

Pleasures Under Pressure: Misogyny, Moral Outrage, and Creative Contraction in Contemporary Chinese Game Culture

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In contemporary platform culture, gender has become one of the most contested triggers for ideological conflict. Practices such as gender discrimination, the objectification of women, and dismissive commentary regarding female gamers' abilities are increasingly subject to intense scrutiny under modern feminist norms. In the context of Chinese gaming culture, these mechanisms became particularly visible in the controversies surrounding *Black Myth: Wukong* (Game Science, 2024). As the first Chinese AAA action-RPG to gain broad international recognition, it was hailed as both an industrial milestone and a model of cultural export (Reuters, 2024). This symbolic weight gave its controversies a visibility far beyond that of a typical gaming incident.

As China Digital Times (2024) summarised, the controversy did not only concern art director Yang Qi's 2013 remarks, such as "some games are made for men", but also included sexually suggestive language in early recruitment advertisements and objectifying comments about female gamers/characters made by other team members. These historical materials, once resurfaced, became central to gender discussions, forming a system of retroactive accountability through permanence and searchability on social

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media and content platforms, drawing the game into wider debates about the male gaze and the marginalised position of women and queer gaming communities (Cannelli & Musso, 2022; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Shaw, 2015). In this case, the game's status as an industrial breakthrough came into strong tension with the gendered expressions of its creators, expanding gender criticism into a structural questioning of creator ethics and domestic player culture.

This controversy spilled over into a broader scrutiny of game criticism and content creators. Video game commentators who publicly praised *Black Myth: Wukong* faced intense criticism on platforms like Bilibili, Douban, and Xiaohongshu for allegedly treating male players as the default audience and ignoring women's experiences (Feng, 2026). Xiaohongshu, with its high concentration of female users, became the most vital space for amplifying dissatisfaction with the male-dominated commentary system. A similar friction appeared in the case of commentator Xiaoyao Sanren. Initially seen as respectful of female players during the *Black Myth: Wukong* debates, he later faced backlash after watching the gameplay reveal of miHoYo's *Varsapura* (2025) on livestream. When audiences raised miHoYo's previous alleged misogyny controversies, he refused to boycott the viewing, leading to more than 400,000 unfollows and a wider public relations crisis (Gamersky, 2025; Huxiu, 2025).

These escalated reactions stem from the marginalisation of women in gaming cultures, where dominant discourses often objectify female players rather than treating them as equal participants (Shaw, 2015; Nakandala et al., 2017; Connell, 2017). Such conditions allow female players' accumulated anger to erupt through social media (Ahmed, 2003). However, this controversy gradually evolved into an intensifying affective confrontation in online spaces. Moreover, none of the accused games was deemed an illegal publication by the press and publication authorities, a conclusion that further intensified public frustration because it failed to address female players' structural concerns (The Paper, 2025). In addition, this brief regulatory response sent an ambiguous signal to the industry: avoiding risk may be safer than engaging in complex cultural expression. Yet the current gaming ecology reveals the further problems produced by such a strategy. Taking *Wuchang: Fallen Feathers* (Leenzee Games, 2025) as an example, even leaving aside nationalist political factors, the design of its female protagonist and costume quickly became a basis on which players judged the developers' position. Like other games featuring female leads, it was inevitably compressed into interpretive frames empowerment, objectification, or pandering, reflecting the binary tendency of postfeminist media culture identified by Gill (2007).

In this context, the "pleasure" in gaming becomes a form of cultural capital, as dominant gaming culture has long been structured around masculinity, technical mastery, and the symbolic authority of the hardcore player (Bourdieu, 2018). As women's demands for safety and respect gain visibility, they collide with these established norms, triggering a struggle over whose pleasure can be recognised as a valid gaming experience (Carr, 2005). Therefore, through case-based discourse analysis and digital ethnography, this article asks: How is "pleasure" symbolised and factionalised under the tensions of gendered power in contemporary Chinese gaming culture? More

specifically, how do players of different gender identities define the boundaries of their pleasure, and how do they seek recognition for that pleasure within gaming spaces? How does this struggle over the right to define pleasure, mediated through digital discourse, influence and reshape the production logic and cultural landscape of China's game industry?

We find that contemporary Chinese gaming culture severely lacks an intermediary discursive space for negotiating pleasure especially in the gender context. While female players seek environments free from humiliation, many male players view feminist criticism as a direct threat to established forms of gaming pleasure, including mastery, high-difficulty challenge, and sexualised aesthetics. When leading Chinese studios like Game Science and miHoYo are symbolically bound up with national technological achievement, this tension is amplified, and gender criticism is misread as an attack on the rise of the Chinese industry itself. Furthermore, we argue that the resulting polarisation has hindered discussions from exploring more ontological dimensions of games, such as gameplay mechanics, aesthetic details, and genre conventions. More importantly, these dynamics create immense risk-management pressure for studios, in an environment where creators are rapidly labelled and attacked, the space for representational negotiation and creative experimentation is further compressed (Kerr, 2017, pp.15-16).

The study therefore proposes the concept of "intersectional pleasures" to move beyond the opposition between male-coded hardcore pleasure and female-coded safety pleasure, thus how different pleasures are historically formed, unequally distributed, and differently recognised within gaming culture can be understood. When misogynistic structures and platform-amplified moral critique meet only through accusation and defence, the result is often contraction rather than transformation: creators retreat into safer categories, players harden into opposing camps, and gendered pleasure becomes increasingly difficult to discuss without moral escalation. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how future design practices, community governance, and media literacy might create the conditions for gaming pleasure to become a shared field of experience that, although uneven, can remain inclusive and open to sustained negotiation.

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