

Playing anachronism in Time: Towards the Ludobiography in the Context of Chinese Indie Games

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This article examines the temporality of ludobiographical (Gallagher 2019, 2022) narratives in Chinese indie games and, conversely, uses these discourses of temporalities as an analytical lens to examine how anachronism functions as a critical and aesthetic strategy within the contemporary landscape of indie game-making in China. The term “ludobiography” in the title comes from Rob Gallagher’s idea that games can be autobiographical when creators present parts of their own lives, and they become “ludobiographical” when they also show how videogames challenge the humanist belief that people are fully independent individuals who control their own bodies, stories, and identities. Gallagher’s concept of ludobiography is based on the idea that videogames can be seen as time-critical media (Ernst, 2016) that extend the reach of players’ agency (Poremba, 2007; Krzywinska & Brown, 2015; Nguyen, 2020; Bódi, 2023) across multiple temporalities, enabling forms of engagement with historical dislocation and fractured temporal experience. Furthermore, ludobiography not only concerns human memory, but also posthuman forms of subject formation across multiple temporalities.

This article adopts the concept of anachronism (Didi-Huberman, 2000) to first express the contradiction faced by contemporary Chinese indie game creators between appropriating Chinese traditional cultural resources and pursuing authenticity in realist expression. In recent years, Chinese indie

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games that have attracted global attention are predominantly visual novels that carry the creators' strong autobiographical impulses. This tendency arises from the resource-constrained circumstances in which many creators begin their game-making careers, leading them to select themes that depict conditions of lived social realities and use the game medium to convey the inherent vulnerability of personal emotions, memories, and the precarity of their social situations.

However, the expression of such grassroots narratives must constantly navigate an ongoing compromise with capital, censorship, and platform infrastructures—circumstances that can ultimately render the creation of autobiographical games susceptible to becoming a form of overly individualized typical suffering narratives. It is likewise noteworthy that even the creative impulse to articulate what cannot be spoken within official contexts often grounds the structure of feeling of these autobiographical games in collective memories of historical trauma.

Consequently, many works exhibit certain homogenized modes of expression, such as the deliberate display of folkloric spectacle or self-orientalizing representations (Said, 1978). The causes of this phenomenon extend beyond state censorship: they also include the influence of prevailing market conditions and the anxieties stemming from the longstanding neglect of national game-cultural traditions. These factors together pose potential constraints on the future development of Chinese independent games.

Another aspect of “anachronism” is manifested in players' affective participation in autobiographical narratives: while the actions of players appear to reveal the game characters' personal histories, they in fact constitute a mode of historical reflection. In this way, player actions within the narrative simultaneously enact resistance to externally imposed social temporality and symbolize the restoration of individual temporal consciousness. This is expressed through two implicit layers of expected player acknowledgment in autobiographical games.

On one hand, players are guided to affectively acknowledge the collective histories of gendered trauma (Zhan, 2025). For example, in *Laughing to Die* (Dajili Production Team 2022), players explore the grandma's personal history by controlling a young girl, transforming everyday objects into narrative carriers, thereby constructing a horror aesthetic of fearful realism (Luo, 2024). In Chinese indie games, the intrusion of female ghosts into the present not only symbolizes the return of historical trauma but also prompts players, through the act of saving individuals who have lost their sense of time, to indirectly reflect on structural social oppression and historical responsibility (Zhang, 2025).

On the other hand, autobiographical games invite players to acknowledge individual tragedies resulting from economic crisis with varied political reasons. In *A Perfect Day* (Perfect Day Studio 2022), the decline of northern industrial regions and the loss from the guarantee promised by the institutional power experienced by individuals are conveyed through depictions of a child protagonist's everyday life. Cyclical temporality functions as an operable event mechanism, allowing players, in exploring the multiple potentials of the present, to experience the child protagonist's

longing for a better future being constrained by the temporalities of the present. This gameplay design enables players, through game mechanics, to perceive and participate in the generation of tragic experience, thereby achieving an indirect acknowledgment of individual histories and epochal affect.

It is nonetheless important to delineate the limits of such acknowledgment. This acknowledgment is at times mediated through narrative devices internal to the game, and at other times manifested indirectly through game mechanics — the latter of which are subject to the systemic constraints of the medium's temporal regime. When cyclical time quietly displaces social contradictions into individualized numerical predicaments, and when calculative rationality persistently colonizes the cognitive space required for reflective thought, the player's failure to reflect is not a matter of unwillingness; rather, the game's temporal regime structurally forecloses any position from which such narrative reflection might emerge.

If the expressions of anachronism in the first two autobiographical games still reflect a strongly anthropocentric construction of subjectivity, I propose to consider the game *Hymer 2000* (doBell 2025) and *Minds Beneath Us* (BearBoneStudio 2024) as a distinct mode of ludobiography, exploring the autobiographical generation of posthuman subjectivity in games through an analytical lens different from ethnographic (Wilde, 2023) or phenomenological approaches (Keogh, 2018). *Hymer 2000* primarily employs gameplay involving interaction with artificial intelligence to explore contemporary reflections on cyborg subjectivity (Milesi, 2022). In the near-future cyberpunk visual novel *Minds Beneath Us*, a meta-narrative structure is used to reflect on human life under technological conditions. Both games investigate how players must engage with a posthuman mode of embodiment existence to navigate ethical choices and enact a ludobiographical exploration of posthuman thinking. Only when the player shifts from performing another's autobiography to intra-acting with their avatar can they reconstruct the self within experiences of multiple temporalities, rather than becoming a ghost attached to the suffering narratives in the game.

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