Identity at the Crossroads: Cultural Negotiation in Player-Character Relationships

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BODY TEXT

Digital games have become significant cultural platforms that offer players opportunities to explore identity, relationships, and agency in virtual spaces. While much scholarship on player-character relationships in role-playing games has emphasized personal expression and psychological identification, this study shifts the focus to how ambiguity in game design shapes the interpretive labor expected of players. Using *Ashes of the Kingdom* (Qookka Games 2023) as a case study, I argue that the game's refusal to resolve narrative and moral tensions constitutes a form of designed non-commitment. This structured ambiguity delegates interpretive responsibility to players, transforming identification into a culturally situated process of negotiation.

In doing so, the game organizes participation not only through interactive choices but also through the orchestration of narrative uncertainty and the implicit demand for interpretive engagement. Players are not given clear ideological cues, but are instead positioned to supply coherence themselves by drawing on gendered, moral, and cultural frameworks. Ambiguity, then, becomes a way of structuring identity-related engagement not by enabling freedom, but by designing the conditions under which meaning must be made.

The player-character relationship in digital role-playing games presents a productive site for rethinking how identity is formed, performed, and contested in technologically mediated contexts. While earlier work has highlighted how avatars serve as tools for personal experimentation and self-extension (Boellstorff 2008; Consalvo et al. 2019; Kafai et al. 2010; Smith 2010), this study attends to the ways that such experimentation is shaped and constrained by broader cultural structures. Drawing on Thomas Malaby's (2007) notion of games as domains of "contrived contingency"—where outcomes emerge from both chance and structured parameters—I explore how narrative ambiguity can structure interpretive practice as a form of delegated labor.

Rather than treating ambiguity as a purely formal or narrative affordance (Aarseth 1997; Murray 1997), I theorize it as a mode of soft governance, in the sense that it organizes the conditions under which players must engage in meaning-making, without explicitly directing their conclusions. Ambiguity in this case does not simply allow for diverse readings; it demands them.

Methodologically, I employ a multi-sited discursive ethnography combining walkthrough analysis (Light et al. 2018), online player discourse from Chinese gaming forums or social media, and semi-structured interviews with players. These materials allow me to trace how ambiguity is embedded into the game's design—particularly through the protagonist's shifting gender presentation, the lack of narrative closure around romance and political ambition, and the non-resolution of moral conflict—and how players respond through sustained interpretive engagement.

The design of *Ashes of the Kingdom* constructs ambiguity through both narrative and interface elements. The protagonist, a woman navigating a patriarchal world while alternately performing as male and female, is never narratively positioned as wholly empowered or wholly complicit. Romance and political choices remain ethically ambivalent, inviting players to speculate on intent and consequence. Players engage this structure by debating the protagonist's legitimacy, agency, and ideological function. Some view her as a feminist strategist, while others see her as reinforcing patriarchal logic.

These divergent readings are not just reflections of individual preference, but articulations of broader social and gender discourses. Through this process, identification becomes contested and constructed: players must negotiate their own understandings of gender, power, and morality in order to stabilize meaning. This is a form of cultural labor, where ambiguity acts as the structuring condition for how identity is engaged, challenged, and reimagined.

This paper contributes to game studies and digital ethnography by reframing ambiguity as a delegated structure of meaning-making. Building on Aarseth's (1997) concept of the ergodic reader, I argue that in *Ashes of the Kingdom*, players are not simply exploring freedom, but performing the interpretive and ethical work that the game abstains from providing. This reframing shifts our understanding of identity in games from one of personal expression to one of negotiated construction within designed ambiguity.

I use the term "governance" not in the sense of institutional control or developer enforcement, but to describe how games structure the interpretive conditions that players must inhabit. Ambiguity functions as a mechanism of soft governance, organizing the space for emotional investment, moral reasoning, and cultural debate without resolving ideological contradictions. This perspective invites further inquiry into how games manage participation and identity not only through interactivity or avatar construction, but through the orchestration of non-resolution and contested meaning.

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