

# Ambivalent Alliance: How History, Memory, and Gameplay Reshape Women’s Political Legacy

**Xiaoyi Sun**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Shatin, N.T.

Hong Kong

[lulusun@link.cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:lulusun@link.cuhk.edu.hk)

## Keywords

historical games; Chinese history; playable memory; gender and political agency; interactive historiography; procedural representation

## ABSTRACT

Scholars of historical games have argued that digital games do not simply replay a fixed sequence of past events but model history as a field of possibilities and practices, inviting players to test evidence and perform forms of historical reasoning (Chapman 2016; Kapell and Elliott 2013; Uricchio 2005). Building on this inquiry, this research takes the political relationship between Shangguan Wan’er and Princess Taiping—two of the most visible yet most narratively fractured female figures in Tang history—to examine how a contemporary historical-fantasy game reorganizes contested historical materials and what kinds of interpretive paths, rather than definitive truths, its systems make available to players. To do so, the study proceeds on two levels: first, by analyzing how the historical archive produces narrative formations of this relationship, and second, by examining how video game proceduralizes and reinterprets those arrangements through interactive memory systems so that conflicting versions in text and play can be analyzed together.

To frame this inquiry, the work develops two interconnected concepts: ambivalent alliance and playable memory. Ambivalent alliance describes a configuration in which collaboration and conflict coexist in the records because different genres and authors assign different functions and meanings to the same people and events, echoing gender-historical and narratological accounts of how “enemies” and “allies” are produced by discourse rather than simply discovered in the archive (Scott 1986; White 1973). Playable memory names game mechanisms that build on such unstable materials and turn them into structures of choice, feedback, and progression through which players reconfigure the past, drawing on cultural-memory approaches that emphasize selective activation and remediation rather than mere storage (Assmann 2011; Erll 2011). Together, these concepts offer a portable vocabulary for thinking across historical writing and game design.

On the historiographical level, the research offers close readings of the core textual records through which the Wan’er–Taiping relationship has been transmitted: *Jiu*

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

*Tang shu [Old Book of Tang]* (Liu 1975) and *Xin Tang shu [New Book of Tang]* (Ouyang and Song 1975), two official dynastic histories of the Tang; *Zizhi tongjian* (Sima 2013), a later comprehensive political chronicle; and Zhang Yue's preface to the Lantai "New Collection" (Dong et al. 1983), a near-contemporary commemorative preface. These sources are indispensable for this case because they were produced under different institutional mandates and generic conventions and therefore constitute the main archive in which the two women appear, are judged, and are remembered. Read comparatively, they reveal three categories of evidence. First, institutional co-presence: the two women appear as collaborators who shared deliberative authority in state decision-making. Second, event-based adjudication: in accounts of the aftermath of the Tanglong and Xiantian Coup, they are cast as entangled rivals, sometimes even positioned as agents implicated in each other's downfall. Third, posthumous construction: contemporaries and later writers elevate Wan'er's literary talent, political achievements, and sacrificial loyalty, consistently framing her legacy in relation to Princess Taiping as a constitutive mirror.

On the level of interactive media, the research turns to the contemporary historical-fantasy game *Dream and Lethe Record* (《忘川风华录》) (NetEase Games 2021), examining how its heterochronic setting transforms divergent historical records into a system of playable memory. The game's "memory fluctuation" mechanic decomposes contested historical interpretations into fragmented scenes: childhood recollections, court deliberations, and high-stakes political decisions. Its premise that "evil spirits distort key memories" functions as an allegory for the instability of historical evidence itself. Guided by the bluebird, a narrative agent that traverses memories, players enter these fragments and distinguish implanted false memories from recoverable ones through dialogic choices, spatial exploration, and clue-based reconstruction. The repeated loop of trigger → discern → repair → reaffirm gradually shifts the Wan'er–Taiping relationship from suspicion and misrecognition toward a model of mutual support and interdependence. The increase of "bond value" is not a formalistic number but directly unlocks new voice lines, illustrated scenes, and side stories, linking political alignment, emotional attachment, and archival repair. In procedural terms, rules and feedback turn ambiguity into a design resource rather than a flaw (Bogost 2007; Gaver et al. 2003; Salen and Zimmerman 2003).

Bringing the historical and game analyses together, the study argues that playable memory constructs an experimental framework capable of holding conflicting evidence and speculative imagination at once. Through mechanisms of pacing, threshold-based unlocking, and reversible interaction, the game repeatedly enacts, tests, and reinterprets an ambivalent female political relationship, opening a feminist interpretive space in which the archive's constraints on women's agency become visible and alternative relational possibilities can be explored. Rather than resolving the past into a single authoritative version, this approach treats women's political relationships as dynamic, cross-media structures that take shape differently in chronicles, commemorative writing, and interactive systems.

Taken together, these arguments lead to three key contributions. First, this research proposes that ambivalent alliance and playable memory can be used beyond this single case to analyze other historical games and new portrayals of women's political lives, and to pose methodological questions about how historians and designers reimagine the past, attribute agency to women, and build fictional worlds in digital media. Second, it suggests that, from this perspective, historical games are not only gamified storytelling devices but also experimental spaces in which assumptions

about what counts as evidence, who is allowed to speak, and which memories are preserved or forgotten are implemented in rules, interfaces, and feedback systems. Third, it argues that reading games in this way brings debates from women's history, memory studies, and critical historiography into game analysis, and shows how specific design choices participate in ongoing theoretical discussions about evidence, power, and remembrance.

## REFERENCES

- Assmann, J. 2011. *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Bogost, I. 2007. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge, MA, USA; London, England: MIT Press.
- Chapman, A. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. New York, NY, USA; London, England: Routledge.
- Dong, G. (董诰) et al. (eds.). 1983. *Quan Tang Wen 《全唐文》 [Complete Prose of the Tang Dynasty]*. Vol. 621, Zhang Yue, "Preface to the Collected Works of Lady Shangguan." Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company (中华书局).
- Erl, A. 2011. *Memory in Culture*. London, England; New York, NY, USA: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gaver, W., Beaver, J., and Benford, S. 2003. "Ambiguity as a Resource for Design." In *CHI '03: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York, NY, USA: ACM Press. 233–240. <https://doi.org/10.1145/642611.642653>
- Kapell, M. W., and Elliott, A. B. R. (eds.). 2013. *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*. London, England; New York, NY, USA: Bloomsbury.
- Liu, X. (刘昫) (ed.). 1975. *Jiu Tang Shu 《旧唐书》 [Old Book of Tang]*. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company (中华书局).
- NetEase Games. 2021. *Dream and Lethe Record (忘川风华录)*. Mobile game; iOS/Android. Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, China: NetEase Inc.
- Ouyang, X. (欧阳修), and Song, Q. (宋祁) (eds.). 1975. *Xin Tang Shu 《新唐书》 [New Book of Tang]*. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company (中华书局).
- Salen, K., and Zimmerman, E. 2003. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. Cambridge, MA, USA; London, England: MIT Press.
- Scott, J. W. 1986. "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review*, 91(5), 1053–1075. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376>

- Sima, G. (司马光) (ed.). 2013. *Zizhi tongjian* 《资治通鉴》 [*Comprehensive Mirror to Aid in Government*]. Vols. 208–209, Tanglong and Xiantian Coups. Beijing, China: Zhonghua Book Company (中华书局).
- Uricchio, W. 2005. "Simulation, History, and Computer Games." In *Handbook of Computer Game Studies*, edited by J. Raessens and J. Goldstein, 327–338. Cambridge, MA, USA; London, England: MIT Press.
- White, H. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore, MD, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press.