The video game Chinese parents and Its political potentials

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Little Stone is having a rough time. I made the Chinese preteen slave all day to satisfy the demands of his teachers and parents. His morning started with lessons in computer programming, then exercises in the arts, followed by math and science. He had hoped to kick back and watch his favorite TV dramas in the afternoon, but then I realized he was falling behind in his foreign language skills, so I made him skip leisure time and take more English lessons instead. Now it turns out it has all been a bit too much. Exhausted from all these activities, Little Stone is teetering at the brink of burnout. His cognitive capabilities are taking a hit—and this right before his report card is due. If his performance dips any lower, his parents will worry even more about his potential to enter a renowned university in a few years. And what will the neighbors say when they learn of his failures!

Little Stone's anxieties are my own anxieties: my task is to guide the little fellow through year after year of school stress and to help him balance the impossible demands that his parents, peers, instructors, and love interests all put on him as he grows up. That is the conceit of the Chinese-language video game *Chinese Parents*, which was released in 2018 for personal computers (PC) on the transnational gaming platform Steam. In *Chinese Parents*, players manage the daily life of a Chinese student from infancy to adulthood, with the goal of developing his or her academic skills for the university entrance exam, the dreaded *gaokao*. The game is awash with cultural tropes, and the designers inject no small amount of sarcasm,

creating a gaming experience that is equal parts resource management and social commentary. As such, the game is a digital reflection on contemporary Chinese issues, and it speaks to questions in both Chinese studies and game studies about the potential of digital media content to serve as a meaningful political intervention into contemporary Chinese society.

Politics in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today are strongly shaped by information and communication technologies, which have profoundly transformed life in China. Research into the political implications of these processes tends to explore what we might call "hard" political issues: the potential for digitally enabled collective action, authorities' ability to censor digital spheres and flood them with propaganda, or the way that online opinions shape policymaking—a topic I have also focused on in my own previous work.[1] And yet critics have rightfully pointed out that interactions in digital China are not primarily about such hard issues, at least not for the vast majority of Chinese digital-media users. Instead, much like in any other society, these interactions are about seemingly trivial matters, like sharing digital pictures of one's food or of cute pets on social media, connecting with friends and family in dedicated forums, consuming transnational mass culture, or playing games.[2] Digital China is full of playful activities, and if we are to understand what politics emerge out of Chinese digital networks, we would be well advised to take these seemingly "soft" issues seriously.

Video games, and the gaming cultures that surround them, are a particularly exciting place to explore how politics connect with everyday interactions in digital China.[3] China has a sizeable online gaming market.[4] Chinese enterprises develop games for the domestic market, often generating significant profits, whether in traditional PC or casual gaming markets.[5] This has in turn provided fertile ground for an active e-sports industry, which is the site of much debate about the nature of play in China.[6] The discourse on e-sports is also, more broadly, about the state of Chinese gaming and its potential to serve as a proxy for China's success in the world.[7] At the same time, Chinese gamers are part of transnational commercial networks that provide digital labor for online games, most famously in the much-stereotyped form of the "gold farmer," a player who resolves repetitive game elements for others in return for a fee.[8] In short, video games in China are sites of transnational engagement, political

imagination, and digital capitalist practices that bridge the divide between hard and soft politics.

A relatively new phenomenon, in this context, is the arrival of Chinese-designed independent ("indie") games on transnational gaming platforms such as Steam, the largest online gaming platform for PC and Mac. While the platform competes with other online retailers like Good Old Games (GOG), Epic Games Store, and developer-specific outlets like Electronic Arts' Origin distribution platform, none of these retailers feature the breadth of Steam's offerings or the depth of its Web 2.0 integration.[9] Steam has revolutionized the international PC gaming industry and catapulted it online, and its features range from comment sections and like buttons to community-building elements such as friend circles and live-streaming functionalities. It is in this context that Chinese game designers are now offering creative new games about local issues and experiences for transnational audiences, often opting for Steam-only releases over uploads to indie and casual gaming platforms like Kongregate or Itch.io. On Steam, these innovative designers engage potential players through early-access projects and online discussion, and much like the games themselves, these discussions are often decidedly self-aware about the sociocultural themes that the games cover.

Emancipation through Digital Play?

As a form of mass art, video games speak to many of the same debates as popular cultural products more generally, especially with regards to their potential political relevance. To what extent, for instance, do video games reinforce or challenge views of the world? Do they coopt players with their ideologies or do they challenge players to think critically about the worlds they are accessing within the game? Do they create fruitful analogies to everyday experiences? Do they simulate meaningful social and political processes? And by extension, do they make worthwhile philosophical arguments in their own right?

Scholarship on the political potential of video games generally focuses on one of two possible dimensions. When it comes to studies that explore the content and experiences that such games offer, researchers tend to emphasize either discourses, representations, and story ("narratology") or

the mechanics and affordances of the game medium ("ludology"). While some combine the two perspectives, it is important to acknowledge that each approach is ultimately informed by specific theoretical arguments, leading to often conflicting interpretations of what we might make of a specific game or the medium as a whole.[10]

Scholarship that focuses on digital content, specifically on the discourses that games generate, tends to be critical of representations that reflect, recreate, and potentially reinforce existing power relations in society. This kind of scholarship looks at the statements that games make about social actors and their places in the world, the racial and gendered stereotypes games utilize, and the social conventions that game narratives present as "normal" or "natural." This line of inquiry originates in cultural studies, critical discourse analysis, and the Frankfurt School's critical theory, and it relies heavily on literary and film theory, which it transfers to the medium of the video game to trace ideologies and the discursive mechanisms that lead to their normalization within specific game products. Scholarship of this type frequently treats video games much like any other kind of medium, proposing to "read" them as "text," even when discussing medium-specific mechanics.[11]

Another approach provides a somewhat different angle on the political relevance of video games by looking at the play experience, specifically at how the mechanical affordances of the computer (the controllers, interfaces, and algorithms) prompt reflection about the narrative content of games.[12] Conceptually, this approach shares much in common with the idea of games-as-ecologies that Douglas Eyman discusses in his contribution to this volume: the idea that games and their meanings unfold in the interactions between game mechanics and player decisions. In this view, narrative elements are not the most relevant aspect of interactive media, which reveal their politics by prompting users to reflect on their own involvement in creating the narrative through engagements with a machine and, by extension, to think about their role in algorithmically governed information societies. In his seminal game studies work, Alexander Galloway writes that "video games are games, yes, but more importantly they are software systems; this must always remain in the forefront of one's analysis."[13]

The experience of playing with an algorithm might then generate po-

litical meanings beyond, or even in contradiction to, the discourses and ideologies that games relay. David Murphy makes a similar point, arguing that the political potential of video games emerges from contradictions between representation and simulation, between narrative and gameplay; in this view, it is precisely the "ludonarrative dissonance" between these elements that creates productive tension during play.[14]

Chinese indie games are useful research subjects in this context. They are highly ideological, and they often make explicit statements about society. They also allow users to calibrate information environments, potentially offering the kind of experience Galloway, Murphy, and others see as politically most meaningful. We might expect to then find intriguing productive tensions and ludonarrative dissonances within such works. At the same time, the fact that the designers have opted to sell their video game products on an interactive, transnational gaming platform also means that we are able to see firsthand how players react to such games. What do the players themselves say? What elements of the games are meaningful to them? Do they notice the ideologies, or the algorithmic mechanisms, or both? Or maybe neither? As a case study, what tension does the game *Chinese Parents* create between discourses and mechanics? How do those relate to the experiences that players discuss on the gaming platform Steam?

The Discourses of Simulated Child-Rearing

In *Chinese Parents*, the designers infuse their interactive cultural product with numerous visual and linguistic statements that serve as commentary on contemporary Chinese society. The scope of these discourses is too rich to cover in full here, so I have singled out four themes that I believe are particularly relevant for discussions about the game's potential to communicate ideology, create player immersion, and prompt cognitive dissonance. Two of these themes invite interpretations that are critical of their subject matter: The first is the game's parenting discourse and in particular gendered assumptions about sons and daughters. The second is its portrayal of social pressures, which manifest in the game through certain achievements and concerns about "face" (*mianzi*) and money. The other two themes are more difficult to interpret as criticism and could be seen

to promote conservative attitudes. These are, first, the game's discourse on childhood, especially the game's nostalgia for adolescence, and second, the way the game portrays human development and skill.

Ostensibly, the game is first and foremost about parenting. The game is actually about much more than this, but the central narrative dynamic pushes parental discourse to the fore: the player makes choices about the child's activities, and as the consequences of those choices unfold, the mother and father interact with the kid through scripted textual dialogues. Through these dialogues, the game provides rich commentary on what Chinese parents might expect of their children and how their judgments reflect gendered biases. In *Chinese Parents*, players can choose to raise a boy or a girl. In terms of the gameplay, the choice has no immediate meaningful effect. The son and daughter are represented differently through the artwork, as are their rooms and other environments, but in terms of the cognitive abilities that the game asks players to maximize, or the options it offers for daily activities, the differences are either very minor (girls can attend ballet lessons) or nonexistent (boys and girls can likewise choose to play basketball, take science lessons, develop whichever cognitive or physical faculty they choose, and so on). Indeed, the game at times has parents, students, and teachers comment that life offers men and women equal opportunities (figure 11.1).

At the same time, however, the designers have injected discursive statements that suggest a different story. For example, if the player decides to send a girl to computer science classes, the father will act surprised and state that this is a "boy's subject" (figure 11.2). Later, as the girl grows up, her grandmother may make an appearance to share conservative ideas about how the main goal for girls should be to find a good husband and start a family. Judging by the symbolic and textual elements that frame such statements in the game, the creators signal that such gender interpretations are outmoded: reactionary statements are made to clash with the actual opportunities offered to the virtual children, and they serve to urge players to defy social conventions. The artwork also suggests that the children themselves are skeptical or even angsty about such parental (and grandparental) interventions: kids are frequently depicted lost in thought, daydreaming, and staring off into the distance. At the level of discourse,

FIG. 11.1. Dad's progressive views extend only so far. The father says, "How can a girl only study this; that's something for boys!" Screenshot by author.

the game presents a progressive view critical of contemporary Chinese society and many of its assumptions.

This is also true for the way that the game frames the social pressures that parents and children face in today's China. Two mini games serve as tongue-in-cheek criticisms of Chinese social dynamics: a frequent competition for "face" and a gift-giving simulation. The first prompts players to step into the shoes of the child's mother and compete with other mothers in a verbal game of bragging about their children while taking down the competition with snide remarks. The player and their computer opponent attempt to outdo each other in fake politeness and subtle insults until one emerges as the winner, which then leads to additional "face points." The second game asks players to take on the role of the child as they are offered one of the famous red envelopes that Chinese gift givers use to offer money to family, friends, and acquaintances on special occasions such as Chinese New Year. The player must repeatedly reject the gift, balancing the right degree of modest refusal with grudging deference to receive the gift. Reject too firmly, or accept too eagerly, and the gift giver will not hand over the envelope. There is much to unpack in both depictions, but the humorous simulations and the textual cues are so exaggerated and sardonic that they

again serve as discursive statements critical of Chinese social interactions, especially any superficial concerns with prestige and money.

It might then be fair to say that the game offers significant opportunities for progressive interpretations of contemporary China, but the game narrative is not quite that clear-cut. Especially when it comes to the game's portrayal of childhood, the discourse becomes somewhat skewed toward conservative themes. Take the portrayal of children and their environments. The visual artwork draws heavily from Japanese manga and animation formats that tell stories of bittersweet high school experiences. The backdrops are lovingly crafted to evoke the kind of school and university life that adult Chinese players would recognize from their own youth. These elements, combined with story components that deal with friendship and dating, suggest that the harsh competition for grades is tempered by a relatively sheltered upbringing. All of this oozes nostalgia and invites players to interpret the game's narrative with soft eyes, excusing the actions of parents, teachers, and other authority figures as loving interventions that are ultimately necessary in order to create the foundation for a memorable adolescence.

These nostalgia triggers combine with a reductionist vision of human capability that is meant to serve a specific understanding of success. Characters are portrayed as having a set of numerical faculties, such as those familiar from many RPGs and particular simulations like *The Sims*: cognition, emotional intelligence, creativity, physical fitness, and similar variables provide the core of the characters, and as such they need to be maximized on the road to success. The scores inform school assessments and ultimately define what universities the children can attend. If players wish to win the game, they need to buy into the premise that human faculties can and should be maximized in this way. This arguably serves as justification for a neoliberal understanding of social success.

Judging solely by the narratives and symbolic representations in *Chinese Parents*, the game ultimately offers both progressive and conservative statements; one could even argue that the satirical elements should not be understood as a form of critical appraisal but rather as a way of selling the game: edgy, self-aware cultural references sell. All in all, it is hard to establish conclusively what political interpretation the game encourages at this level of analysis, though the narrative ambiguities themselves are

already a progressive statement in their own right: forcing players to consolidate the conflicting statements pushes them to acknowledge that life is complicated, that there are no simple answers to social problems, and that growing up in contemporary China is ultimately messy. A look at the game mechanisms suggests a similar interpretation.

Game Mechanics and Their Disruptive Potentials

In terms of the story it tells, and the statements it makes, *Chinese Parents* is already an ambiguous cultural product, and this impression is only enhanced through its gameplay and design choices. The game combines a string of somewhat repetitive mini games with a barrage of Chinese memes that require a high level of contextual knowledge to appreciate. While mastering the mini games and deciphering the many cultural references can be entertaining, it also holds the potential for much frustration. At the same time, the game confronts players with loops of turn-based decisions and consequences that prompt continuous engagement with the game, both in individual playthroughs (raising a child) and across multiple games (raising generation after generation of offspring).

Some of the representational components of the game already discussed allude to game mechanics, especially where dynamic game elements contribute to the representation of human skills or to antagonistic interactions between player and nonplayer characters. One could even conclude that presenting skills and conflicts as dynamic variables is itself mostly a matter of representation. After all, the designers have decided to translate their specific idea of intelligence into something called "cognitive quality" that can take on a numerical value between one and several thousand points. However, it is important to recall Galloway's argument about games as systems: such dynamic game elements go beyond representation; they are matters of simulation.[15] In the case of the numerical values that stand in for certain skills, these values dynamically model human abilities, and they create an algorithmic reality with which players are forced to interact. If the players wish to see their characters succeed, they need to buy into the algorithmic premise, learn to understand its rationale, and take the appropriate actions through the game's interface to exploit this logic and maximize these values.

What kind of experiences do the game mechanics of *Chinese Parents* enable? Whatever one may think of the discourses that the game presents, a closer analysis of the mechanics shows that the game invites critical reflection on social processes, and that it does so by producing contradictions between the gameplay elements as well as between gameplay and narrative. Five examples illustrate this: the way the players are invited to identify with various characters in the game, the approach of using mini games to model complex real-world processes, the practice of prompting players to respond to in-game surveys about childhood experiences, the way the game forces players to balance trade-offs within the algorithmically managed resource system, and finally the effect of playing the game for several generations. Due to these elements, the players must continuously navigate complicated dissonances and disruptions, which in turn strengthen the impression that the social situations modeled in the game are complex, multifarious affairs that deserve critical reflection.

The first issue is a matter of identification. Whom exactly does the player play? Both the title and the early phases of the game suggest that the player is acting as a parent to a newborn, and as a review of player comments shows (see below), this is also how many players interpret their role. However, the game flips this identification by making players choose actions for the child that would not be under a parent's control—for instance commanding the toddler to roll over or start speaking words—and later choosing activities that are clearly not in the interests of the parents, like slacking off or dating. Indeed, the parents appear as pop-ups to admonish such choices, and one numerical value that players need to carefully monitor is the child's standing with the parents, which translates into perks if players manage to increase this value sufficiently. What is more, in some sequences the player must make choices from the perspective of the child, such as when assembling an essay for school, competing in talent shows, or complimenting a love interest.

Is the player then actually playing the child? This may seem like a plausible interpretation, but again the game stubbornly resists having its perspective narrowed: players skip back and forth between perspectives, for instance when they play the mother during face-saving contests, and they engage in mini games that ostensibly model neurological processes outside of anyone's control. This places players in an odd position, acting at times

as a manager, at other times as near-omnipotent god figure, then as a parent, and at yet other times as a child. This can be a vertiginous experience.

The mini games contribute to this sense of disruption through the ways they model social interactions. The short game through which players lay the foundations for the child's mental and physical faculties is heavily modeled on the aesthetics of mobile games like *Candy Crush* or *Bejeweled*. In contrast to such games, the child-development episodes rely less on spatial puzzling and more on resource management: on a partially obscured game board, players click on a limited selection of colored bubbles that increase certain faculties and provide perks, with each choice revealing other adjacent bubbles. However, each choice also costs the player energy, which is a scarce resource. It is a matter of both luck and of careful planning to get the most out of each round. This is a fairly simple set of mechanics that are meant to simulate extremely complex and meaningful processes in child development. Similarly, the mini game that models gift giving relies on an exceedingly simple mechanic: players have to click their mouse button repeatedly when the gift envelope enters a specific zone between giver and recipient, and the margin of error decreases at higher difficulty levels.

The reduction of real-world complexity through mechanisms prompts players to think about the technical aperture of the computer. Roth describes how this phenomenon in video games can be created consciously, as in early *Metal Gear Solid* games that require players to unplug controllers or restart the machine in order to solve in-game problems, or unintentionally, through technical problems like dipping frame rates or awkward key bindings. He writes that in such instances "the player is variously confronted with the performance of the computer and its ability to enact the unimagined, contributing to decisively alienating experiences."[16] This sense of alienation, arising from the interaction with an algorithm and its limitations, is also meaningful in the case of *Chinese Parents*, where having to smash the mouse button at precisely the right time to win can be supremely frustrating, can estrange players from the game narrative, and can push them out of the immersion that the game otherwise encourages through its cutesy artwork. In this fashion, *Chinese Parents* is never far away from reminding players that they are playing on a computer.

Another mechanic that contributes to this feeling is the survey element that the designers built into the game's narrative, which repeatedly breaks

the fourth wall. After each round of the talent-building mini game, players plan the child's day by selecting academic and leisure activities, then let the algorithm simulate the results of their choices. *Chinese Parents* then adds an element of randomness by injecting unexpected events into the daily routines, such as getting bullied, being singled out by a teacher, or being embarrassed by one's parents. The game asks the player whether they have experienced anything similar growing up, and once the player has responded to the query, the game displays the global distribution of answers from all players who have played the game.

To the player, this suggests that there are many people out there engaging in precisely the same game activities, and this in turn generates a sense of imagined communion with people the player does not know. The game mechanic creates the sort of "synchronous time" that Benedict Anderson wrote about when he described the ability of traditional mass media to inspire association with imagined communities such as nations.[17] In this case, the imagined community is gamers engaged in a Chinese parenting simulation. While such an experience might serve to increase immersion and invite identification with the game narratives by normalizing certain childhood experiences as commonly shared, the breaking of the fourth wall ultimately shatters any illusion about the players actually managing a child's life and instead invites them to reflect on their own position in this digitally connected community. The surveys provide intriguing moments for reflection, for instance by suggesting that a bullied player is not alone in their potentially traumatic personal experience.

One could argue that the survey elements are not actually game mechanics: players do not need to respond to survey questions; they can simply go on parenting without any negative consequences. The surveys themselves are what Galloway calls "nondiegetic" components, meaning they remain outside of the game's narrative.[18] This does not make them irrelevant, but it means that such elements interact differently with in-game representations than diegetic components do. While players can of course pause the game, enter the game menu, struggle with their input device, or (in this case) answer a survey, such actions are of a very different quality than operations that optimize the variables required to win the game.

What, then, do the game mechanics that directly govern play contribute to the discourses? Like any resource management game, *Chinese Parents*

requires players to look beyond the representations and understand the mathematical mechanics that inform the game's rationale. At the surface, the representations may seem blatantly neoliberal. They suggest over and over that personal dedication will directly maximize measurable skills that then assure success in the competitive marketplaces of education and work. However, peeling back the layers of representation to successfully play the game also means recognizing these neoliberal representations for the deceits they are. The game systems create challenges by confronting players with continuous streams of dilemmas. With a limited number of time slots per day, it is simply not possible to train a child to become, for example, both an athlete and a successful pianist. Add to this the requirements of staying mentally healthy and having a social life, and the pressures of the game quickly become overwhelming. In this sense, the game does not so much model parenting, or adolescence, but rather neoliberal informationalism. In an algorithmic world governed by measurable understandings of value, all achievements come at a steep opportunity cost. There is no pure sense of success.

While the game generates the potential for such realization during a single playthrough, it truly brings such meanings to the fore through its generational dynamics: once players have finished one game, they can continue by raising the offspring of the kid they just accompanied through the game. This next child will inherit some of their parent's abilities, but more importantly, players now enter the parenting cycle with additional experience. They can experiment with a different approach. Did the previous child spend too much time slacking off? The next generation can do better. Did the previous child train to become an artist? How about the next child maximizes physical skills to become a basketball star? While this freedom of choice is liberating, it also generates cycles of depressing repetition that, ultimately, still require players to maximize the same variables within the same dilemmas created by the same resource scarcities. The game cleverly turns repetitive gameplay into a meaningful (though arguably bleak) simulation not of parenting but of life in an information society. Whether in the game or outside of it, players are on a treadmill, and the game will not let them forget it. This is a powerful statement, particularly coming from a medium that is frequently maligned as a "waste of time" and an obstacle to social success. Chinese players are bound to remain especially aware of

this context, considering the prevalence of discourses in China that portray gaming as an "addiction" and players as "losers."[19]

Player Discourses: Making Sense of *Chinese Parents*

Chinese Parents can be said to contain contradictions on numerous levels, including within the narrative, within the gameplay, between narrative and gameplay, and even between players' experiences of playing the game and their experiences of living in an information society. But how do players react to these ambiguities? The Steam platform with its comment spaces promises to provide an answer. While I am not in a position in this chapter to quantitatively and systematically analyze all of the more than ten thousand comments about the game, I have examined the fifty comments that the platform itself identified as "most helpful" in the spring of 2019 based on user feedback. Subsequent research will need to explore how representative these initial impressions are, but several patterns emerge based on the most popular remarks about the game on Steam.

One observation is that numerous comments primarily discuss the game design or certain game elements, usually to suggest adjustments. Some players comment on how the game's numerical assessment method does not accurately model the real-world university entrance exam; others find fault with the way the game simulates dating. Yet others find the gameplay repetitive across playthroughs and would like the designers to resolve this problem by adding additional life paths (all translations are my own):

> When it comes to the game quality, aside from a sense of freshness at the start, the gameplay isn't very satisfying later on, and there's a lot of repetition. In the end I'd recommend adding outcomes where people do not get married or are gay.

While such comments do not tell us much about whether and how a game like *Chinese Parents* makes players engage with information society more broadly, they minimally suggest that players are comfortable stepping back and forth between their reflections of the game's representations, its mechanics, and its ability (or inability) to speak to wider social issues, such as

sexuality. A similar pattern is evident in player comments that discuss the game's representations more explicitly. In such contexts, players frequently see themselves as taking on the role of a parent, even though the game itself offers the various forms of identification discussed above. Apparently, the narrative setup invites players to see themselves as controlling a parent who is responsible for their child rather than as a child making certain choices under parental pressures. This leads to intriguing experiences for many players, along the lines described by this commentator:

> I didn't want to become the kind of father I despised as a kid, but in this game, when I became the father, every time I looked at those exam results, I had a terrible sense of anxiety; to increase my kids' scores, I wouldn't let them play or date but would only make them endlessly study, study, and study some more. I wanted my son to succeed, but in the end, he became an average worker. At that point I had a mental breakdown; I had become my own parents.

This comment already suggests that the player is using the game as an analogy for reflecting on their own social upbringing, and potentially also on the judgments that Chinese society makes about success and failure. Becoming an "average worker" is viewed unfavorably, and it here becomes the catalyst for a crisis in thinking. Other gamers likewise describe that the game left them "lost in thought" or "pondering deeply," and these reflections repeatedly lead to criticism of China's cutthroat obsession with material success.

> I originally wanted my young son to try out all sorts of careers, but in the end, I made each generation become the wealthiest.

> Even though each profession has its own delights, I ultimately still got hoodwinked by the money.

> When my kid grew up, I originally wanted to let things slide, but in my heart I still couldn't let it go, and during each playthrough I did my best to exploit my kid's full potential, making him attend the most classes and maximizing his scores.

> Even if the data turned out beautifully, is it really my kid who is happy, or is it me?

Aside from the reflection on monetary incentives, it is intriguing that the commentator here reflects on their ability to make a nondiegetic element like data turn out "beautifully," especially in contrast to the (implied) consequences on the child's happiness. Importantly, the player constructs their own narrative out of elements that are not, strictly speaking, part of the game itself. The game does not comment on whether the adult children are happy or not, only whether they are successful in their chosen career, and yet the player finds it worth discussing how the algorithmically programmed variables may clash with less tangible values such as quality of life.

Note also how the player comments on their experience across "each playthrough" and "each generation." This is a frequent point of departure for game comments. Players find their own reflections on society transformed through repeated play. As one player describes:

> When I was playing the game and I had completed the first generation, I suddenly woke up with a start to the realization that I had become a despicable parent. So during the second generation, I strictly followed my own educational principles, but then when I saw my extraordinarily gifted daughter left with no chance of entering a well-ranked high school, with no way to reverse that outcome, and she ended up having average scores in the university entrance exam, I had this deep feeling of guilt, like I had crushed a young sapling with my own hands.

In short, the conflict between algorithmic incentives and (repeated) playthroughs serves as a productive tension within which players make sense not just of the game but of themselves and the society in which they live.

Conclusion

What potential for social and political reflection might a game like *Chinese Parents* hold? This examination has involved a combination of auto-ethnographic work, design analysis, and discourse analysis, including both game contents and user commentaries on the gaming platform Steam. This approach is not without limitations: video games create very large imaginary spaces and exploring these spaces auto-ethnographically is bound to leave many potential ways of playing unexamined.[20] I have also only dipped into the rich player commentaries, and a next step will be to

conduct a more systematic, computer-assisted analysis of the more than ten thousand contributions to establish whether my initial impression of gamer interactions is indeed accurate. Another open question is whether players who comment actually reflect on the system of the university entrance exam or merely on the game; self-awareness may not be the main mode of play, even if it is signaled in the comments, and future qualitative research that observes and interviews players would shed light on the degree to which players translate their game experiences to criticism of the issues that the game models. Finally, it is worth asking how these observations about a Chinese game on the Steam platform compare to similar games on platforms that cater to indie and casual gaming audiences, for instance Kongregate and Itch.io.

Despite these limitations, it is clear the game *Chinese Parents* is politically meaningful. While scholars of video games have frequently been skeptical of in-game narratives and representations, mostly on the grounds that such components might communicate ideologies in service of the status quo, *Chinese Parents* is not so easily reduced to a dominant discourse. The designers have injected a strong sense of irony into the game's arguably stereotypical renditions of adolescence and parenting in China. Granted, the fact that a commercial game sells an ironic understanding of market capitalism to consumers for profit arguably says much about the limits of cultural industries to serve as vehicles for progressive change. Nevertheless, I would hesitate to dismiss the critical potential of such games. *Chinese Parents* generates emergent narratives that are full of contradictions and prompt players to reflect on the many seemingly absurd social tensions that define the experience of growing up in contemporary China. It is by no means clear that the game coopts players into a conservative worldview, despite its nostalgia-inducing artwork and the frequently reactionary attitudes of authority figures, or that it normalizes neoliberal assumptions about success. Instead, it provides enough communicative resources to invite critical engagement with precisely these attitudes.

While the narrative already provides players with plenty of triggers for critical reflection, the game mechanics create an experience that is truly ambiguous and characterized by frequent moments of estrangement from the game. If the narrative serves as a commentary on Chinese social processes, then the repetitive gameplay, reductionist mini games, and algorithmically

constructed dilemmas serve as a metacommentary. The message that these tensions send is that growing up in China today is an impossible task, shaped by neoliberal constraints that cannot be overcome, only "gamed," much like scholars in earlier periods "gamed" the imperial examination system that preceded today's dreaded *gaokao* (see the introduction to this volume). As the player comments suggest, such realizations leave many a gamer "deeply pondering."

Ultimately, the most powerful aspect of *Chinese Parents* is not related to its parental themes at all. It is instead its ability to algorithmically model and interactively implement the seemingly insurmountable contradictions between harsh social expectations and nonconformist attempts to achieve happiness in China. By putting players in the uncomfortable position of having to negotiate these contradictions, the game subtly milks an irony that is likely to be on Chinese players' minds: that playing a game is precisely the kind of nonconformist behavior that the game asks them to minimize if they wish to win the game. *Chinese Parents* is not solely, or even primarily, a child-rearing simulator. It is a tongue-in-cheek object lesson about the value of industriousness that can ironically only be learned by "wasting" time playing.

Notes

1. Guobin Yang, *The Power of the Internet in China: Citizen Activism Online* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Gary King, Jennifer Pan, and Margaret Roberts, "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (2013): 1–18; Rongbin Han, *Contested Cyberspace in China: Online Expression and Authoritarian Resilience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); James Leibold, "Han Cybernationalism and State Territorialization in the People's Republic of China," *China Information* 30, no. 1 (2016): 3–28; Florian Schneider, *China's Digital Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

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