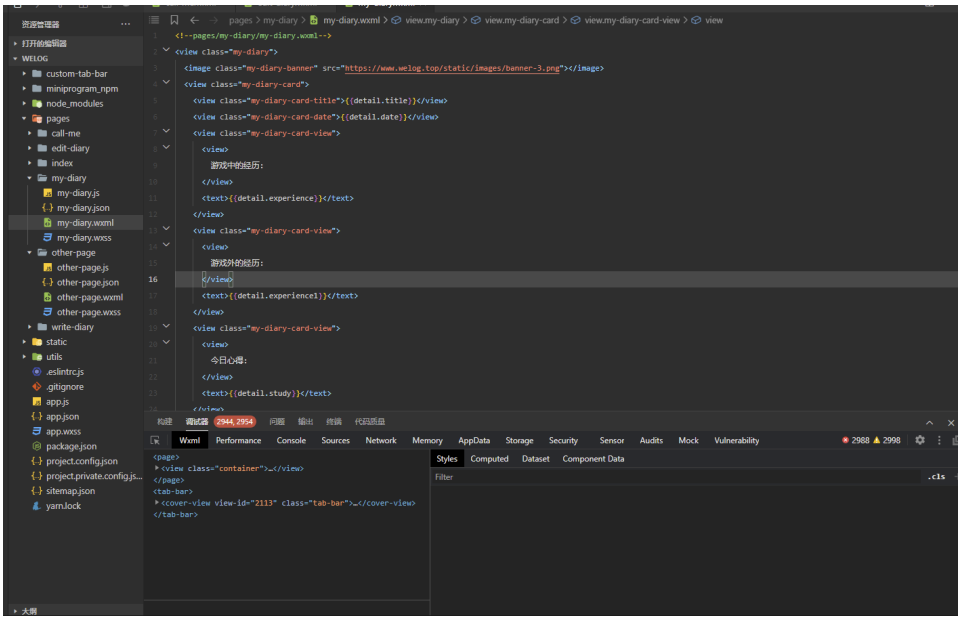
There are four main interfaces in WeLog, namely the Home Page, Add New, Your Diary, and About Me, each capable of serving different functions for my project on digital diaries.



Here are some screenshots of the WeLog programme codes:







(iii) Realisable Functions

Online Form Filling
Participants are required to complete a diary in a form, including date, title, experiences in and outside the game, and their feelings and thoughts. Writing a diary with a form can provide participants with a filling guide to help them understand what needs to be written every day. This function also facilitates me to collect and analyse data according to different categories.

Online Text Input
When filling the form, participants can enter text (no word limit) in the text box and insert emoticons. This function is convenient for participants to record and share their game experience and feelings of the day through text.

Image Upload
Participants can upload one image they would like to share, such as screenshot of gaming, chat on other social platforms, fan works, etc. Image sharing can be used as a supplement to their text diary.

One-click Submission
Participants can click the 'submit' button at the bottom of the page to submit the diary immediately. Once the diary is submitted, it will appear in the list on the homepage.

Free Review of the Day
After submitting, participants can check their completed diaries at any time from the diary list, so as to recall what they have experienced and what they have written. This function can also help inspire participants, providing some ideas for write a new dairy or how to play in the next few days.

Immediate Revise
Participants can revise the diary after submitting it in 24 hours, since players can use their mobile phone to play the game anytime and anywhere at their convenience. Then, this function can facilitate them to delete, modify or supplement the submitted content at different times of the day.

Data Access
This function is design for data analyse. Once the diary is submitted, the researcher can access the data through the backstage management system. I can review each of the diaries - when they submitted it and what they shared. This function can help me collect and sort out data quickly and easily. It is also convenient for me to distinguish whether anyone has difficulties in using the WeLog according to their daily diary completion and provide technical help in time. Only the researcher has access to the backstage database.

In addition to the abovementioned core functions, WeLog also have the function of diary deletion and forwarding for participants to manage their own diaries. Participants can also check the brief introduction of this project and my contact information (Phone number, email and WeChat ID).

(iv) **Development and Test**

After development, I invited nine participants to conduct the functional test of WeLog. With guidance, participants clicked on the link and accessed WeLog to create more than 3 diaries on the ‘Add New’ page. They filled out the form according to the subtitle and prompt information provided for each text box, upload image, and then submit. Upon returning to the ‘Home’ page, participants were asked to review the diaries, ensuring that the submitted content was displayed accurately and testing various functions on the 'Your Diary' page. Finally, participants visited the ‘About Me’ page and clicked on the picture link located below to test whether the page successfully redirected to my personal page at the University of Leeds. They were required to fill out a test form, marking a check (√) if there were no problem with the text item. They were asked to provide a brief description if they encountered any problems.

	Test Items								
	Create a new diary	List loading	Diary review	Diary editing	Diary deletion	Diary forwarding	The next/previous one	The picture link	Access again after exiting
Participant 1	√	Slow loading speed	error codes appeared	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 2	The question is a little vague. I don't know how to answer it.	It cannot be loaded.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 3	Can the suggestive text be written in more detail?	Only one diary can be displayed.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 4	√	Only one diary can be displayed.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 5	√	The load symbol is flashing all the time.	The memes inserted in the diary became garbled	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 6	The meaning of suggestive words is somewhat vague.	I can’t see the list.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 7	√	It cannot be loaded.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 8	I can’t upload short video	It cannot be loaded.	The inserted emoticon cannot be displayed	Every diary can be edited.	√	√	√	√	√
Participant 9	√	It cannot be loaded.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

(v) WeLog User Guide

Dear Participants, Hello!

First and foremost, I want to express my gratitude for your participation. I apologize for the delay, but after enduring a lengthy process of programme development, Tencent and Ministry of Industry and Information Technology approvals, and repeated testing and modifications, WeLog is finally ready for use (tears of joy T_T). WeLog is a WeChat mini-programme designed and developed by me for this project. It is primarily intended for Onmyoji gamers to share your gaming experiences and reflections over a period of ten consecutive days. In this document, I will provide some brief guidance on how to use WeLog.

1. Login:
For the first use, please scan and identify the QR code. For subsequent uses, you can find the WeLog icon in the 'Recently Used Mini-Programs' section on the WeChat homepage.

2. About WeLog, Me, and My Project:
There are introductions about WeLog, myself, and my project on the 'Home' and 'About Me' pages. If you have any questions, feel free to communicate with me via WeChat or through other contact methods displayed on the 'About Me' page.

3. Writing Diary Entries:
The diary creation page provides prompts on 'What should I write'. You can write diary entries around these prompts but are not limited to them. I sincerely invite you to share your daily gaming experiences and thoughts in as much detail as possible. Every bit of your sharing is valuable research data to me.

4. Submission, Viewing, and Modification:
After submission, you can view and modify the content at any time within 24 hours. However, after 24 hours, only viewing is supported, and modification is not allowed. I hope you can record new ideas in a new diary entry.

A Warm reminder: According to the 'WeChat Public Platform Service Agreement' and information content specifications, please do not use this mini-programme to publish, transmit, or disseminate content that violates national laws and regulations, public order (such as violating the constitution, endangering national security, harming national honour and interests, undermining national unity, spreading rumours, obscenity, or inciting crimes). So, be careful~

Appendix 6: The Guideline of Interview Questions

(i) General Questions about Gaming Experiences

By asking some general questions, I aimed to make participants feel more relaxed and open, encouraging them to share their genuine thoughts and experiences.

1. How long have you been playing Onmyoji?
2. Approximately how much time do you spend playing Onmyoji each day?
3. Besides Onmyoji, do you enjoy playing any other games?
4. What initially attracted you to this game?
5. What do you think is the most captivating aspect of this game for you? What keeps you hooked or constantly thinking about it in the game?
6. Could you use three or four keywords to describe your overall gaming experience with Onmyoji?
7. From when you first started playing the game until now, what do you consider to be your biggest gain in the game?

(ii) Questions Related to Diaries and Three Themes

I posed targeted questions based on the dairies they submitted. Not only did this allow for a deeper understanding of the content mentioned in the entries, but it also enabled exploration of topics that participants were genuinely interested in, linking them to my research themes. Therefore, the questions in this section were designed with specificity in mind beforehand and were adjusted flexibly during implementation. The following questions are excerpted from interviews with 20 participants and represent a typical subset of questions:

Questions Regarding Players' Specific Gaming Behaviours
(Regarding Doing Dailies)

1. Based on your diary entries, your experiences in the game are mainly related to daily tasks. Some players have likened playing Onmyoji to going to work, where they log in daily to complete tasks. What is your perspective on this? You've also expressed feeling exhausted after completing daily tasks in your diary. What do these daily tasks mean to you? Do they deepen your connection with the game?
2. What is your favourite task in the game? And what do you find most tedious?
3. In your diary, you mentioned that you manage your game time reasonably and consider yourself a time management master. What does your usual game time planning look like? Do you utilize your spare time, or do you focus on completing game tasks during specific time slots?
4. You mentioned having experiences of '肝' and, like me, you often use the auto-

battle mode. How do you think enabling the game system to initiate auto-battle and directly obtain rewards affects your gaming experience?

5. Have you ever experienced ‘Liver burst’? What motivates you to invest a significant amount of time in the game? Do you think such time investment is worthwhile?

(Regarding Game Mechanics)

6. You mentioned that the game mechanics of Onmyoji are very complex, ranking among the top in the market. As a player, are you personally attracted to such complex game mechanics? Are you willing to spend time studying and understanding them?
7. In your diary, you mentioned that cultural elements in the game are important, but the most crucial aspect is that players can continue playing and newcomers or returning players can quickly get the hang of it. Do you believe that reasonable game mechanics are more important for player engagement?
8. I noticed in your diary that you mentioned being a PvP player. Some participants have previously mentioned that they enjoy the thrill of uncertainty (probability) in the game. Do you have similar feelings in the game?
9. In the first entry of your diary, you mentioned experiences of failure in PvP battles. Does success or failure in PvP battles affect your sense of participation in the game? For example, does a failed PvP battle make you lose interest or serve as motivation to improve your skills?
10. You mentioned in your diary about your mentorship in the game and the stories between you and your disciples, which are very touching! You mentioned that you will always accompany your disciples through their newbie period. How do you view the relationship between you and your mentor or disciples? Do you feel that your shared love for the game strengthens your bond? What makes you feel a strong sense of responsibility towards your disciples?

(Regarding Character Design)

11. Let's talk about the characters in the game. You mentioned some characters you like in your diary. So, what are the key factors that influence your liking or disliking of a character? Is it their skills, backstory, appearance, or other reasons?
12. What would make you particularly dislike a character?
13. Do you usually pay attention to the details of character design during gaming? For example, what style elements are used in the character's portrait design? Do you prefer a particular cultural style in design elements?
14. You mentioned that you strongly disliked some skins that haphazardly pile on elements that don't fit the character. Through your diary, I feel you are very keen at capturing elements used in character design. If not for participating in the study, do you usually enjoy paying attention to these details? What type of design do you like the most?
15. Do you actively search for content related to character design elements? Do you actively seek to understand cultural knowledge related to character prototypes?

16. You mentioned that the sword of the character Youtou Hime is ‘too, too, too big’. You're referring to her sword, but let's be honest, do you think her chest is also exaggerated? Haha. So, I want to ask, do you prefer female characters more than male characters in the game? Do outstanding physical features of female characters particularly attract you?

(Regarding Narrative Related to Characters)

17. Do you pay attention to the storyline in the game? Does the game's storyline evoke a sense of participation or immersion for you (for example, imagining yourself in such an environment to save the world)?
18. Through your diary, I found that you understood the storyline through various forms both in and out of the game. Which form of narrative presentation do you find most attractive? For example, some players said they skip text-heavy content, while others enjoy reading because they find the in-game text interesting, and some players mention that in-game dialogues can be verbose.
19. In your diary, you mentioned that you paid attention to the storylines of certain Shikigami characters in the game and have analysed the game's storyline. Among the various themed storylines, which genre do you like the most?
20. You mentioned that you particularly enjoy detective-themed storylines. Could you elaborate on how the game's storyline enhances your sense of participation?
21. You previously mentioned that you also skip storylines. Could you explain why you choose to skip?
22. For those storylines that cannot be skipped or that you inadvertently come across through discussions on forums or social media, do they leave you with a rough impression of what the story is about? Does not understanding the storyline have an impact on your gaming experience?
23. Although you said you don't watch the storyline at all, from your diary, I sense that you accept the worldview of saving the world and exorcising demons in Onmyoji. In your diary on the last day, you mentioned that it would be interesting to have a modern version of Hyakki Yagyō, working hard during the day and transforming into an onmyoji at night. When reading this part, it feels like something you want to do yourself. So, do you imagine yourself in such an environment to save the world? Do you have such a sense of immersion when playing the game?
24. You shared some insights about your understanding of the Higanbana in the first diary, which left a deep impression on me. You mentioned ‘No one survives, that's the real ending’, and ‘Yokai are neither good nor evil; good and evil are just perspectives from the human side’. Your reflections really struck me deeply. I'm curious, do you actively think about the implicit meanings of character background stories while playing games?

(Regarding Derivatives)

25. Do you often consume derivative products? What style do you prefer the most? Why? And what style do you least prefer? Why?

26. You mentioned that Onmyoji fan works, and derivative works can be considered parallel worlds to the game itself, constructed by everyone to satisfy their own imagination and extend the dream. However, if fan works' reinterpretations of characters align with your original understanding of the characters, does it enrich your perception of the characters?
27. Have you ever tried to actively create some fan works yourself? If you have a certain skill, such as drawing, would you be interested in trying? What kind of fan works would you like to create?
28. I noticed from your diary that you've spent quite a bit on peripheral products of the game. What kind of peripheral products would you spend money on? What motivates you and what are your goals behind these purchases?
29. You mentioned in your diary that you would browse NGA even if the world was ending. I'm curious, what kind of content do you usually enjoy on NGA? Do you actively participate in posting and discussions? Why isn't it ‘even if the world was ending, I'd still play Onmyoji’?
30. Besides doing daily tasks in mobile games, I also saw in your diary that you frequently browse forums, check Weibo, and watch Bilibili, which have become part of your daily routine. Do you consider activities such as browsing forums, checking Weibo, and sharing game content with friends as part of your gaming experience?

(Regarding Socialization)

31. How does social interaction in the game make you more attached to the game? Do you enjoy making friends in the game? Do you feel closer to friends you've met in the game compared to those you know in everyday life, or is the interaction limited to the game?
32. Do you consider yourself active in forums, Onmyoji guilds, or other player groups? Have you ever initiated discussions? Could you provide examples?
33. Have you participated in offline events organized by Onmyoji? Do you think there are different experiences between online and offline events?

(Regarding Cultural Representation)

34. From your observation, do you think there are many Chinese cultural elements used in the game, whether in character design or scene construction? How would you rate the harmony between these elements? Do they give you a sense of disorientation?
35. You mentioned in your diary and in our conversations that you believe the game incorporates both Japanese and Chinese cultural elements. You mentioned that they are accepted by players due to the high degree of cultural commonality. Could you elaborate further on why, as a Chinese player, you are interested in a game filled with Japanese culture?
36. You mentioned that the original Onmyoji team was very dedicated. From your perspective, could you discuss the changes in the planning style of Onmyoji over the past five years? Do you think these changes are good or bad? Why?

37. In our previous conversations, you mentioned that you feel Onmyoji has created a shell related to Japanese culture, attracting players because of Japanese culture, but in the end, they are not interested in the storyline anymore. Ultimately, what holds players is the game system and social interaction. Could you explain this in more detail? Why do players lose interest in the cultural aspects later in the game?

Questions Regarding Gamer Perceptions of Media Censorship

1. Do you feel that your gaming participation is free or restricted?
2. Are you aware that game content is subject to a certain degree of censorship and regulation? How do you view this type of content scrutiny and regulation? Do you believe that everything you consume and interact with in the game is what the government wants you to see and experience?
3. Do you think that without such regulations, the content in the game (such as character designs and storylines) would be different compared to the current versions?
4. You mentioned that games themselves are powerful mediums for cultural dissemination. Do you think that content censorship and regulated game content affect players' understanding of Japanese culture? What effect do you think Onmyoji has had on cultural dissemination?
5. In your diary, you've shared how content censorship affects game development and player experience. Indeed, Onmyoji also faces censorship in many aspects. Recently, there has been a lot of discussion about several aspects of content censorship, such as depictions of violence, and simplification. How do you perceive this type of censorship targeting cultural styles?
6. Actually, I noticed in your diary that you use certain words in a certain way, such as in the diary on the fourth day where you mentioned ‘electronic impotence’. I know that in gaming community, this phrase expresses a feeling of being powerless or ineffective in the game. However, you chose to replace the word ‘impotence’ with a homophone. What was your reasoning behind this decision?
7. Many internet users, including myself, often use homophones to replace content that might be easily censored on public social media platforms. How do you view this behaviour? Do you see it as a form of resistance against content regulation (breaking out of regulation to express oneself)?
8. Onmyoji has participated in some political and cultural events, such as being involved in promoting the Winter Olympics. What are your thoughts on this? Can you provide other similar examples?
9. The ongoing charity events in Onmyoji to rescue stray animals have been highlighted in your diary, and it seems you particularly enjoy this aspect of the game. Could you elaborate on why you like it? Have you also attempted to participate in any charity events because of this? Since these charity activities involving cats and dogs seem somewhat incongruent with the overall narrative background of the game, how do you view these actions where games attempt to align themselves with mainstream values or social virtues?
10. Let's delve deeper into the ‘Boy Love’ culture in Onmyoji. How much do you

understand about it? Why do you think they enjoy playing this game? What is your attitude towards the fan-created works by BL?

Questions Regarding Identity and Identification

1. Do you enjoy the characters, stories, and scenery design in Onmyoji related to Japanese yokai culture? I've seen some players express a strong desire to travel to Japan to experience similar architecture and see cherry blossoms firsthand. Do you have such thoughts?
2. You mentioned that you love the 'Japanese culture' that exists in your mind rather than the real one. There is a fundamental difference between real culture and the culture created in the game. So, do you care if the content expressed in Onmyoji is an adapted version of Japanese yokai culture? Which version do you prefer?
3. Onmyoji players often refer to themselves as '痒痒鼠'. Would you happily introduce yourself with this identity to people around you?
4. You used some affectionate terms when referring to certain characters. For example, you mentioned that Ubume is like your mother in the game. Could you explain this feeling in more detail? Also, you mentioned some Shikigami as your 'daughter', as many other players do. As a person in the real world, how do you view your relationship with these fictional characters from the game?
5. Some interviewed players mentioned that they contemplate the values conveyed by character stories, such as a sense of responsibility, family affection, and the essence of life. I wonder if you also relate these character stories and backgrounds to your real-life experiences during your usual gameplay. Do you have similar or different insights?
6. You repeatedly mentioned playing the game with your boyfriend and how Onmyoji has accompanied you through some difficult times, carrying many memories. It seems that Onmyoji is no longer just a mobile game but more like an emotional haven or bond. Could you elaborate on your feelings?

(iii) Questions Related to Self-evaluation

This section presented some questions for participants to reflect on their overall assessment of their gaming experiences and any changes in their understanding before and after participating in the study. For example,

1. Have you ever considered quitting the game? If so, what types of reasons might lead you to quit one day?
2. If you had to recommend this game to friends who have never played it before, how would you introduce it?
3. If Onmyoji were to permanently shut down its servers in the next 24 hours, what would you do?
4. (In comparison to the initial questions) You participated in this study, believing that it would allow you to understand the game from new perspectives, and you

shared many in-depth insights. Now that the study is nearly over, do you have a different understanding of the game or your gaming experiences? What are the insights or revelations that the game has provided you with?

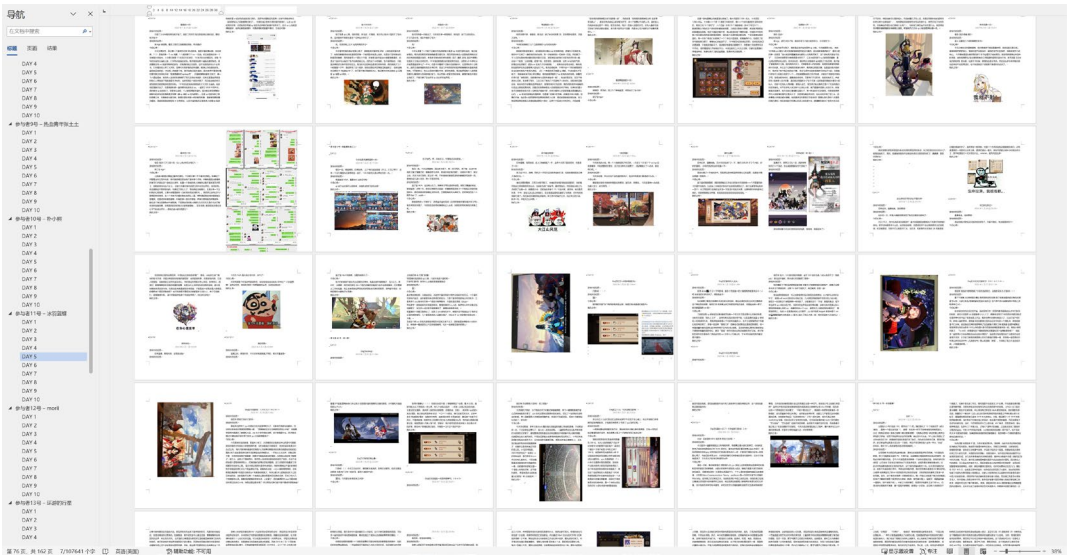
(iv) Questions Related to Feedback of the Method

At the end of the interview, I briefly discussed with the participants their feelings and feedback on the digital diary and interview research methods. This not only helped me evaluate the effectiveness and acceptability of the research methods but also provided me with some suggestions for improvement to enhance the design and implementation of similar studies in the future.

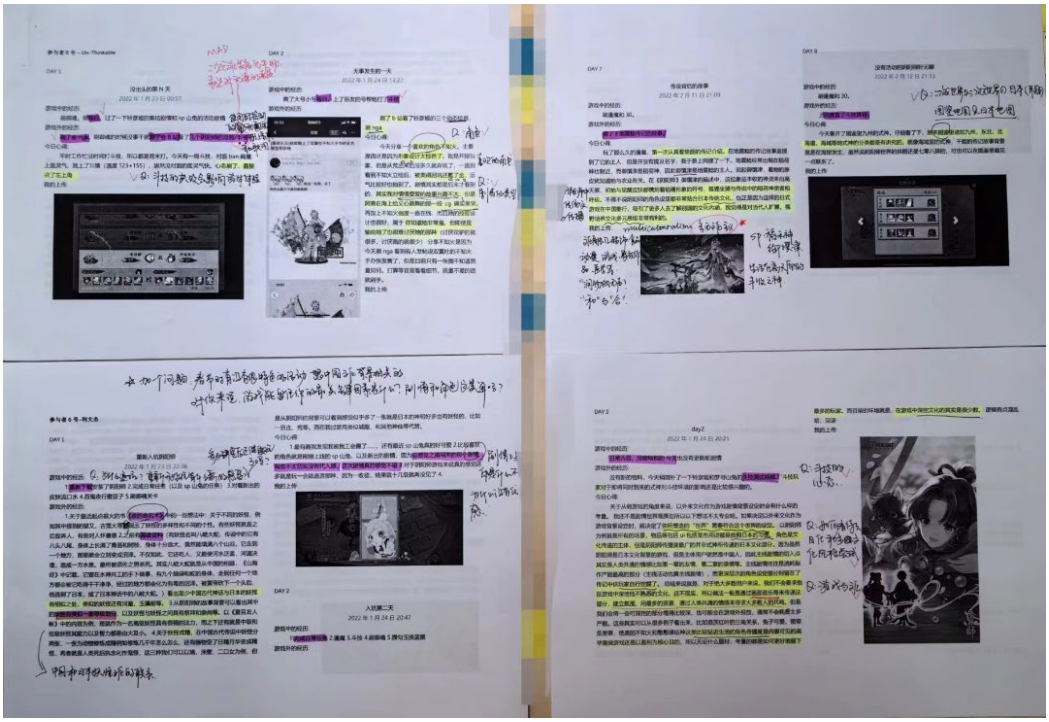
1. Do you think the research in the form of WeChat mini programme and interviews interesting?
2. Did it make you feel like expressing yourself? Did you feel constrained during the participation process?
3. How do you think I can improve WeLog from a user perspective?

Appendix 7: Discourse Analysis

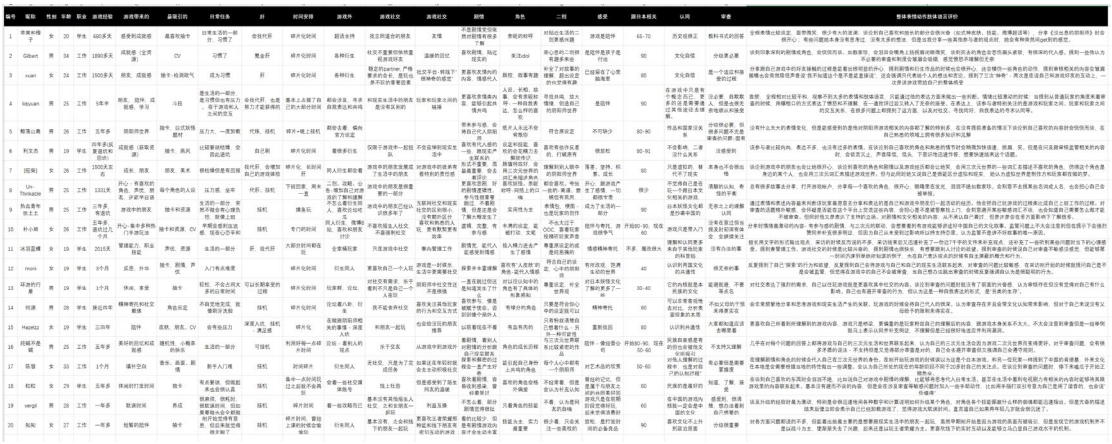
Firstly, I reorganized these diaries according to the unique IDs of the participants, ensuring that each participant's diaries from Day 1 to Day 10 were arranged in sequence. I exported and compiled the titles, upload times, main text content, and the uploaded images of each participant's diaries into a single document for subsequent retrieval and comparative analysis. Here are some screenshots of the data document.



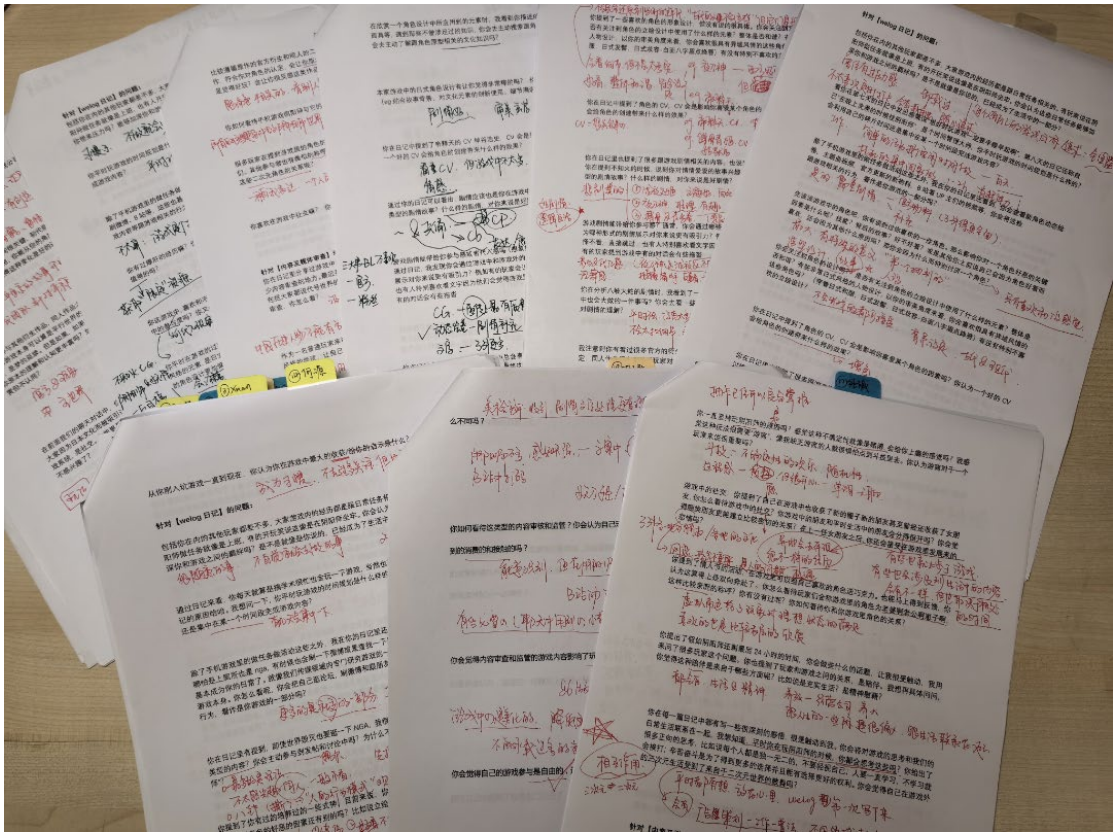
Then, I printed out the document, went through it repeatedly, and marked the sections that require further clarification (highlighted in yellow marker) as well as the interesting parts (highlighted in purple marker)

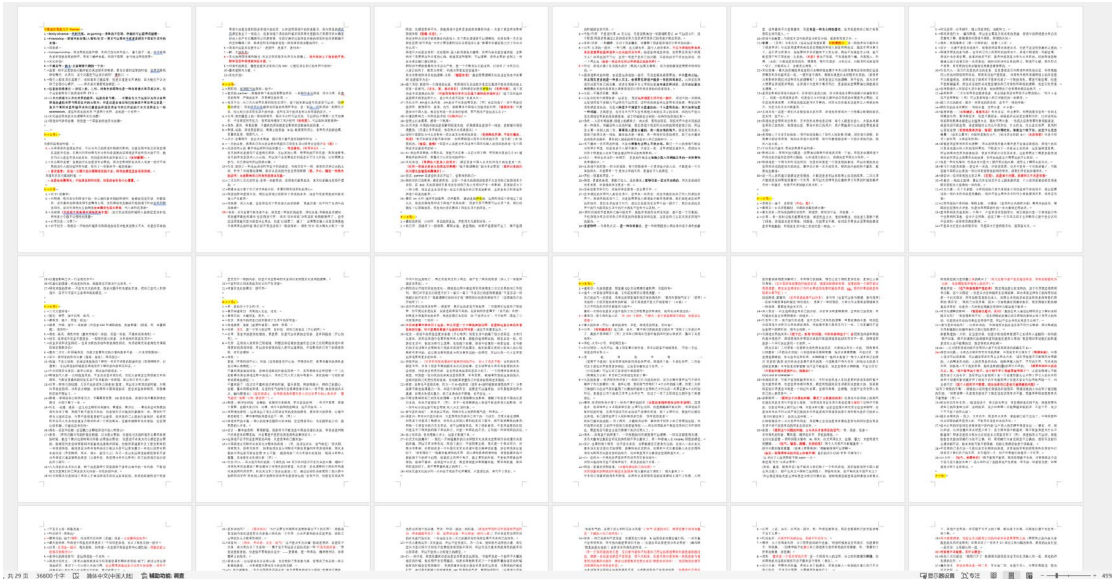


I extracted demographic information of all participants and keywords commonly mentioned in the data (such as ‘肝’, daily tasks, time management, extracurricular gaming experiences, social interactions, plot enthusiasm, character-related discussions, fan creations, and media censorship) and compiled them into a comprehensive table, serving as an index for further analysis.

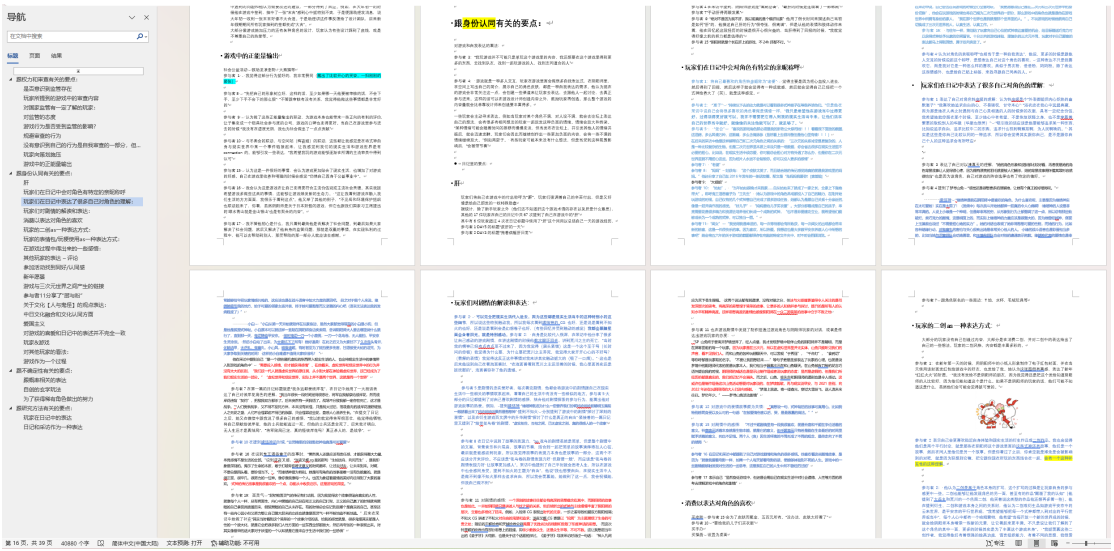


In the analysis of the interview transcripts, combined with the notes I made during the interviews, I excerpted their expressions from the interviews and supplemented them with notes on their facial expressions and body language.





Next, I combined the diary data with the interview data to identify content relating to the three main themes of my project. I summarized this content under subheadings (on the left of the screen shots below) and compiled the data in relation to these themes. This reorganised the content thematically enabling comparison and highlighting nuance:



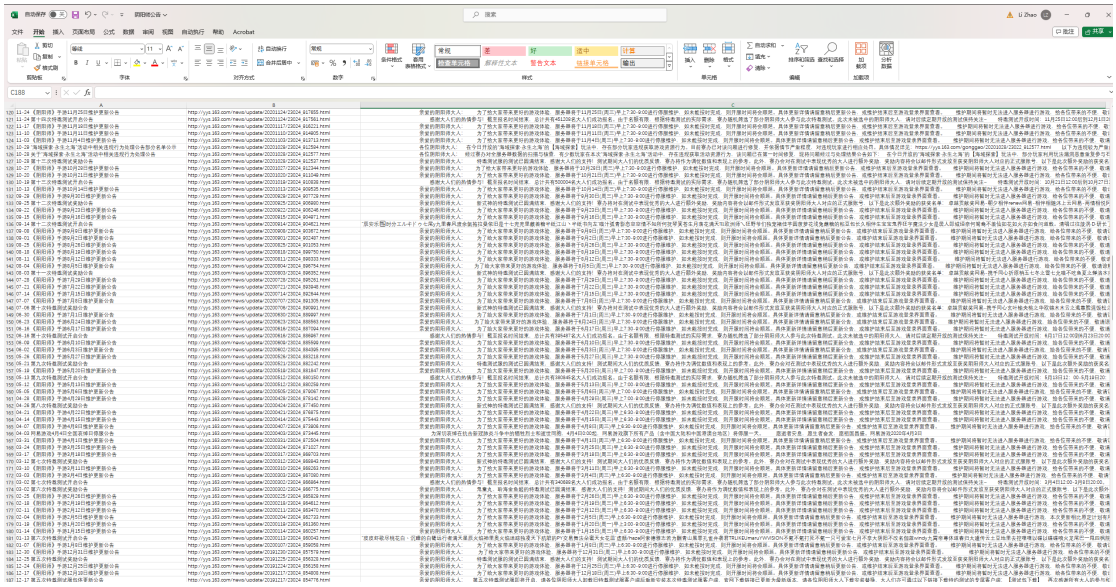
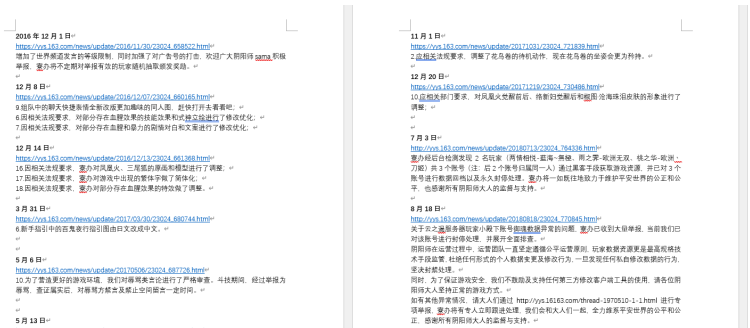
Appendix 8: Python Research

During my investigation into how the *Onmyoji* developers respond to government regulatory policies and conduct self-regulation, I utilized the Python programming language to write code for scraping the regular game update announcements posted on the *Onmyoji* official website. Through this approach, I collected a total of 450 update announcements from June 1, 2016, to October 25, 2022, and found 27 items related to the game's self-regulations. The utilization of this method significantly enhanced my efficiency and accuracy in retrieving specific content.

Here is the programme code for web scraping:

```python
import requests
from bs4 import BeautifulSoup
from urllib.parse import urljoin
import pandas as pd
import re
#--------------------SETTING--------------------------------
base_url = "https://yys.163.com/news/update/index{}{}.html"
# Set the date range and filter keyword
start_date = '20160601'
end_date = '20221025'
keyword = 'START'
start_page = 1 # 1 is first page
end_page = 5
#-------------------------------------------------------------
columns = ["Date", "Title", "Link", "Content"]
df = pd.DataFrame(columns=columns)
for page_num in range(start_page, end_page + 1):
    if page_num == 1:
        url = base_url.format("", "")
    else:
        url = base_url.format("_", page_num)
    print(url)

    response = requests.get(url)


    if response.status_code == 200:

        soup = BeautifulSoup(response.content, 'html.parser', from_encoding='utf-8')


        all_d = soup.find(class_='news-list') # Need to replace it with corresponding class name.

        information_list = []
        for sub_element in all_d.find_all(class_='item'): # Need to replace it with corresponding ID name.

            link = urljoin(url, sub_element.find('a')['href'])
            print(link)
            title = sub_element.find('p', class_='p-tit').text.strip()[6:]

            date_match = re.search(r'/(\d{8})/', link)
            date = date_match.group(1) if date_match else None

            print(date,title,link)
            #-----------------------------GET CONTENT OF SUBLINK---------------------------------
            link_response = requests.get(link)
            link_soup = BeautifulSoup(link_response.content, 'html.parser', from_encoding='utf-8')
            sub_page_content = link_soup.find('div', class_='content')
            content = [p.get_text(strip=True) for p in sub_page_content.find_all('p')]
            information_list.append({"Date": date, "Title": title, "Link": link, "Content": content})

        # Append the information to the DataFrame
        df = df.append(information_list, ignore_index=True)

    else:
        print(f"Failed to retrieve the page {url}. Status code: {response.status_code}")
# Save DataFrame to Excel file
df.to_excel("./163announcement/unfiltered_content.xlsx", index=False)
# Filter by date range
filtered_df = df[(df['Date'] >= start_date) & (df['Date'] <= end_date)]
# Search for titles containing the keyword
result_df = filtered_df[filtered_df['Title'].str.contains(keyword)]
result_df.to_excel("./163announcement/filtered_content.xlsx", index=False)
```

This is a screenshot of part of the 450 update announcements I scraped. These data were categorized and integrated into an Excel sheet based on time, title, URL, and content.



Here are the 27 announcements related to the game's self-regulations that I put them into a Word document for clearer reference and discourse analysis.