

The Fearful Realism: Chinese Horror Indie Games and the Realist Horror

Haoxi Luo

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Shatin, NT,
Hong Kong SAR, PRC
haoxi35@gmail.com

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is not to delineate a fully genealogical or prescriptive definition of the subgenre - "Chinese horror", but rather to show its potential to engage reality through the analysis and contextualization of typical games. The term "realist horror" in the title originates from Cynthia A. Freeland's discussion of the subgenre of horror movie that is based on real characters and events (Freeland 1995). I adapt this term to rethink the relationship between horror and realism.

Considering the affective nature of video games, horror games have become one of the most flourishing genres in contemporary global game market. But the discourse of horror games has long been dominated by survival horror, where players either escape and fight zombies and monsters (Perron 2021) or experience the uncanny atmosphere and psychological fear in Japanese horror games (Picard 2009). Since the release of *Detention* (Red Candle Games 2017) and *Devotion* (Red Candle Games 2019) by Taiwan indie developer Red Candle Games in 2017, unexpectedly, Chinese horror has become an emerging subgenre that tends to associate horror more with specific socio-cultural reality of the past and present, especially the representation of Taiwan's historical trauma and folk religion (Scott and Alexander 2022; Wu 2022; Beadle 2022). However, even though "Chinese horror" is thriving in mainland China's gaming industry and community, it has not received commensurate academic attention. On the one hand, the over-visibility of Red Candle Games obscures the performance of its mainland relatives. On the other hand, the lack of localization makes it difficult for these games to reach the non-Sinophone world.

This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the entanglement of independent horror games and social reality in mainland China through the case study of two typical games, *Firework* (Shiyong Studio 2021) and *Comedy Funeral* (Great fortune and great favour Unlimited 2022). These video games inherit the convention and legality from Chinese modern realist literature such as the works of Lu Xun. They are orientated to capture the repressed and restricted events, experiences, and feelings of everyday life, even though a fictional world. In this sense, they create a playground, or in Foucault's words a heterotopia (Foucault 2005), that disrupts and questions the boundaries between

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fantasy and reality, between affect and reason. I call this aesthetic form "fearful realism." I will demonstrate the textual, contextual, and intertextual aspects of the games by analyzing the narrative and gameplay, as well as the online archival data such as reviews and discussions.

In both ancient and modern China, horror and ghost stories are marginalized. The People's Republic of China (PRC), as Laikwan Pang has argued, is a "state against ghosts" aiming to complete the enlightenment and modernity project through the repression of irrational and supernatural narratives (Pang 2011). In this context, like horror film industry in China, these indie horror games negotiate the tensions between the market, the state, and culture. The official discourses of anti-superstition and promoting traditional culture are appropriated as a realist façade to gain legitimacy by being "ideologically correct". However, the presence of haunting and supernatural forces in the games inevitably questions the above promises.

These games challenge the gameplay of survival horror. While diminishing the action gameplay, they do not increase the difficulty of the puzzles. There are very few escape scenes and no fight. The puzzle-solving is also simple and without time limit. They are designed in the gameplay of "archival adventure", in Melissa Kagen's words, "in which players assemble a story by piecing it together from the archival memorabilia left behind" (Kagen 2020, p1007). It's the narrativity that compensates for the lack of gameplay.

In *Firework*, players take on the role of a police officer to re-investigate a closed case of massacre in a mountain village. And in *Comedy Funeral*, players follow the little girl enter the memory space of the protagonist's grandmother to find out the truth that grandma was trafficked and forced to married. Ghosts don't appear as enemies in these puzzle adventure games, unlike that in survival horror games. Instead, with reference to Bliss Cua Lim's concept of "spectral time" (Lim 2001) and Chris Berry's concept of "Haunted realism" (Berry 2007), I argue that ghosts are the embodiment of repressed memories that guide the protagonist in exploring and redressing the injustices of social reality. Correspondingly, the source of horror, the "monsters that threaten normality" (Loiselle 2020), are not only the supernatural, but the premodern relict of feudal superstitions and patriarchy in contemporary China. Horror here is not abstract and fictional, but realist horror that reflects the experiences and affects of everyday life.

With reference to David Der-wei Wang's interpretation of Hannah Arendt's "Fearful Imagination" in his study of contemporary Chinese literature (Wang 2023), I aim to showcase the unique approach that Chinese horror indie games take to engage with societal realities, the "fearful realism". When players are shocked and terrified by realist horror in games, they can see and imagine the dark and traumatic sides of real world that has been conventionally obscured and forgotten. The return of monsters and ghosts in games not only questions the dichotomy of reality and fiction, but also archives and (re)evokes the feelings of uncanniness and anachronism in "the historical present" (Harootunian 2007). The affective scenarios and experiences articulate the horror of everyday life and open a queer space of bargaining, adapting, and subverting status quo. Through the dark, we may see the light.

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