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**Playing His Part, Holding Her Strength: Gendered Negotiation, Agency, and  
Empowerment among Chinese Women Players of Fixed Male-Protagonist  
Single-Player Games**

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**Abstract**

This thesis examines how Chinese women players negotiate sustained engagement with narrative-driven single-player games with fixed male protagonists, and how these experiences relate to agency and empowerment across personal, interpersonal, and political levels. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with fifteen Chinese women players and reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal different trajectories across personal, interpersonal, and political levels. At the personal level, players describe confidence, agency, and strength developed through play as extending into everyday life. At the interpersonal level, women-only gaming communities provide spaces where gendered experiences can be discussed and shared awareness can develop. At the political level, players articulate critical awareness of gendered structures. Yet this awareness remains largely bounded within personal and community settings and is not necessarily accompanied by broader collective action. This pattern may partly reflect the perceived social costs of publicly claiming gendered empowerment. Players may describe changes consistent with empowerment without naming or presenting these experiences publicly as empowerment. This separation between realization and claiming suggests that critical awareness and public or collective action do not necessarily develop together. Game spaces can therefore enable empowerment without necessarily enabling its public claiming beyond the boundaries of play.

Keywords: gender and gaming; women gamers; male protagonists; cross-gender play; gendered agency; empowerment

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## **1. Introduction**

Much influential research on women's empowerment has examined economic, political, legal, and household dimensions (Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra et al., 2002). Yet empowerment may also emerge through everyday practices not explicitly undertaken for that purpose. Women participate in leisure, join communities, and develop capacities and self-understandings in informal spaces.

Single-player games are one such space. Male characters remain substantially overrepresented in commercially prominent video games (Jones et al., 2026; Williams et al., 2009). I focus on a specific subset: narrative-driven single-player games with fixed male protagonists. In these games, players control a character who acts and develops within a fictional world (Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Narrative progression and key gameplay systems are organized around this fixed protagonist. These features are common in RPGs but also occur in adjacent genres such as action-adventure games and visual novels. I therefore use "male-protagonist games" as an umbrella term for the games examined in this thesis. Engagement with these games can be prolonged and repeated. The single-player format also limits direct mediation by other players. Women therefore access exploration, combat, decision-making, and narrative progression through a fixed male protagonist.

Feminist leisure scholarship has shown that leisure is not detached from gendered power. It is a site where gender relations are reproduced and contested (Parry & Fullagar, 2013). Gaming is one such practice. Existing game research has focused on male dominance in the game industry and culture, gender-based discrimination in online environments, and cross-gender play motivations (Cote, 2020; Shaw, 2015;

Yee et al., 2011). How women experience sustained engagement with fixed male-protagonist games has rarely entered the discussion.

These games place women players in a distinctive structural position. The fictional world and its narrative logic are organized around a fixed male protagonist. Over sustained periods of play, women act through this character, carrying out tasks, making decisions, and bearing consequences. Such experiences take place within a broader social context in which public gender expression may carry costs. This raises the possibility that forms of agency and empowerment can emerge through less formal and less explicitly political practices. If empowerment emerges there, its form, level, and limits may differ from those associated with institutional settings. Whether and how these experiences relate to empowerment beyond the game is where this thesis begins.

I examine this phenomenon within China's sociocultural context. Public expression related to gender can carry real social consequences in this context. These conditions may constrain some forms of public and collective action. Women who play single-player games have also received little attention in existing Chinese-language research.

My research question is therefore: How do Chinese women negotiate sustained engagement with fixed male-protagonist single-player games, and how, if at all, do these experiences relate to empowerment?

Answering this question requires addressing three layers in sequence: what kind of space the game constitutes, how women act within it, and how these experiences relate to different levels of empowerment and its limits. My theoretical framework

draws on Foucault's heterotopia, Butler's gender performativity, Mahmood's agency within norms, and Gutiérrez's empowerment theory to examine these interconnected layers. I adopt a qualitative research design. I conducted semi-structured interviews with fifteen Chinese women who play fixed male-protagonist games and analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis.

The thesis is organized as follows. Chapter 2 provides background on the Chinese context. Chapter 3 reviews the relevant literature. Chapter 4 establishes the theoretical framework. Chapter 5 describes the research methodology. Chapter 6 presents the data analysis. Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, addresses the research question, and sets out the limits of the study and directions for further research. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis.

## **2. Background**

Participants are Chinese women who play male-protagonist games. The gendered pressures they face take historically and institutionally specific forms. The space available for discussing these pressures is also constrained. The gaming culture in which they play has its own gender structure. These conditions shape how agency and empowerment may be experienced, expressed, and extended beyond play.

### **2.1 The Structural Position of Chinese Women**

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, gender equality reforms were largely state-led. Marriage law reform strengthened women's legal rights within marriage, including rights concerning divorce and family property. The state

incorporated women into the social production system through mass mobilization (Johnson, 1983, pp. 54–55, 102, 157–158). However, the driving force behind them came from the state’s strategic need to achieve political and economic goals, not from an independent women’s movement (Johnson, 1983, pp. 88–89). The All-China Women’s Federation, the official women’s organization, has always been subordinate to the Party-state system. It is not an independent women’s movement body (Min, 2007).

Market reforms after 1978 transformed employment relations and reduced some protections associated with the planned economy. These changes also reshaped gender inequality in the labor market (He & Wu, 2018; Shu, 2005). Employers gained greater hiring autonomy and pursued profit and efficiency, often treating women’s reproductive and family burdens as costs, which led to sharper exclusion and income penalties for women of childbearing age (He & Wu, 2018; Shu, 2005). Yet the official rhetoric of ‘women hold up half the sky’ did not disappear. Official commitments to gender equality coexisted with persistent gender discrimination in the market.

These historical processes have shaped the overall character of the pressures facing Chinese women today. The pressures are structural, dual, and mutually reinforcing across public and private domains (Ji et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2025). Women’s educational attainment has risen substantially. Yet expectations of traditional gender roles have not weakened accordingly. Many women therefore navigate tensions between professional participation and traditional gender expectations (Ji et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2025).

This institutional history also provides important context for contemporary gender

discourse. Party-state institutions have played a central role in defining legitimate public discourse on gender equality. When women try to discuss gender issues outside this framework, they enter a tightly controlled space.

Social media has become an important site for feminist expression in China. At the same time, such expression faces increasing forms of platform censorship and political scrutiny. At the institutional level, independent feminist action faces direct legal risk. Activists have been detained for organizing gender-related public advocacy (Hong Fincher, 2018). At the platform level, inciting gender antagonism has become a frequently used censorship label. Feminist accounts have been banned on a large scale. Censorship mechanisms continue to escalate to track evasion strategies such as homophones (characters or phrases with similar sounds used to bypass keyword filtering), while misogynistic and sexist speech is rarely intervened against (Shao & He, 2024). Even as feminist discourse on Weibo becomes more direct, much of it remains individualized and affective rather than taking the form of sustained collective resistance. Hashtag-based networks and discursive alliances are also often short-lived and vulnerable to dismantling (Liu, 2025).

These restrictions have not eliminated Chinese women's gender consciousness. But expressing it carries a cost, and even when expression occurs it is difficult to consolidate into sustained collective force. Political forms of empowerment are often associated with public voice, collective organization, and participation. In China, these forms of action operate under strict institutional constraints.

## **2.2 Chinese Gaming Culture and Women Players**

In 2025, the Chinese game market generated 350.789 billion yuan in revenue, with a user base of 683 million (Game Publishing Committee [GPC], 2025). Mobile

games accounted for 73.29% of total market revenue. Client games accounted for 22.28%, while console games represented about 2.4% (GPC, 2025).

The growth in women players has occurred within this structure. In the most recent year with gender-disaggregated industry data, women made up 46.2% of Chinese game users. Yet they contributed only 22.8% of market revenue (GPC, 2019). The report attributed this gap to a shortage of quality products for women users and the dominance of casual, low-spending games in the female market (GPC, 2019). This explanation locates women's low spending on the supply side. But it also treats women users as a distinct market segment. Mainstream competitive genres such as multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games are often imagined and marketed around a male player norm. Genres such as otome games (story-driven romance games typically centered on a female protagonist and marketed primarily to women) are explicitly designed and marketed toward women. Together they form a gender-segmented market structure (Liu & Lai, 2022). Chess (2017) conceptualizes this logic through *Player Two*, a designed identity of the imagined female gamer. The game industry manufactures a fictional identity about what women should play and how. Industry data do not distinguish women who play non-female-oriented PC or console games as a separate group. They are therefore difficult to identify within aggregate industry statistics. This statistical invisibility matters for the population examined here.

### **3. Literature Review**

#### **3.1 Single-Player Games: Gendered Narrative Structures and the Male Default**

Williams et al. (2009) documented the systematic overrepresentation of male characters through a virtual census of 150 video games. Later studies continue to document substantial male overrepresentation, although estimates vary across

samples and methods. Lin (2021) found that 79.2% of protagonists in the study's sample were male. In a study of eleven commercially successful games, women accounted for 17.78% of cover characters and 31.63% of characters in audiovisual content. Only 35.29% of identified protagonists were female (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2025).

In narrative-driven RPGs, this male default takes a multi-layered form. A systematic analysis of fifty RPGs found that male characters had more dialogue than female characters in 94% of the games, even in those with female protagonists. The imbalance also persisted beyond simple differences in character numbers and protagonist gender (Rennick et al., 2023). This default extends to assumptions about player identity. Fron et al. (2007) describe a *hegemony of play* shaped by industry practices and the privileged status of the self-identified hardcore gamer. This discourse historically centers genres, conventions, and forms of play associated with young male players. Chess (2017) develops this argument through *Player Two*, a designed identity of the imagined female gamer. *Player Two* is not an empirical description of women players. It reflects industry assumptions about who women players are and what kinds of games they should want. Digital games thus function as a gendered technology, with male defaults operating across multiple layers.

In narrative-driven games, players commonly act through a player character to progress through the game world (Klimmt et al., 2009). Interactive control can facilitate identification, but the two are not equivalent. Klimmt et al. (2009) define identification as a temporary shift in players' self-perception toward selected attributes of the game character. Identification is selective rather than a complete replacement of the player's identity. A fixed protagonist further limits which character occupies the playable position. The player can shape some actions, but

the character's core attributes remain predetermined. When that protagonist is male, women players access the game's central playable position through a male character.

### **3.2 Women Players' Entry and Practice**

A gender mismatch between player and protagonist does not necessarily prevent engagement or identification. Gender match is not the only basis on which audiences or players relate to fictional characters. Audiences may also respond to characters aspirationally. Wishful identification refers to the desire to resemble or behave like a character (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005; Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Similarity is therefore only one possible basis for character attachment. When avatar customization is available, women may select more masculine avatar traits when these traits fit the game's demands (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Eklund (2011) likewise shows that women players negotiate gender through avatars, strategies, and context-dependent forms of play. These studies show that cross-gender play is possible and that avatar choice can become a site of gender negotiation.

Research on gaming motivation helps explain why gender mismatch does not necessarily prevent sustained engagement. A factor analysis of more than 3,000 massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players identified three independent dimensions of gaming motivation: achievement, social, and immersion (Yee, 2006). The immersion dimension includes role-playing, character customization, exploration, and escapism. Several of these motives, particularly role-playing and exploration, are closely associated with RPG play. The three dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and gender contributes less to motivational differences than stereotypes suggest (Yee, 2006). Later studies further complicate the stereotype that women play primarily for social motives. Competition also appears among women's reported gaming motives (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019).

Wohn et al. (2020) found women in their multiplayer sample to be at least as achievement-oriented as men.

How women negotiate this gendered structure varies with their level and form of engagement. Royse et al. (2007) found different relationships between gaming and gender across levels of participation. For highly engaged players, gaming became more closely integrated into their sense of gendered self. These players valued mastery, strength, and competition. Moderate players often used games to manage everyday pressures. They also maintained a clearer separation between virtual and everyday identities. Gender negotiation also extends beyond the immediate act of play. Facing exclusion and harassment in gaming culture, some women players construct or seek digital safe spaces. Within these spaces, individual experiences of gendered discomfort can become collective discussion, alongside networks of informational and emotional support (Zhang et al., 2023; Scidone et al., 2024).

### **3.3 Gaming Practice, Agency, and Empowerment**

What women gain from media and leisure practices is a recurring question in feminist media research. Radway's (1991, pp. 209–211) study of women romance novel readers found that reading is both a response to needs unmet under patriarchy and a practice that may substitute for rather than promote social change. Feminist leisure research has similarly questioned whether empowerment must take the form of direct resistance. Raisborough and Bhatti (2007) show that women's leisure can create forms of agency that neither straightforwardly resist nor simply reproduce gender norms.

This tension recurs across game research. Chess (2020) argues that feminist play can provide a space for practicing agency within unequal systems. Women's

participation in gaming can itself carry gendered significance. Delamere and Shaw (2008) show that women may challenge gendered boundaries by entering a leisure space traditionally associated with men. Such agency, however, is not always straightforward. Kivijärvi and Katila (2022) found that women could reproduce masculine gamer norms while also developing alternative gamer identities with subversive potential. However, these forms of agency and negotiation do not necessarily extend beyond play. Shaw (2015) found that some women players were indifferent to the lack of female characters in games. At the same time, the industry often treats representation as a market question, making visibility more likely for groups seen as profitable. Yet targeted solutions can create another problem. The girl games movement did not bring female players into the hardcore gamer market. Instead, games designed “for girls” remained peripheral to mainstream gaming (Shaw, 2015, p. 170). Participation therefore does not automatically produce either a demand for representation or greater inclusion.

In China, Liu and Lai (2022) use MOBA and otome games to illustrate a gender-segmented market logic in which women remain positioned as othered participants. Women players in otome games hold contradictory understandings of the role games play in their lives. They value the emotional experiences these games provide while also recognizing their reproduction of patriarchal norms. Players with different feminist commitments develop various strategies to reconcile growing gender awareness with conservative game narratives (Liu, 2025).

Much of the player-centered literature reviewed above examines female-oriented games, customizable characters, or multiplayer environments. These settings differ in important ways from fixed male-protagonist single-player games. This leaves open how women experience sustained engagement with this form of play.

### **3.4 Research gap**

Where avatar gender or gendered traits can be selected, the resulting configuration partly reflects player choice (Eklund, 2011; Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Otome games are designed for female audiences. The space itself is built to cater to the player's desires (Liu, 2025; Liu & Lai, 2022). In multiplayer games, social interaction forms part of the play environment (Yee, 2006; Zhang et al., 2023). Fixed male-protagonist single-player games have none of these three features. The playable protagonist is not the player's choice. The space is not designed for her. The core gameplay requires no direct interaction with other players. How sustained engagement with this configuration relates to agency and empowerment beyond play remains underexplored.

Existing research gives limited attention to this particular type of play. One reason may be that relevant studies approach the issue from different directions. Research on male defaults often examines representation, dialogue, visual content, and industry structures (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2025; Fron et al., 2007; Rennick et al., 2023; Williams et al., 2009). These studies establish persistent gender imbalances but tell us less about how women experience prolonged play through a fixed male protagonist. Several player-centered studies instead focus on motivation, avatar choice, or multiplayer environments (Lopez-Fernandez et al., 2019; Yee, 2006; Wohn et al., 2020). These studies explain important aspects of women's play, but do not isolate the fixed-protagonist single-player experience. Research on Chinese women players reviewed here also focuses mainly on explicitly gendered settings, particularly otome and MOBA games (Liu, 2025; Liu & Lai, 2022). Cross-gender play with a fixed protagonist has no explicit moment of character choice or female-oriented genre label. Its gendered significance is

therefore less immediately visible.

A second gap concerns how agency and empowerment are distinguished. Across the literature reviewed here, empowerment and related forms of agency appear at different analytical levels. These levels are not always clearly distinguished. Individual capability, awareness of gendered structures, social connection, and collective action can all appear under the broad language of empowerment. A gain at one level may coexist with a limit at another. A limitation at one level therefore does not by itself resolve whether empowerment exists at another. Distinguishing these levels is therefore necessary for understanding how different forms of agency and empowerment appear across existing research. This distinction provides the basis for the empowerment framework developed in the next chapter.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

### **4.1 Overview**

Answering the central question requires a framework that can do three things simultaneously: explain what kind of space women enter, analyze how they act within it, and evaluate what their actions produce. To this end, this chapter develops a framework built around three interrelated analytical tools.

To begin with, the framework needs to explain what kind of space women enter. I draw on Foucault's concept of heterotopia to analyze game spaces as real but alternatively ordered spaces. However, in male-protagonist games, this spatial structure also has a gendered dimension.

Second, I combine Butler's gender performativity with Mahmood's concept of agency within norms. Butler helps identify where gender norms become unstable;

Mahmood reminds us that working within norms can also be a form of genuine agency. Together, they allow the analysis to remain open to what women's practices actually are, without reducing them to either passive compliance or resistance.

Finally, Butler and Mahmood help us understand what women do in games, but they do not provide tools for assessing the outcomes. I therefore introduce Gutiérrez's empowerment theory. This framework offers a multi-level structure for examining how empowerment appears differently across personal, interpersonal, and political levels.

These three tools form a progressive analytical path. They move from the space in which women's practices take place, to the nature of those practices, to an examination of how these practices relate to different forms of empowerment. This progression organizes the remainder of this chapter.

## **4.2 Heterotopia and Women's Cross-Gender Play**

Women's practices in male-protagonist games are difficult to grasp through ordinary spatial concepts. Women play from a physical location in everyday life, while their actions also unfold within the rules of the game world. These two spatial orders coexist during play. Heterotopia provides a way to examine the relationship between them. Understanding this relationship requires a concept that can account for a space's connection to the world outside it. Foucault's heterotopia provides such a tool.

Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopia in his 1967 lecture *Of Other Spaces*. He argued that the spaces we live in are not empty or uniform. Rather, they are constituted by diverse sites defined by different sets of relations, and these sites

cannot simply be layered on top of one another. Among them, there is a particular kind of space. It exists within society, yet operates under rules and logics different from the everyday order (Foucault, 1986). Foucault called these spaces heterotopias. The most productive use of this concept is not as a label for classifying spaces, but as an analytical method. It reveals how a particular space creates tension with, reflects, and interacts with the world beyond it (Johnson, 2013). I use heterotopia in exactly this sense, examining how its core features help us understand the way game spaces, especially male-protagonist games, operate for women players. Foucault outlines six principles of heterotopia. I focus on four that are most directly relevant to this study: spatial juxtaposition, heterochrony, systems of access, and the functional relationship with external space.

Juxtaposition of real space and game space. Foucault argued that heterotopias can juxtapose in a single real place multiple spaces that are normally incompatible with one another (Foucault, 1986). In male-protagonist games, the physical space the woman player occupies and the fictional world of the game are combined within a single experience. Real space does not disappear. It temporarily hosts a different spatial order. This juxtaposition also carries a specific gendered dimension. The woman player remains physically in the real world, while her actions in the game unfold through a male protagonist. The woman player and the male protagonist are therefore linked within the same gaming experience. This difference constitutes a persistent structural condition whenever women players enter this space.

Temporal rupture. Foucault called this feature heterochrony. Heterotopias begin to function fully when people break with traditional time (Foucault, 1986). Games can create an analogous temporal rupture. Once a woman player enters the game, real time continues to flow. But her actions begin to follow the game's internal logic:

tasks, day-night cycles, narrative progression, save points. Game time can be paused, interrupted, and re-entered. Days or even years within the story can be compressed into a single session. Heterochrony thus provides the temporal condition for women players to temporarily enter the world of the male protagonist. It allows the game space to maintain an order distinct from reality for the duration of play.

A distinct system of access. Foucault emphasized that heterotopias are not freely open to all. They achieve both isolation and penetration through mechanisms of access (Foucault, 1986). Accessing a game may involve purchasing or installing it, configuring equipment, and learning its controls and rules. Players can only engage with the game world within the range of actions the program provides. In male-protagonist games, the character position leading into the game world is a preset male protagonist. Women players can explore, fight, make decisions, and advance the narrative, but these actions remain within the possibilities allocated to the fixed protagonist and the game's structure. The passage into this space is open to women players. But the passage itself is defined by the male protagonist. Openness and constraint together constitute how women players enter male-protagonist games.

Functional relationship with reality. Heterotopias have a functional relationship with the real space outside them. Foucault distinguished two forms. Illusion heterotopias expose the illusory nature of reality by creating an illusory space. Compensation heterotopias create an other space more perfect and orderly than reality, compensating for its deficiencies (Foucault, 1986). The compensatory function is especially relevant to this study. Many RPGs make progress visible through quests, levels, achievements, and other feedback systems. This does not mean that game worlds are inherently fairer than reality. Rather, it raises an

empirical question: whether women players experience the game's rules and feedback as clearer or more controllable than constraints they encounter in everyday life. If they do, the game may take on a compensatory relationship with reality.

The features discussed above describe how heterotopias operate. However, their presence does not automatically make every game a heterotopia. Hutchings and Giardino (2016), drawing on Wilson's (2015) "Foucauldian mirror test," ask whether play encourages meaningful reflection on the world beyond the game. In their discussion of *Dungeons & Dragons*, they argue that play may fall short of heterotopia when it remains within the fantasy world and does not prompt such reflection.

This judgement leaves one question underexplored: what happens when there is a structural difference between the player and the game space she enters? When no fundamental tension exists between the player's identity and the game's assumptions, the game may indeed remain a closed fantasy space. But what happens when women players enter game spaces built around male subjectivity? Does the gender mismatch itself already produce a kind of mirror effect?

In male-protagonist games, women players cannot transparently merge into the game the way male players can. They are always simultaneously inside and outside the game. The gaming experience acts back upon their perception of their own position in reality. The structural condition for this mirror effect is built into the gender mismatch itself. It does not need to be deliberately created.

In this sense, the introduction of gender as a dimension strengthens the heterotopic quality of game spaces. The tension between women and the game space cannot be

dissolved. Far from weakening the game's heterotopic nature, this tension makes the game a more complete heterotopia for women players.

The concept of heterotopia establishes a key premise. Women's practices in male-protagonist games do not take place in everyday space. They take place in a space that operates under different rules and that continuously acts back upon women's perception of their real selves. This means their actions in games have the potential to carry meaning beyond the game itself. But whether this potential becomes reality depends on the nature of these practices. What is women's relationship with the gender norms of the game? What kind of agency do they develop within this relationship? Answering these questions requires theoretical tools that can analyze the relationship between norms and agency.

### **4.3 Gender Performativity and Agency Within Norms**

#### **4.3.1 Norms and their operation in games**

To understand women players' practices in male-protagonist games, we first need to understand how the gender norms they face operate within games. Butler's (2006) theory of gender performativity offers a key analytical starting point. For Butler, gender is not a stable identity. It is not something that comes first and then produces actions. Rather, gender is "an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 191). This means gender is not an attribute that a subject has. It is produced through ongoing performative practices. There is no gender essence prior to performance. The subject itself is an effect of performativity.

The analytical power of this framework lies in how it reveals the mechanism by

which norms sustain themselves. Norms are not established through a single declaration. They are maintained through repetition and citation. Butler (2011) describes performativity as the repeated reiteration of existing norms rather than a single act. It is precisely this repetition that makes norms appear natural and stable. At the same time, Butler (2006) noted that gender as a construction ordinarily conceals its genesis (p. 190). Norms appear self-evident precisely because the process of their construction is hidden.

I approach male-protagonist games as a site in which this mechanism of repetition can be examined. Unlike a static text, a game requires repeated player participation. Each time a player enters the game, they act through a fixed male protagonist. Combat, exploration, decision-making, and narrative progression repeatedly take place through this character. It is through this stylized repetition that the norm of male as default game subject is continuously produced. The idealized male player identity that the game industry designs, what Chess (2017) called Player One, is the cumulative sediment of these countless citations, not a pre-existing essence. Through this repeated participation, the male protagonist is not simply represented as common. The male position is repeatedly used as the position from which players fight, explore, make decisions, and advance the narrative. Repetition can therefore make this gendered position appear ordinary rather than gendered. I understand this as part of the performative production of the male default: the norm becomes less visible precisely because it is repeatedly presented as normal.

This apparent neutrality becomes especially important when women enter the same playable position. The structure of the game remains the same, but the relationship between player and protagonist changes. A position that may otherwise appear simply “default” is now occupied through a player whose gender differs from that

of the protagonist. This structural difference creates the possibility that the male default becomes visible as a gendered construction rather than remaining an unnoticed background of play.

#### **4.3.2 Citationality and the gaps in norms**

The core insight of Butler's theory, however, lies not in the power of norms but in their fragility. Norms need to be constantly repeated precisely because they are not stable. Because norms depend on repetition, they can never be reproduced in exactly the same way. Changes in context can open gaps between a norm and its repetition. These gaps create the possibility of resignification and change. Butler illustrated this mechanism through her analysis of drag. "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself, as well as its contingency" (2006, p. 187). Drag shows how repetition in a different context can make the imitative and contingent character of gender more visible. I use this insight to consider whether the structural gender difference between player and protagonist can create a similar gap in repetition.

Women players entering male-protagonist games provide a particularly interesting condition for this kind of repetition with difference. When a woman player controls a fixed male protagonist, the gender of the player differs from that of the playable character. I propose that this structural difference may make the gendered nature of the playable position more visible. As Butler's analysis of drag suggests, repetition in a different context can expose what otherwise appears natural or stable. This may also help create the conditions for the heterotopic mirror effect discussed above. As Butler's analysis of drag revealed, when a norm is repeated in a different context, its constructed nature may become more visible in the process of being cited, rather than successfully concealing it. The game space may therefore become not only a

site of immersion but also a space where the constructed nature of gender norms becomes more visible.

But repetition with difference is not the same as simple rejection or opposition. Performativity in games has a clear moment of entry. Players enter the game through a playable character and act within its rules. This makes the framing of performativity more visible than in everyday gender performance. It also means that the relationship between player and character involves active investment and participation, not just being called upon by norms. Empirical findings in game studies confirm this complexity. Marginalized players often connect with characters across identity boundaries. They form bonds based on shared experiences and circumstances rather than shared identity markers, developing a relationship of being with a character but not as a character (Shaw, 2015, p. 109). Shaw's distinction is useful here because participation does not require the player to become the character. Women can therefore participate in a gendered narrative without either fully identifying with it or rejecting it. It is a repetition with a difference. They work with the materials provided by the game, while potentially interpreting or using them in ways not fixed by the game itself.

#### **4.3.3 Agency within norms**

Butler's account of repetition and resignification opens an important analytical space for understanding women's practices in games. It allows us to see where norms loosen and where their constructed nature is exposed. But this concept also carries an analytical tendency. Mahmood (2005), in her careful reading of Butler, observed that although Butler repeatedly emphasized that subversion and consolidation are inseparable, "the concept of agency in Butler's work is developed primarily in contexts where norms are thrown into question or are subject to

resignification” (p. 21). This raises a question. What about practices that do not produce visible gaps? When women accept the gendered narrative framework of a game, develop skills and meaning within it, but do not deviate from the norm’s assumptions, does this mean they lack agency?

Mahmood offered a fundamental challenge to this tendency. “Norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted,” she argued, “but performed, inhabited, and experienced in a variety of ways” (p. 22). Drawing on her research on women participating in the Islamic piety movement in Cairo, she argued that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.” (p. 15). Mahmood uses the concept of docility to show how capacity can be formed through disciplined practice. Here, docility is not passive acceptance. It is the malleability required in order to be instructed in a particular skill, a process that involves struggle, effort, and achievement (p. 29). This perspective serves a key calibrating function in the theoretical framework. If women players develop skills, interpretations, or forms of self-understanding within the game’s existing structure, these practices do not need to be judged only by whether they disrupt its gender norms. They may themselves be meaningful forms of agency. Their form is self-shaping within norms rather than deviation from them. Recognizing the value of agency within norms, however, does not mean giving up the question of its structural limitations. This is precisely why both frameworks need to be present together.

#### **4.3.4 The analytical tension between Butler and Mahmood**

At this point, the theoretical framework has formed a core analytical tension around the question of agency. Butler and Mahmood share a basic position. Both acknowledge that agency exists under normative constraints. Both refuse to

describe women as passive victims. However, they place different analytical emphasis on where agency becomes visible. Butler draws attention to instability, repetition, and the possibility of resignification. Mahmood broadens the analysis to include capacities developed through inhabiting norms. If only Butler is used, the analysis may overemphasize the possibilities of gaps and resistance, excluding practices that do not deviate from norms from the realm of agency. Mahmood's framework, however, does not by itself provide a way to evaluate how far such agency changes the conditions in which it operates.

This tension can be put as a question. Women's practices may involve both moments of deviation and forms of self-shaping within existing norms. The question is how these forms of agency appear, coexist, and differ in their consequences. More importantly, what do these two forms of agency ultimately bring to women? To assess what forms of empowerment these practices may produce, and where their limits lie, I introduce Gutiérrez's (1990, 1994) empowerment framework as the final analytical tool.

#### **4.4 Empowerment Theory as an Evaluative Framework**

Gutiérrez (1994) defined empowerment as a process that "involves the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (p. 202). This definition has two features that are crucial to this study. Empowerment is a process, not a state. It is not an endpoint that is achieved once and for all. It is an ongoing change throughout life, a way of interacting with the world (p. 205). More importantly, Gutiérrez distinguishes between different understandings of empowerment. As Gutiérrez noted, some authors define empowerment as an increase in the actual power or control of the group, while others describe it as the

development of a feeling of increased power without an actual change in structural arrangements (p. 203). This distinction directly relates to the central question of this study: do women describe an increased sense of power, changes in their actual capacity to act, or both?

Drawing on earlier contributions from scholars such as Solomon, Rappaport, and Freire, Gutiérrez describes empowerment as a process of change that occurs at individual, interpersonal, and political levels (1994, p. 204). These three levels provide tools for evaluating the phenomena described in the preceding sections.

The personal dimension concerns the development of a sense of personal power. This dimension is used to examine whether skills, interpretations, or forms of self-understanding developed through play relate to a greater sense of self-efficacy beyond the game.

The interpersonal dimension concerns the ability to influence others. This dimension is used to examine whether women build meaningful social connections through gaming, exchange support, or develop forms of shared understanding with other women.

The political dimension concerns the ability to work with others to influence or change social institutions. This dimension is used to examine whether women connect their gaming experiences to broader gender inequalities and whether this understanding is accompanied by attempts to act on those conditions.

An important part of the empowerment process is critical consciousness: a growing awareness of how political and social structures shape individual and group

experience (p. 204). When individuals begin to understand their situation as related to social structures rather than merely personal luck or failure, their personal empowerment experience gains the potential to point toward structural change. For women players, critical consciousness may involve connecting their gaming experiences with broader gendered patterns in game design or everyday life. Gutiérrez emphasized that these processes are not a linear sequence of stages but occur simultaneously and reinforce each other (p. 205).

Gutiérrez's framework also provides a distinction between empowerment and coping that is crucial to this study. This distinction is rooted in her critique of the individualizing tendency in social work practice (1990, p. 149). Coping focuses primarily on how individuals manage stressful conditions. An empowerment perspective extends this focus by asking whether people also identify and act upon the social conditions that contribute to those stresses (1994, p. 202; pp. 208-209). Gutiérrez further warned that the illusion of control, while it may help individuals feel better, can interfere with processes that enable individuals to more accurately identify the sources of their problems and take action accordingly (1994, p. 209).

This distinction directly illuminates the core tension revealed in the preceding sections. The heterotopic mirror effect may make the relationship between game space and everyday reality more visible. Butler's framework shows how repeated gender norms may become open to resignification, while Mahmood recognizes the value of capacities developed within those norms. Gutiérrez's framework then asks how far these forms of agency extend. If gaming primarily helps women manage gendered everyday stress and gain a temporary sense of control, without expanding their capacity to act beyond play, any empowerment may remain largely personal and limited in scope.

## **4.5 Framework Integration**

The theories discussed above form an integrated analytical framework. The core logic of this framework is to trace an analytical path from conditions to practices, and from practices to evaluation. It first establishes the spatial conditions in which women's practices take place and the range of possibilities these conditions create. It then analyses the practices women develop under these conditions and the nature of these practices. Finally, it evaluates how these practices relate to different forms of empowerment and where their limits lie. In the research design and analysis, this framework informs the interview guide and provides sensitizing concepts for interpreting the data.

The core theoretical tools of this framework come from specific Western academic traditions. In applying them to Chinese women players, I calibrate their reach against the contextual conditions set out in Chapter 2, above all the specific cost that gender expression carries in the Chinese discursive field.

## **5. Methodology**

### **5.1 Research Philosophy**

I ask how women make meaning of their gaming practices, what forms of agency these practices enable, and where the boundaries of such agency lie. Such questions require an epistemological stance that understands meaning, experience and practice as constructed within specific social contexts rather than waiting to be discovered.

I adopt a social constructionist ontology. Social reality is not a fixed entity independent of human activity. It is continually produced and reproduced through social interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Luckmann (2008) describes the social world as a historical communicative system in which knowledge and institutional structures are constructed, maintained, transmitted, transformed, and sometimes destroyed through interaction (p. 281). Acknowledging constructedness does not mean denying the reality of structural effects. Gutiérrez (1994) distinguishes between the subjective development of a sense of power and an actual increase in group power (p. 203), and notes that objective powerlessness is often overlooked in social work practice (1990, p. 149). This distinction only makes sense if institutionalized structures have effects that cannot be reduced to individual perception. Gender inequality is socially constructed, but once institutionalized, it operates as a real constraint on people's lives. My ontological position therefore takes both dimensions seriously. It recognizes the constructedness of social reality and the structural force of what has been constructed.

This ontological position carries epistemological consequences. Understanding participants' own interpretations is necessary, but it is not sufficient for the questions asked here. I also examine how these accounts are shaped by and situated within broader gendered structures. My epistemological position is therefore critically informed social constructionism. It treats participants' accounts as situated meaning-making, while allowing me to interpret the possibilities and limits they describe in relation to broader structural conditions.

## **5.2 Research Design**

Based on the philosophical position above, I adopted a qualitative approach with semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method.

Qualitative research is well suited to capturing the complexity of meaning, the situatedness of practice, and the layered quality of experience. It gives participants the space to describe and interpret their experiences in their own language (Patton, 2014, p. 21). Combined with a critical orientation, it also provides the analytical depth needed to identify tensions and contradictions within participants' narratives (Patton, 2014, p. 130).

The semi-structured format allowed the theoretical framework to guide the main thematic blocks while leaving space within each block for participants to narrate freely. The actual direction of each interview was driven by the participant's narrative, with theoretically informed follow-up questions woven in as they arose. Researcher and participant together shaped how meanings were produced and articulated during the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

### **5.3 Research Participants and Sampling Strategy**

Participants are Chinese women who play fixed male-protagonist games. The research question concerns variation in how women with sustained experience of this form of play understand and describe their gaming practice. I therefore did not restrict recruitment by occupation, education, or minimum hours of play. To be included, participants had to self-identify as female, be at least 18 years old, have been playing this type of game for at least one year, and have completed at least one title in full. The one-year requirement was intended to ensure sustained engagement rather than a brief encounter with the genre. Completing at least one title ensured that participants had experienced a game beyond its initial stages and through its broader narrative progression. Among eligible respondents, some were not selected when their background and gaming profiles were similar to those of participants already recruited, as the sampling strategy aimed to maintain variation

in gaming engagement and life circumstances.

I recruited participants through Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media platform. I selected Xiaohongshu as the recruitment platform because of its large female user base. Although it is not a gaming-specific platform, its broad user base made it a practical channel for reaching Chinese women with varied backgrounds. I used purposive sampling and aimed to recruit participants with varying levels of gaming engagement and different life circumstances. Participants differed in how extensively they played and in their work, family, and caregiving responsibilities. Interested candidates provided brief background information, including which fixed male-protagonist games they had played, how long they had been playing, and their current life circumstances. I used this information to confirm eligibility and assemble a varied sample.

The final sample comprised fifteen participants. They ranged in age from 19 to 31. Seven were students and eight were employed. Gaming experience ranged from approximately one year to over twenty years. Two were married, one of whom had children. All participants grew up in China and were recruited through Chinese-language platforms. Most were based in mainland Chinese cities at the time of interview. A few were studying or working overseas but remained active in Chinese gaming communities.

#### **5.4 Data Collection: Interview Design**

The interview guide was organized around three thematic blocks. Within each block, questions were divided into core questions covered in every interview and flexible questions used depending on the participant's narrative. The blocks provided thematic direction, not a fixed sequence. I adjusted the wording of each question to

the participant's specific gaming experience.

The first block concerned how participants experience the game space. This included how they came to play this type of game, the relationship between gaming and everyday life, and how participants experienced playing through a male protagonist, including whether the protagonist's gender mattered to them. The second block turned to what participants actually do in the game. It focused on their relationship with the male protagonist, how they interpreted narratives and character relationships, including any ways they reworked or reimagined them, and how their practice has developed over time. The third block explored the connection between gaming and participants' wider lives. It asked what these games have brought them, whether, and in what ways, they connected gaming experiences with life outside the game, and how they situate gaming among their other life circumstances.

Interviews were conducted online and lasted approximately one hour. With participants' consent, each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed.

Each interview began with a brief warm-up about what the participant had been playing recently. Each ended with an open invitation to add anything important that was not covered. The full interview guide is provided in Appendix A.

## **5.5 Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis. Coding in the original language helped preserve the texture of participants' expressions and reduced the need for translation decisions at the coding stage. All coding was therefore conducted in Chinese. The final themes were constructed and

named in English. Participant quotes presented in the findings were translated by me from the Chinese transcripts. I prioritized preserving the register and texture of spoken language over polished English. Key untranslatable terms are retained in Pinyin((the standard system for romanizing Mandarin Chinese) and explained in the glossary.

The analysis combined data-led and theoretically informed coding. Concepts from the theoretical framework acted as sensitizing lenses rather than predetermined themes. At the same time, coding remained open to meanings that the framework had not anticipated, particularly those specific to the Chinese context.

I coded all fifteen transcripts in Chinese in NVivo, producing 424 initial codes. I then exported the codes to Excel and organized them into six broad topical domains, with larger domains further divided into subgroups. Candidate themes were repeatedly reviewed, merged, reorganized, or set aside as the analysis developed. This process resulted in four final themes, which were then synced back into NVivo. Appendix E documents the path from the initial codes to the final themes in more detail.

## **5.6 Research Sensitivity in the Chinese Context**

The discourse conditions described in Chapter 2 have direct implications for how I collected and analyzed data.

The impact is visible in language itself. Both nǚquanzhuyi (女权主义) and nǚxingzhuyi (女性主义) originated as translations of the single English word feminism (Min, 2007). But in public discussion they have acquired very different

meanings. Nüxingzhuyi, with its emphasis on gender as identity, is associated with the academic and the moderate. Nüquanzhuyi, with its emphasis on rights and power, is often seen as radical and confrontational (Bao, 2025). The divergent connotations of these two terms illustrate the contested position of feminist language in contemporary Chinese public discourse. The understanding of gender that participants develop within these contradictions is likely more complex than a simple distinction between having critical consciousness and lacking it.

This complexity means that when participants expressed themselves briefly or downplayed gender-related topics, I could not interpret this as an absence of relevant experience. Silence and understatement may reflect constraints on expression rather than absence of experience. In interviews, I approached these topics through concrete experiential questions rather than labels that carry social or political connotations. In analysis, I attended not only to what participants said, but also to hesitations, shifts in terminology, qualifying language, and moments when they did not elaborate.

The Chinese context also contains particular discursive resources that require analytical sensitivity. Independent woman (*duli nüxing*) is a popular discourse in contemporary China, emphasizing economic independence, emotional self-sufficiency, and not relying on men (Bao, 2025; Wu & Dong, 2019). This discourse appears related to empowerment on the surface. But it may function as an individualizing narrative that converts structural problems into matters of personal effort and choice (Chen & Peng, 2024; Li, 2024). When participants used terms such as independent or getting stronger, I examined how these expressions functioned within their broader narratives: whether they referred mainly to personal self-efficacy, broader structural awareness, relationships with others, or forms of

action beyond individual adaptation.

Because many of the games discussed by participants were produced outside China, cultural distance could also shape their interpretations of characters, narratives, and game worlds. I therefore treated cultural difference as a possible additional axis of analysis rather than assuming gender was the only relevant one.

### **5.7 Research Quality**

I addressed the quality of this study through deep engagement with the data and through reflexivity.

I supported analytical claims with participant extracts and contextualized interpretation, allowing readers to assess the relationship between the data and my analysis.

Reflexivity is central to quality assurance in reflexive thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2021) treat it as an intrinsic requirement. The researcher is an active participant in the construction of themes, and my positionality needed ongoing scrutiny. I am myself a female player of male-protagonist games. This shared experience helped me understand what participants were expressing and made it easier to build trust. But when their descriptions resembled my own experience, I risked projecting my understanding onto theirs, or losing the sensitivity to probe experiences that felt self-evident. At the same time, I brought a theoretical framework developed within Western academic traditions to the data. As a Chinese woman trained in a Western academic institution, the themes I constructed from the data were inevitably shaped by these theoretical commitments. To keep these positionalities visible throughout the analytical process, I wrote a narrative memo

before coding each interview, recording my overall impressions and emotional responses, with particular attention to moments of strong resonance or discomfort.

### **5.8 Ethical Considerations**

All participants received an informed consent document via my Lund University email before the interview.

Given the political sensitivity of gender-related discourse in China and the study's attention to the political dimension of empowerment, consent was confirmed orally at the beginning of each recorded interview rather than through a signed form. This avoided creating an additional written record linking participants' identities to the study. Interview recordings and transcripts are encrypted and accessible only to me.

Interviews sometimes triggered emotional responses. When this happened, I paused and asked whether the participant wished to continue. Participants are identified by codes (P01–P15). Platform usernames, community names, geographic locations, and other details that could identify participants are removed. If a participant disclosed something in the interview that she did not anticipate discussing, I gave her the opportunity afterwards to decide whether that material could be included in the analysis.

### **5.9 Limitations**

Recruitment took place through a single platform, Xiaohongshu. The recruitment strategy likely favored women who were comfortable with social media and online participation. The recruitment wording may also have favored women already interested in gender and gaming or in links between gaming and everyday life.

Access to these games may also favor players with the economic resources to purchase games and suitable gaming equipment. Women from rural areas, lower-income backgrounds, or with less formal education may therefore be underrepresented. The sample also skewed young, mostly unmarried, and only one participant had children. It is not possible to determine whether this pattern reflects the wider player population, the recruitment strategy, or both. It limits the study's insight into empowerment experiences under conditions of significant domestic and caregiving constraint.

All interviews were conducted online, which means some non-verbal information available in face-to-face interaction was lost. The political sensitivity of gender discourse in China may also have shaped what participants chose to express. Some experiences and views may have gone unspoken. Participants based overseas may face different discursive constraints than those in mainland China, which could affect how they articulate and claim their experiences.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese while the thesis is written in English. Translation inevitably involves some loss of meaning, particularly regarding internet slang, cultural idioms, and contextual nuances specific to the Chinese digital landscape.

The study is cross-sectional. Interviews captured participants' narratives at a single point in time, but empowerment is a process. What I could see is one slice of that process, not its unfolding.

The theoretical framework originates from Western academic traditions. Although I preserved space for context-specific themes through inductive coding, its

applicability to the Chinese context is itself a question that required empirical examination.

## **6. Findings**

Four themes were constructed from a reflexive thematic analysis of fifteen Chinese women players' interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The themes are organized across progressively broader analytical levels, moving from player–character identification to game space, everyday life and collective politics. Theme One examines the player–character relationship at the most immediate analytical level. It considers how participants experienced and negotiated actual or potential gendered distance from male protagonists through three recurring positions. Theme Two extends the analysis from the player–character relationship to the game space as a whole. Participants described this space as operating according to rules that differed from those of everyday life. This difference could provide access to otherwise unavailable positions and experiences while also drawing attention to participants' gendered positioning outside the game. Theme Three examines how participants understood the relationship between in-game experiences and everyday life. Some experiences were described as carrying into life outside the game, whereas others remained bounded within play. Where participants reported such continuities, their ability to recognize these experiences as personally meaningful was shaped by wider discursive conditions. The theme also considers how this process operated through interpersonal relationships. Theme Four examines participants' accounts of critical gender consciousness and the conditions that constrained its translation into collective action. Its transformation into collective action meets a double blockage, one external and one internal to discourse.

## **6.1 Theme One: Gender Negotiation with the Male Protagonist**

The accounts suggest that gendered distance from male protagonists was neither universal nor equally important across the sample. Across the dataset, I constructed three recurring positions according to what happened to that distance during play. In distancing, the distance remained explicit and was maintained. In demotion, it remained present but was given less weight than other aspects of the character or game. In radical processing, players worked on the distance itself by changing how they entered, understood, or reshaped the player–protagonist relationship. These positions therefore differed not simply in the amount of gendered distance participants experienced, but in what they did with it.

### **6.1.1 Distancing**

For some participants, gendered social positioning remained relevant when they entered the game. It shaped how easily they could identify with a male protagonist.

Distancing was the position in which gendered difference remained most explicit in participants' accounts. Participants engaged with male protagonists while maintaining some distance from them. The analysis constructed four related features of this position.

The first feature concerns the continuing role of social recognition in shaping gendered distance.

*As a woman, and also a woman in social recognition. It's hard for me to honestly say that the moment I open a game with a male protagonist, I immediately identify with him... most of the time I cannot. (P09)*

The phrase “as a woman” identifies the gendered position from which P09 understood herself to be playing, while “a woman in social recognition” draws attention to the ongoing process of being recognized as a woman by others. I interpret this additional qualification as distinguishing personal identification from the social processes through which that identity is repeatedly affirmed. Viewed through Butler’s (2006) account of gender as constituted through repeated social practices, P09’s description suggests that entering a game did not suspend the gendered position established through everyday social recognition. In this account, that continuity made immediate identification with a male protagonist difficult.

Another feature is that gender can be harder to cross than other differences.

*Even if, say, this game character has a completely different personality from mine, a completely different appearance from mine, I would still feel she is my projection in this game world. But if it’s a man, my projection in this game world is a man, I cannot project. (P12)*

Gender was harder to cross than differences in personality or appearance. Other forms of difference could often be accommodated without disrupting projection, while gender more often became a boundary (P02, P08, P10, P12).

A further feature is that the barrier is not experienced in the same way at all times. Most of the time it runs as a transparent background, activated only in specific scenarios.

*When I’m playing some plots that are kind of misogynistic, or plots that demean women, I can’t empathize at all, and I become disgusted with the character I’m*

*playing.* (P13)

In P13's account, misogynistic plots make empathy impossible. Her disgust falls on the character she is playing. This interrupts the relationship between player and character. Gender moves from the background to the foreground, making the player-character difference more salient in her account. She can no longer act through the protagonist without conflict.

A final feature is that the barrier can become a usable condition. This change appears in P05's use of "doesn't suit me."

*Actually, a lot of the time I already have trouble identifying with the female perspective, and I feel I have even more trouble with the male perspective. At first I felt it didn't really suit me, but later I felt this not-suiting let my behavior in the game become bolder, pushing past my own moral limits.* (P05)

The phrase "doesn't suit me" appears twice in this passage but takes on shifting meanings. The first time it marks difficulty in identifying with the male protagonist. The second time it is reread from "difficulty" into "actually... able to." It becomes the condition that opens space for action. The space that opens is "pushing past my own moral limits." These are the player's own moral standards. The barrier "I am not him" opens a distance. It allows her to make bolder choices in the game. She can also move beyond her usual moral limits. Distance therefore restricts identification but creates more space for action.

Together, the four features show different forms of distancing. It is shaped by ongoing social recognition (P09). It is harder to cross than other differences (P12).

It can remain in the background until specific scenarios bring it into focus (P13). It can be tolerated and even turned into a usable condition (P05). These features suggest that gendered distance is not always produced by the game itself. For some participants, it is already rooted in their broader social positioning, while specific in-game moments make it more visible or more difficult to ignore. Maintaining distance is therefore a form of gender negotiation in its own right, developed within a playable structure participants did not choose.

### **6.1.2 Demotion**

Another way of handling gendered distance is to give gender less weight in game evaluation. I call this position demotion. While aware of gender's influence, the player lets other dimensions take priority.

One mode of demotion is deliberate relativization. Discomfort is acknowledged without dictating the overall evaluation. This mode appears in the data as a negotiation that holds three layers at once.

*I'd feel discomfort, but well, that's also part of the progress of the times. At the same time, I allow my discomfort to exist. But I also won't reject a work that is genuinely good just because of this discomfort. Unless its gender narrative is a complete mess and the work overall has nothing else to recommend it, in which case I just won't play it. (P10)*

This mode of demotion keeps discomfort and evaluation apart. Discomfort is real. Other criteria decide whether a work is worth engaging with. This separation has a limit. Players exit only when a work's gender narrative is "a complete mess" and nothing else recommends it. Discomfort is recognized. Discomfort is allowed.

Discomfort does not get to decide. This pattern resembles agency within norms in Mahmood's (2005) sense: engagement continues without requiring rejection of the existing framework.

The same logic also shaped how some participants identified with characters. Closeness rests on "something with universal value, that kind of feeling" (P10). Shared feelings can cross gender difference. Gender then becomes one difference among many. This allows other dimensions to take priority.

Another mode of demotion appears when gender does not enter the evaluative frame.

*Honestly I haven't felt any unsuitability. Maybe for some games, gameplay is more important to me. If I were to feel a game doesn't suit me, it might be that I don't like its mechanics, or I feel its story isn't attractive enough. (P03)*

"Unsuitability" is defined entirely as a mismatch at the level of mechanics or story. No process of separating discomfort from evaluation is reported. Gender does not appear here.

The same mode appears in a different form elsewhere in the data.

*When I play, regardless of male or female protagonist, what I mainly focus on is the experience the game gives me and its plot. I'll switch to an identity that isn't entirely the protagonist, kind of like an identity between protagonist and witness. (P07)*

The same anchoring in experience and plot appears here (P07). The data also shows

a distinctive player position, “an identity between protagonist and witness.” The position does not stay fixed. The non-fixity has an analytic implication. A player who shifts between protagonist and witness never settles into one position. In this mode, gender does not need to be consciously excluded. Because the position shifts between protagonist and witness, gender difference does not become a stable problem that requires resolution.

Deliberate relativization and frame absence together form the two modes of demotion. Deliberate relativization is conscious and requires continuous maintenance. Frame absence is different: gender simply does not enter the participant’s evaluative frame as a relevant criterion.

Both modes can support engagement with male protagonists. They can also break at specific moments. This failure appears in the data as the experience of being suddenly pushed out of an already-established resonance.

*In single-player games with male protagonists, there are some protagonists I can develop fairly strong emotional resonance with... but there are moments of very intense dislocation. The game has plots that cater to the player. For example, the male protagonist can go to a brothel, and at that point the sense of disconnection becomes very strong for me. (P04)*

Emotional resonance is enough to let the player enter the male protagonist’s experience. But when a scene makes a male-oriented perspective especially visible, demotion suddenly fails. This rupture parallels the misogynistic-plot interruption analyzed earlier (P13). The intensity differs. There, no resonance had been built; the position remained that of an observer. Here the player is pushed out of an

already-established resonance. The investment was real, which is what makes the snap-back so intense. At the brothel scenario, the cooperative position no longer has room for her.

Demotion therefore describes a mode of negotiation in which gender is given less weight without necessarily disappearing. For some participants, this involved consciously separating discomfort from overall evaluation (P10). For others, gender did not enter the evaluative frame at all (P03, P07). In both cases, engagement could continue until a particular scene made gender difference difficult to ignore (P04).

### **6.1.3 Radical Processing**

Radical processing works on gendered distance rather than simply living with it. Across the data, this work took place at four different points in the player–protagonist relationship. At the level of experience, the protagonist could become transparent as players identified with their own actions in the game world. At the relational level, he could remain separate but become someone to depend on, admire, or desire. At the level of subjectivity, players could separate the protagonist’s male body from the gender of the subject acting through him. Beyond the game itself, the character could also be reshaped through fan practices such as “mo”(an affective practice of reimagining a fictional character), mods, and fan fiction.

The first mode is transparency. In this mode, the player does not try to identify with the male protagonist as a person. During immersion, attention shifts to her own actions and presence inside the game world.

*Because when I’m fully immersed in it, what I identify with isn’t him, it’s myself.*

*Myself in this scene, in this game scene, whether I'm riding a horse or hunting or going on a killing spree or singing and dancing, what I identify with isn't him, it's myself. (P11)*

The repeated distinction between “him” and “myself” is important. The player does not say that she becomes the male protagonist. She describes herself as the one riding, hunting, fighting, or moving through the scene. The protagonist’s male body remains on screen, but it is no longer the main basis of identification. What matters is the player’s sense that “I am here, doing these things.” Gendered distance therefore becomes less noticeable during immersion, because identification is attached to the player’s own action in the game world rather than to the protagonist as a person.

A second mode keeps the male protagonist clearly separate from the player but turns that separation into a relationship.

*The one I played most in Chinese Paladin IV was Yuntianhe. He's so sincere and pure, very innocent... he'll look out for me at any time, no matter what difficulty arises, and I came to feel a kind of dependence on him. But Cloud in Final Fantasy is mature and steady, and I feel I might not be worthy of him... Admiring him is more like admiring a god-like figure. (P06)*

What appears here is a different way of handling gendered distance. The male protagonist is positioned as an other to depend on, admire, or desire. The player herself takes the position of “the one being cared for” or “the admirer.” Elsewhere in the data, a similar position was described as “hiding behind him” (P06). The relationship shifts from “being him” to “being with him.” Gender difference no

longer needs to be crossed because identification is no longer the main form of connection. The player remains in the game as a woman, while the male protagonist becomes someone to rely on, admire, or desire.

A third mode goes further by relocating where subjectivity is understood to reside. The character's male body is acknowledged, but it is no longer treated as the final source of the acting subject's gender.

*Since he's a character, and he's controlled by me, then he's only a man on the surface, biologically. But mentally, since the soul living inside him is mine, then of course he's a woman. Because if I don't play him, he has no soul, he just stays stuck in place and becomes a beautiful piece of waste paper. (P15)*

What appears here is a reversal of where subjectivity is located. The male body belongs to the character, but the "soul" that makes him act is located in the player. Gender is therefore split between the visible character and the subject who controls him. The player does not try to cross the distance by becoming male. Instead, she claims that the acting subject remains herself, and therefore remains female, even while operating through a male body. This changes the barrier itself. The question is no longer whether a woman can identify with a male protagonist. The distinction between the protagonist's gender and the player's acting subject is reorganized so that the male body no longer determines the gender of the subject of play.

The final mode moves from subjective processing to creative practice. Instead of only changing how the relationship to the protagonist is understood, players reshape the character himself beyond the official game text.

*Many male players probably just think Leon is handsome when they see him, that he's a handsome older guy, a weathered older guy, and they get a kind of satisfaction from imagining themselves as Leon. But female players will "mo" him, will dig out the parts of him that fit female aesthetics. And he isn't entirely the tough-guy older man on every side. (P04)*

The account contrasts identification with a more possessive and transformative relation to the character. Female players "mo" him. In Chinese online fan culture, "mo" is an intensely possessive and desirous form of affective consumption directed at a character. It involves selecting and amplifying the parts of a character that fit female aesthetics and desire. More committed forms can involve mods that alter the character's appearance or fan fiction that rewrites his story. The phrase "mo him into all kinds of unrecognizable shapes" captures how far this transformation can go. The important shift here is that adaptation no longer moves only from player to game. The official character also becomes material that can be reworked within female fan culture. His appearance, story, and affective meaning can be reshaped to fit women's own aesthetics and desires. Gendered distance therefore becomes something that can be acted upon through creative practice, rather than simply accepted, ignored, or reinterpreted.

The four modes differ in where the work of radical processing takes place. Transparency changes the immediate structure of identification by allowing the protagonist to recede (P11). Relational redirection changes the form of connection, turning distance from a barrier to identification into the basis of a relationship (P06). Subjective relocation goes further by changing where the acting subject is understood to reside (P15). Creative reoccupation moves this work into practice, reshaping the character himself beyond the official game text (P04).

The movement across these modes is therefore from bypassing the barrier, to redirecting the relationship around it, to changing its underlying logic, and finally to working directly on the character who embodies it.

Across the three positions, the central difference lies in what happens to gendered distance. Distancing maintains it. Demotion reduces the weight it carries. Radical processing works on the distance itself by altering the terms of the player–protagonist relationship. Gendered distance therefore does not have one fixed effect on identification. It can remain a barrier, become secondary to other forms of connection, or itself become material for reinterpretation and transformation.

These forms of negotiation demonstrate agency, but they do not by themselves establish empowerment in Gutiérrez’s (1990, 1994) sense. The same practices could support personal empowerment while leaving the broader structure unchanged, or function mainly as ways of adapting to it. The next theme therefore asks what the game space actually provides once engagement with the male protagonist is sustained.

## **6.2 Theme Two: The Functions and Mirror Effects of the Game Space**

What participants described gaining from play was closely tied to the kind of space they were able to remain in after negotiating gendered distance. The game space carries two interconnected effects for participants. Inside, it provides positions and experiences that are difficult to obtain in everyday life. In contrast with reality, it can make the players’ own real-life position as women more visible to them. Both arise from a single source, a space that operates by rules different from those of everyday life. The male protagonist is the concrete vehicle of these functions.

Occupying this male position can also reflect back the players' real-life position as women.

One feature of the game space is that it operates by different rules. It enables forms of experience that cannot easily happen in everyday space. This difference in rules takes several concrete forms in the data. It sometimes appears as the player setting down, for a while, a role from everyday life. The role is one she must continually maintain.

*Through games, I can be my real self again, I don't have to put on an act. (P06)*

"Doing my real self again" presupposes a self that already exists. The self cannot be fully present in everyday reality. The game allows its temporary recovery. "Not having to put on an act" points to that reality. The "act" here is a particular feminine family role, experienced as fragile and lacking in agency (P06). The game space lets her step out of this role for a while. The same difference in rules appears in other forms. One form is risk suspended ("enough sense of safety to be in love with a game character," P12). Another is time freed from function ("time that I can just spend," P10). These go beyond "entertainment" or "relaxation." They point to something more basic, the sustainability of the self.

This difference in rules gives the game space a heterotopic quality (Foucault, 1986). The concept describes real spaces operating by different rules. These spaces are connected to and contrast with everyday social space. "Doing my real self again" is difficult to sustain in everyday reality. The family space is experienced as requiring a posture of fragility (P06). The game space suspends those norms. A self that everyday norms cover over briefly appears.

The difference in rules also makes possible another kind of work. Some players gain in the game an experience of agency that belongs to themselves. This experience appears in the data as an explicit judgment about ownership.

*The sense of control I get in the game actually feels like mine. Even though he can be very forceful in the game, and I make those decisions for him, I still feel I'm the one who gained these abilities, in the game. (P06)*

The one being controlled and acting forcefully is the male protagonist. But the ownership of agency is pulled back to the player. The male protagonist is the medium; the agency belongs to her.

*I think it's the worldview, the character itself, whether male or female, when they're strong enough, they give me a sense of power. (P13)*

The sense of power here comes from how strong the character is. It does not come from "what I did." It passes to the player through identification with a powerful character. Through the character, the player feels something hard to reach in reality. Elsewhere the character is described as doing "things I'd never be able to do in my whole life" (P13). This sense of power depends on a clear contrast. The strength in the game is experienced as something less available in reality. It fills something missing in reality.

This experience of agency is not a function the game space produces automatically. It has its conditions of occurrence.

*I don't think I can get that sense of power the way they do. I might feel "wow, I played that well" or "wow, my skills improved," but I don't get that sense of identification. (P04)*

The satisfaction of "improved skills" differs from a sense of power. The game brings achievement. Achievement does not amount to power. This distinction shows that the sense of power has conditions. A sense of power emerges when the power exercised through the character is subjectively claimed by the player as her own. In these accounts, participants maintained a clear separation between themselves and the protagonist and did not describe the character's power as their own. The same judgment appears elsewhere in the data. The game does not give a "particularly distinctive sense of power" (P03). These counter-cases mark the limits of agency in the game space.

Another feature of the game space is that its functions are organized through the concrete position of the male protagonist. The male position holds a mode of being that, in reality, women cannot access. What it offers is relief from a burden women must continually carry.

*If my revenge fails, I'm going to die. And in the middle of all that, I might also start thinking about all kinds of distressing things related to gender. And then I'd feel that right now, as long as I'm controlling a male character, I don't have to think about any of those things anymore. I can be in a position of absolute fairness, of absolute first-sex. (P14)*

Applying "absolute first-sex" to game experience signals that what is occupied in the game is not "the protagonist" in any ordinary sense. It is a position with a

specific structural content, one that exempts its occupant from the “distressing things” women must carry. “I don’t have to think about any of those things anymore” reveals what the everyday female position demands: continually thinking about these things and negotiating them. The appeal of the male position lies first in this exemption.

The structure of this moment can be read through Butler’s account of repetition and resignification. “Male = default subject” has operated as a transparent background. When a female player occupies this position instead, the enactment is no longer seamless. This mismatch can bring the underlying assumption into view. The former default becomes visible as a specific position. The player then explicitly names this reality.

The male position holds not only exemption but also the expansion of the space of action.

*I feel a bit like I’m controlling, or rather, using his identity to mask the real me, and then doing things more recklessly. (P05)*

The phrasing “using his identity to mask the real me” names two operations at once. The first is concealment: the female self remains present but is covered over by the male identity. The second is extension: once that cover is in place, action becomes possible in ranges the female position would not allow. The word “more” in “more recklessly” marks a contrast. As a woman she can already act; the male cover extends that range. “Using his identity” is an active device one deploys. It layers over the female position rather than replacing it. The same function appears elsewhere: using the male identity to “step away for a moment from the constraints

of real life” (P01), or describing the male protagonist as doing “things I could never do in real life” (P13).

The male position holds not only the experiences described above. Entering it, and meeting its limits, also produces a counter-effect. This counter-effect appears in two related forms in the data. The first form concerns what the player sees from inside the male position: a mode of being experienced as less available in everyday life as a woman.

*Living like that every day, in his early period before the player has taken him over, his girlfriend had run off, and he was in that especially chaotic period—I felt that, in real life, this is a state that I, or rather women, would rarely be in. (P09)*

The contrast between the protagonist’s “especially chaotic period” and a state women rarely occupy reveals what the male position holds. The contrast is not about whether such men exist in reality. It is about which states women are allowed to occupy. A man can be chaotic, can fail, can be self-destructive. He is still told as the center of the story. A woman in the same state either does not become the center, or is not permitted that degree of disorder. What the male position holds, in this form, is the possibility of disorder without loss of centrality. This asymmetry operates as the naturalized background of daily life and becomes visible from inside the male position. Occupying a position that allows such existence makes the limit on women’s permissible states emerge as nameable.

The second form of this counter-effect appears at the limits of the male position.

*At those moments, I clearly realize that the freedom I can experience here has limits.*

*Reaching those limits immediately reminds me that I still live in society outside the game—and that I am still a woman subject to social discipline. (P09)*

The freedom experienced in the game is not unlimited; it has “limits.” But the limit itself is what matters. “It immediately makes me realize” indicates that this awareness is not the result of active reflection. It is triggered by the limit; at the moment of hitting it, she is pushed back to her position as a woman.

The phrase that emerges is more specific. Not “a person living in real society” but “a woman within social discipline.” What this phrase names is the discipline operating on women as women. This discipline functions as a background condition in daily life.

It is lived within but not named at every moment. The brief entry into the male position, and the failure of that entry at the limit, makes this discipline more visible and easier to name. Its specific content appears in other participants’ accounts, as when “because of others’ eyes I have more demands on myself, I get bound up, living within frames” (P05).

This counter-effect is the mirror function Foucault (1986) describes in his concept of heterotopia. The heterotopia works back on reality. Through contrast with everyday space, it lets the player see the structure of that everyday space. In the case of male-protagonist games, this mirror has a gendered content. Female players briefly occupy a position structured through a male protagonist. Through this occupation, some participants become more aware of their position as women in reality. They can see more clearly the limits that shape how they are expected to exist. In everyday life, these limits may otherwise remain less visible.

P09's two descriptions might suggest a single direction of flow. The flow runs from lack in reality to compensation in the game to visibility back in reality. P12 complicates this picture with a flow in the reverse direction.

*Actually, I think it is my mental strength in real life that feeds back into the game. The game offers so many different choices that, without that strength, I might not even feel confident enough to choose options like those. (P12)*

“Feed back” (fanbu) is a word usually used for offspring giving back to their parents. Carried over into the relation between reality and the game, the word treats reality as the source of the game. Mental strength is produced in reality. It is applied in the game. This reversal complicates the earlier argument. Even within the exemption and expansion the male position provides, the player's reach has limits. The limits come from what she brings in from reality. The male position offers a possible field. What happens within that field depends on what the player brings into it. The game and reality stand in a continuous two-way flow.

The mirror function does not operate at the same intensity for every player. Two specific limits to its activation appear in the data. When a player has already grown accustomed to not making her own decisions in reality, with a low threshold for the need for control, the male position is not activated as a contrast at the same intensity (P13). When a player directs the comparison toward men in reality rather than toward herself as a woman, what is reflected back is the limit of men, not her own position as a woman (P11). The mirror function appears strongest when the player's position in reality contrasts with the male one, and when the comparison is directed back to herself.

Ultimately, this theme has shown the game space operating by different rules. It carries functions that participants experienced as difficult to obtain in reality, including the sustainability of the self and the experience of agency. These functions work through the concrete position of the male protagonist, which can provide relief from gendered burdens and open up what the player feels able to do. The brief occupation of this position can also reflect back the players' real-life position as women. Rules that normally operate as a transparent background can become more visible and easier to identify. Difference and mirror together make up the core work of the game space for female players.

All this concerns what happens within or through the game space. Whether these functions produce changes in players' real lives is a separate question. What do this exemption and expansion leave behind once the game is closed? How does the "woman within social discipline"—as P09 named it—continue to act in reality? These questions push the analysis beyond the game's boundaries.

### **6.3 Theme Three: Empowerment and Coping**

What should the experiences disclosed by the previous two themes be recognized as in Gutiérrez's (1990, 1994) framework of empowerment? The data do not give a single answer, and the answer runs through two distinct questions. The first is whether game experience crosses into real life at all. On this question the data divides: some experiences transfer, and some are insulated from the outset. The second question arises where participants describe transfer: whether the player can claim what has crossed as her own. Here the data show a recurring pattern of discursive downgrading. The three patterns coexist across different experiential dimensions of the same player. At the interpersonal level, the female communities

the game connects players to constitute a separate space of empowerment, one that does not depend on personal-level transfer.

### 6.3.1 Transfer

Experiences that cross the boundary between game and reality appear in the data in several forms. The most directly identifiable form is psychological reference. Difficulties once overcome in the game become a concrete reference point in reality. This transfer appears in the data as a precise comparison of difficulty.

*But when I run into something really hard at work, I'll think back and realize this work isn't as hard as Soulslike games were when I first picked them up. So I'll feel like I just need to push through a bit more, and I should be able to finish. (P11)*

The comparison stays specific. It matches the difficulty of “first picking up Soulslike” against the difficulty of “this work.” These are not “the game” and “reality” as abstract categories. What “think back” names is recall. The game experience returns as a concrete memory available for retrieval, not as a stable change in personality. When a real-life difficulty appears, this memory gets activated. The comparison runs. That difficulty was higher. So this one becomes doable. The game serves here as a yardstick of difficulty. Against this yardstick, the present task looks smaller, and “pushing through” follows as the practical inference. What crosses the boundary here is a measurement. At this stage, the transfer operates mainly at the level of perception. The self is not yet described as an object of change.

A second form of transfer is the analogy of state. This form appears in the data as the transfer of a non-victorious posture.

*I've died who knows how many times, and I can still play this game, I'm just too amazing. I believe in real life, as long as I keep this kind of half-alive state, I'll definitely be able to, at the very least, get by. (P08)*

Two scenes get recognized as the same state. “Dying so many times and still playing” belongs to the game. “The half-alive state” belongs to real life. The analogy holds across the boundary, and the game-side supplies the language for naming the real-side. The wording for what gets taken from the game stays restrained. “Even half-alive I can keep going” reaches lower than the language of victory or power. The transfer here takes the form of an adopted stance, and the stance comes phrased in a downgraded register. This restraint will reappear in the analysis of discursive downgrading.

A third form of transfer enters the level of behavioral change. A specific mode of action that has been tested in the game is brought back to reality.

*Before, I would think harmony comes first, whatever, if I can help I'll help, save myself getting stabbed in the back later. But after playing, one big change I feel is that I'll refuse him... This kind of courage actually came from experiencing refusal and getting the dividend myself. (P05)*

The “before” and “after” structure attributes the change in real-life refusal directly to the game experience. More specifically, the description names a transfer mechanism. “Getting the dividend” means that in the game she observed the concrete benefits refusal brought, and carried this observation back as evidence. The game here serves as a low-cost laboratory where she can try a behavior she

experiences as more costly in reality, observe its consequences, and then bring the verified pattern back. The same transfer structure appears more concisely in another participant (P15: “be braver, more decisive”).

A fourth form, deeper still, enters value judgment. What is transferred is not an action but a frame for judging. Some propositions in the game’s content become part of the player’s own value framework.

*Watching that CG, before I empathized with that CG, I was probably fine. But later that line of dialogue—it became part of my own inner voice, it influenced my values, some of my behavioral logic. (P13)*

“Inner voice” presupposes a feeling she already had, and the line in the game is not imposed on her from outside but joined with what was already running in her mind. This joining converts game content from external input into a resource for self-expression. Values and behavioral logic are judgment frames continuously at work in everyday life. The game’s influence here is the transfer of a whole set of standards. The same level of transfer appears elsewhere as a shift in standards. As one participant put it, “before I would think mind your own business is fine, but now I realize some things you can’t just mind your own business about”(P15).

The forms of transfer together present a common structure. What happens in the game does not stay inside the game but enters the player’s real life with different specificities: as a difficulty memory available to be called up (P11, P07), as an adopted stance (P08), as a verified pattern of action (P05, P15), as a value proposition merged into the ‘inner voice’ (P13, P15). These forms of transfer show changes that extend beyond the immediate gaming experience. Some, particularly

changes in perceived capability and action, can be located at the personal level of Gutiérrez's (1994) empowerment framework as forms of increased self-efficacy.

### 6.3.2 Discursive Downgrading

But even when participants describe concrete changes beyond the game, whether they claim these changes as forms of power is shaped by discursive conditions. This limitation appears in the data as a stable discursive pattern. Players use restrained, low-intensity wording to summarize the game's overall work in their lives. They rely on terms like "relaxation," "entertainment," and "escape from reality." This wording contrasts with the far more complex practices they describe elsewhere in the interview.

The clearest illustration of this downgrading appears in P08's accounts. The earlier transfer layer already demonstrated her restrained framing. She claimed "even half-alive I can keep going" rather than "I can win." This same restraint subsequently manifests as a direct retraction.

*Because I'm the one playing, the sense of accomplishment from defeating something or achieving something might dilute some of the discomfort I feel in real life, and might let me feel some power. But this kind of power, if you ask me how much power I actually have in real life, I'd say probably none. (P08)*

The opening sentence links game accomplishment to real-life relief and "some power." This structurally aligns with previously established transfer forms. The subsequent sentence immediately retracts this power. The retraction relies on a specific standard: actual real-world capacity. The participant restricts the label "power" strictly to reality-altering effects. This rigid standard operates as a

discursive mechanism. A downgraded state like “half-alive” is permitted. An empowering state like “power” is denied.

Other participants demonstrate this exact downgrading. P02 frames the game strictly as “just for relaxation.” However, she simultaneously details intense emotional investment in the plot. P04 similarly calls the game “a very good way to relax.” Yet, she actively creates mods and fan fiction for Leon. These intensive practices suggest a more complex relationship with gaming than the label of “relaxation” alone captures. Furthermore, P05 labels the game an escape from real-life pressure. Nevertheless, she previously transferred in-game refusal into real-world advantages. Their detailed interviews show that they can articulate complex functions of gaming, even when their summary labels remain restrained. The gap therefore lies in how that experience is named and claimed.

This finding complicates the empowerment judgment in Gutiérrez’s (1994, p. 204) framework. Critical consciousness includes the subject’s ability to recognize her own situation. An experience that is not recognized as a source of personal capacity may be less available as a resource in how a person understands her own power. Discursive conditions can therefore separate the changes participants describe from the way those changes are claimed. A downgraded sense of power may still shape the player’s real life. But when she does not name it as her own “power,” it may remain less visible within the story she tells about her own situation.

### **6.3.3 Insulation**

Discursive downgrading addresses how transfer is restricted at the level of naming. The data show another related but different pattern. Some game experiences are not allowed to cross the boundary between game and reality from the outset. This

discursive labor codifies a rigid self-requirement.

*Games are kind of like a hobby that doesn't exist once you leave this room. So I'd say I haven't really brought things from games into real life. (P13)*

“Doesn’t exist once you leave this room” operates as a spatial metaphor. The game is positioned as an object with a clear spatial boundary, one that corresponds to the physical boundary of “the room.” The participant actively restricts the game’s meaning to this specific virtual space. “I’d say” itself points to a self-positioning in which game and reality are kept separate. The same insulation appears elsewhere as “games are games, reality is reality” maintained as both a self-description and a self-requirement (P04).

This boundary-making also targets intense emotional experiences.

*It has nothing to do with reality. I just simply feel that if this story could continue, how warm it would be—that kind of reluctance to let go. (P02)*

What is described is real emotional investment. “Reluctance to let go” and “how warm it would be” are feelings she names directly. But while naming these feelings, she immediately adds “it has nothing to do with reality.” It is a qualification that happens at the same time as the emotional description. The feeling is allowed to be real, but its range of effect is contained inside the game.

Furthermore, this insulation serves a clear practical function.

*Inside games, it's only in the past two years that I've slowly come to realize that*

*games are games. One benefit is that you can have conflict to your heart's content. After conflict in a game, there are costs, but they're not that big. (P10)*

Here insulation is described as a functional good, the game as a low-cost arena for conflict. "Games are games" is, in this phrasing, a cognitive premise that secures the game's specific function. The game can serve as an arena where "the costs are not that big" precisely because it has been recognized in advance as a space not directly connected to reality. If the costs could extend into reality, this function would disappear.

Four different phrasings point to the same boundary-making effect. Emotional and psychological experiences are acknowledged, while their relevance to life outside the game is actively limited.

Insulated experience is best understood as coping rather than empowerment in Gutiérrez's (1990, 1994) framework when its main function is to contain stress, emotion, or conflict within the game rather than extend the player's capacity to act beyond it. Gutiérrez (1994) locates the distinction in whether people primarily adapt to stressful conditions or develop the capacity to act on the conditions producing them. The "low-cost arena for conflict" described here falls on the coping side of this distinction. The game provides a space where conflict can be experienced and released at lower cost. This may help the player return to everyday life and continue functioning, while leaving the source of the conflict unchanged.

Gutiérrez (1994, p. 209) further warns that a sense of control can become limiting when it improves how a person feels without helping her identify or act on the source of the problem. Read in this light, insulation has a double function. It can

provide real emotional relief and a protected space for conflict, but it can also contain that experience within the game. Where the sense of control remains bounded in this way, the result is coping rather than broader empowerment.

#### **6.3.4 The Interpersonal Level**

At the personal level the data divides between empowerment and coping; the interpersonal level operates through a different mechanism. Here, the game functions not as an isolated escape, but as a crucial social bridge. The most prominent form of this interpersonal empowerment in the data is the female player community. The game serves as an entry point, and the resulting social connections fulfill functions reaching far beyond the game content itself.

*Its meaning is, to give an example, like a group of women discovering a new continent, and then everyone gathering to discuss how we set up this tent, how we live, how we build the fence, how we build houses. (P10)*

The “new continent” metaphor highlights a collective construction from scratch. Activities like “setting up tents” and “building houses” signify a shared, foundational labor. The metaphor lands because the existing social space does not provide the same building conditions for these women. They have to find a new continent before they can begin. Naming the space as a “new continent” gives the community a collective meaning beyond entertainment. The same form of community appears in another participant as “an all-female gaming group” used specifically to discuss women’s issues. Its existence is attributed to “the gaming industry currently not being particularly female-friendly” (P12). The all-female structure creates room for discussions that they experienced as difficult to sustain in mixed-gender spaces.

However, this interpersonal empowerment remains structurally bounded.

*But when they found out that I had a family, they simply removed me from the group. It felt... very... cold and pragmatic, in a way. (P06)*

“Very... real” frames this rejection using the exact opposite of the game space. It signals that the relations the game connects players to were expected to operate by rules different from those of reality. When this expectation falls through, the logic of “reality” returns, filtering women by their marital and reproductive status. This reveals a specific limit of interpersonal-level empowerment: marital and family status can also become a basis of exclusion within female gaming communities.

At the personal level, the data divides along two lines. Whether experience crosses the boundary separates transfer from insulation. Transfer can support personal-level empowerment when it expands self-efficacy, judgment, or action beyond play. Insulation, by contrast, operates closer to coping when its main function is to contain stress or experience within the game. Where participants describe transfer, a second line runs between the change itself and how far they claim it as their own. Discursive downgrading holds these two apart. What it restricts is not the transfer itself but the player’s capacity to claim it as her own. These patterns often coexist within a single player. At the interpersonal level, female communities offer a separate empowerment space. This communal support operates independently of personal-level transfer, though it maintains its own internal limits.

These personal and interpersonal dynamics lay the groundwork for political-level empowerment. The data already reveals early seeds of critical consciousness.

Players actively rename their communities and identify gendered problems in the gaming industry. In Gutiérrez's (1994) framework, such critical consciousness is an important part of the movement from personal experience toward political-level empowerment. Theme Four examines how this critical consciousness develops and where its movement toward collective action becomes blocked.

#### **6.4 Theme Four: Critical Consciousness and the Blockage of Political Transformation**

Gutiérrez (1994) identifies critical consciousness as an important process in the movement from personal toward political empowerment. Recognizing personal struggles as structural issues directs individual empowerment toward collective action. The data reveal this mechanism remains incomplete. Critical consciousness reaches a clear structural level, yet its translation into collective action faces a dual blockage. One is external: the space for collective action is structurally compressed. The other is internal to discourse: participants keep the label of feminism at a distance when making critical statements. Across the data, structural awareness is clearly present. The main blockage appears in translating this awareness into collective political action.

##### **6.4.1 Three levels of critical consciousness**

The recognition of critical consciousness emerges in the data at three interconnected levels. The first level is the naming of gendered design within the game. The second is reflection on how the participants themselves have been shaped by real-life norms. The third is the recognition of broader gendered patterns in the gaming industry and gaming community culture that place women at the margins.

The first level of recognition removes the naturalness of game design and interprets it as oriented toward a particular player position.

*Because that women's town, first they have a man sneak in to satisfy men's weird voyeuristic desire—this just makes me really uncomfortable. (P12)*

P12 reads the design logic of the game level as oriented toward a male player position and identifies that orientation through “men’s voyeuristic desire.” The same recognition appears more directly elsewhere: “It’s obviously an animation designed to please male players” (P04). This recognition also extends to supposedly “genderless” settings: Link “is set as genderless, but actually in the game everyone treats Link as male” (P12). Another form of recognition targets the internal limits placed on female characters in games: “If you create a strong female character like this, you’ll default to having an even stronger male character appear in her life” (P10).

The second level of recognition extends to reflection on how the participants themselves are shaped, as women, by social norms.

*I'd also have more demands on myself because of how others see me, and I'd get bound up, living within frames. (P05)*

“Demands on myself” is named as a product of an external source. The phrasings “bound up” and “frames” further show the concreteness of these norms. The same reflection appears elsewhere in a more specific form: women’s pressure is “turned inward... having to be considerate, having to consider others’ feelings... more like internal exhaustion” (P05). The recognition also extends to women’s vulnerability

in public space: “in a public setting where no one knows anyone, I feel women are very weak” (P02). At its most direct, this recognition names patriarchy as a major social force rather than treating gender inequality as a series of isolated personal experiences: “There are only two things I hate most in this life—patriarchy and war” (P14).

The third level of recognition addresses the overall pattern of how experience is distributed.

*I feel women have a hard time getting the same experience from this kind of game... A lot of teenagers or younger players, when they play this, they put themselves in it, or hope they can have this kind of masculinity to some degree. But actually women have a hard time getting the same experience from this kind of game. (P04)*

The experience of masculinity in games is recognized as a resource more readily available to a particular group. This extends the critique from individual design choices to broader patterns in how game experiences are organized. The recognition extends from game content to the level of player communities. A dedicated “Female Players Alliance” group exists on Douban explicitly for discussing gendered games. The existence of this separate space suggests that mainstream gaming communities did not provide equal room for such discussions (P09). This awareness also pierces the industry’s commercial logic. Game companies anticipate a male demographic and actively provide “service to these male players” (P08). Ultimately, gaming culture connects directly to broader macro-social inequalities. Society educates men “to be more aggressive,” while tying women’s gaming positions to restrictive social roles. Unequal family resource distribution further exacerbates this divide. Males often receive more “parental favoring” and financial support. These intersecting

structural forces are understood as contributing to the gendered composition of the gaming consumer base (P08).

The recognition also includes a reflection on the self.

*Because I came into contact with games really early—I even feel that some of these views were influenced by what games put out. It feels like you don't really think about why it's this way or that way, you just feel this is normal. (P07)*

Views previously accepted as simply “normal” are now recognized as external cultural products (P07). This reflection exposes gaming culture as a powerful normative force. The environment continuously dictates what its audience judges to be natural. The invisible ideological operation of the game space thus becomes visible.

These three interconnected levels map a broad structural critique. Players identify gendered in-game design. They reflect on internalized real-life norms. They expose the overarching normative force of gaming culture. This recognition evolves far beyond critiquing a single virtual level. Taken together, these accounts suggest that participants connected gaming to broader social, cultural, and economic structures.

#### **6.4.2 From recognition to individual action**

Recognition also takes concrete form in personal practices.

*So what I'd do is not play those games and support the kind of games that are more female-friendly. (P12)*

This statement frames consumer choice as a direct response to gendered design. The parallel actions of “not playing” and “supporting” constitute a clear resistance strategy. Players explicitly adopt the logic of “voting with money” (P15). They exercise their consumer rights, recognizing that the industry ultimately cannot “turn down money” (P15). Beyond selective consumption, this awareness can also take the form of refusal. Players establish strict boundaries, insisting they “haven’t even touched” extremely male-oriented games (P13). This direct exit removes hostile products from consideration.

This resistance also manifests as deliberate in-game positioning. Players explicitly vow to “make sure I have power” and refuse to “be someone’s slave” (P12). This translates structural awareness directly into virtual positional practice. This agency also appears in the rejection of gendered interactions. They dismiss “preferential treatment” as thinly veiled “prejudice” (P11). These agentic acts directly target the identified structural inequalities. These practices show critical consciousness being translated into forms of individual resistance.

#### **6.4.3 The double blockage**

Recognition has occurred, and individual action has followed. Yet, this progression stalls before reaching Gutiérrez’s (1994) political level of empowerment. Gutiérrez defines political-level empowerment as the capacity to work with others to change social institutions. While players actively target structural problems, much of this resistance remains individualized, while existing collective spaces are largely community-bounded rather than directed toward wider institutional change. This gap between structural recognition and collective mobilization surfaces in the data through two distinct blockages.

The first form of limitation operates at the level of external space. Critical reflection

takes place within particular communities of belonging, such as the Female Players Alliance on Douban, the all-female gaming groups, but their reach remains largely bounded by the communities in which they operate.

*At this point these games are worth reflecting on... a narrative or role-playing game with a male protagonist, I think what it might bring me is a kind of reflection. After I finish a game, I'll go to Douban to give it a rating, and look at what others are saying. (P09)*

While this reflective practice is highly active, its circulation remains bounded. “Douban” and “Female Players Alliance” are particular community spaces. The same participant elsewhere directly states that reflection “can only circulate within the community,” and calls this state “very sorrowful.” Women players’ reflection is sustained, but its circulation remains largely within community boundaries rather than extending into broader public mobilization.

This bounded circulation limits the political reach of participants’ agency. The issue is the difficulty of translating community-based reflection into wider collective action. Establishing a functional bridge between “individualized women’s empowerment” and “collective feminist advocacy” becomes profoundly difficult. All visible spaces of practice are community-bounded, personal, and do not constitute public mobilization.

The second form of limitation operates within discourse itself. The content of critical consciousness is expressed, but the label that carries this position, feminism, is avoided when critical statements are made.

*Is it because he's too different from real men? Is that okay to say? You won't say I'm a nüquan (feminist), will you? (P11)*

Structural recognition triggers immediate self-surveillance. The participant voices a critical observation but instantly shields herself from the political label. This preemptive distancing separates the critical statement from an explicitly feminist identity. “I’ve always thought I’m not that kind of feminist person. But I have to take care of myself first. It’s not that I’m demanding everything change to favor women” (P15). It also appears elsewhere as distancing from the feminist movement. ‘Because feminism exists, because such relatively extreme positions exist, more space has been won for us’ (P05). The statement acknowledges feminism’s achievement while characterizing those who won it as ‘relatively extreme positions.’ The distance is built by this characterization. The extremity belongs to them; the space belongs to us. The dividend of the critique is received. The stigmatized identity is left at a distance.

Critical consciousness in the data extends across multiple structural levels. Recognition extends from gendered design (P12, P04, P10), to the internalization of real-life norms (P05, P02, P14), to the structural exclusion of women by the gaming industry and gaming communities (P04, P07, P08, P09). It turns into directed personal practices (P12, P15, P13, P11). But the political level of empowerment requires working with others to change social institutions (Gutiérrez, 1994). What remains limited is the movement from collective reflection and community formation toward coordinated action aimed at changing wider institutions. The blockage lies on the path from consciousness to collective action. In the Chinese context, this pattern can be understood in relation to the political and social costs attached to visible feminist positions (Hong Fincher, 2018). This cost

compresses collective-action space externally (P09) and produces self-monitoring around the feminist label within personal discourse (P11, P15, P05). The content of feminism continues to be expressed. The label is what gets held at a distance. Therefore, the richness of critical consciousness and the blockage of political transformation coexist within the same constrained political and discursive environment. This double blockage defines the limit encountered when the agentic and critical experiences described in earlier themes move toward the political level.

The position women players occupy in male-protagonist games is one of continuous negotiation within the openings of structure. Personal-level empowerment develops where game experiences expand capacities that carry into everyday life. Coping develops where those experiences primarily contain or manage pressure within the game space. Structural critique emerges at the level of consciousness. Structural blockage appears at the political level. What these levels amount to, taken together, is no longer a question the data can answer on its own.

## **7. Discussion**

The findings show that empowerment does occur, and that it is not confined to the game. Some gaming experiences transfer into players' real lives, changing how they understand themselves and how they act. At the interpersonal level, empowerment also appears through connections in gaming communities and the shared awareness formed within them. At the political level, the picture shifts. Critical consciousness does form, but its circulation remains largely bounded within community and personal settings. Gutiérrez's (1994) framework divides empowerment into personal, interpersonal, and political levels, and these levels do not move together. What the data show is not empowerment or adaptation but both at once, each realized or blocked at different levels within the same group of players.

Yet within this layered picture, realization and claiming come apart. At the personal level, empowerment can be realized without being claimed as empowerment in discourse. Empowerment can occur without being claimed by its own subject. This non-claiming runs at different depths. Sometimes consciousness is clear and speech is restrained. At other times, this restraint appears to have entered the way the experience itself is narrated and understood. This separation is sharpest at the political level. Claiming is restrained in broader public discourse, forming part of the blockage between critical consciousness and political-level empowerment. Understanding why claiming is blocked requires returning to the space where empowerment occurs and to the conditions that claiming meets within it.

### **7.1 The Separation of Realization from Claiming**

Critical consciousness is the mechanism that connects personal empowerment to the political level. One component of critical consciousness is the reduction of self-blame, reading one's situation as structurally shaped rather than as personal failure (Gutiérrez, 1994). This reduction involves recognizing one's situation and capacities in relation to broader structural conditions rather than treating them as purely personal matters. The findings suggest that this recognition can be uneven: players may describe changes in capacity while still withholding the language of empowerment from those changes. At one level, consciousness is clear. The player knows the strength is there and simply does not speak of it in the register of empowerment. At another, the game is sincerely narrated as something of little consequence, as relaxation, as entertainment, while the rest of the same player's account shows that change did occur. The downgrading here is no longer only a choice of wording toward others. It appears within the participant's own understanding of the experience. Through repeated citation, norms come to appear

natural and self-evident (Butler, 2006). Both forms can be understood in relation to the cost of claiming. That cost can constrain what is said publicly and may also shape how the experience itself is narrated and understood.

The findings also show moments in which gaming makes gender norms more visible. When players occupy a gendered position different from their own and experience that difference as meaningful, the constructedness of those norms can become more visible (Butler, 2006). Playing as a male protagonist can bring the game's gendered assumptions into view rather than leaving them taken for granted. This visibility, however, does not lead to claiming. The capacity players develop within the gendered structure of male-protagonist games is real. Players act within norms, and the agency they develop there does not lose its reality for being norm-bound (Mahmood, 2005). The issue is not the absence of strength, but that participants do not always describe this strength as empowerment in public discourse. I interpret this pattern as potentially related to the social consequences attached to gendered claims in the reality players inhabit. The game space, for all its freedom, cannot shield such claims once they move beyond its boundaries. In the current Chinese digital discourse, feminist positions carry stigma, and publicly claiming such a position invites hostility and scrutiny (Wang & Chang, 2023). To claim one's gaming experience in explicitly gendered or empowering terms can place it closer to this contested discursive field. This cost does not operate on discourse alone. The spaces where critical reflection lives are community-bounded, and reflection remains largely bounded within those communities rather than developing into broader public mobilization. The organizational space for collective action is structurally compressed. The discursive cost of claiming and the compression of collective action are two faces of the same consequence structure. Strength gained through play can enter everyday life and shape action without

requiring public identification as empowerment. Claiming is different. It enters a discursive field where consequences follow. The transfer of strength into reality can therefore occur without being equally accompanied by the discursive act of identifying that transfer as empowerment. Empowerment remains realized but not claimed. This separation is most visible in the downgrading pattern, where transfer occurs without being publicly described as empowerment.

If the restraint reflected a simple lack of critical awareness or expressive capacity, similarly restrained language would be expected across settings. This is not what the data show. In settings where claiming must return to public discourse, players withdraw it and narrate their strength as a reluctant holding-on. In women-only gaming communities, however, participants speak more openly about the value of female collective space and the need to sustain it. Players identify these communities as spaces that need to be built from nothing, and they talk about the significance of sustaining them. This setting has its own boundary. Some women-only gaming communities may also exclude women on the basis of marital or family status. The contrast suggests that claiming is shaped by the consequence structure of the setting rather than by a simple lack of awareness or capacity within the players.

The game, as a heterotopia, can establish its own rules for what happens within its space (Foucault, 1986). It cannot govern the consequences that return to the reality it is situated within. Women-only communities, by contrast, provide a setting in which gendered claims can carry different social consequences. I use “consequence structure” here to describe how different settings attach different social costs to speaking, identifying, and acting in explicitly gendered terms. Foucault’s account helps explain how an alternative space can operate by different rules, but it says

less about the different consequences attached to experience and to the public claiming of that experience. The distinction between realization and claiming helps make this difference visible in my data.

This spatial structure also explains why this finding emerges from a study of gaming. For the separation of realization from claiming to become visible, a setting is needed where realization does not depend on public claiming. In everyday life, the development of strength is entangled with its discursive environment. In everyday life, it can be difficult to distinguish between capacities that never developed and capacities that developed but remained unspoken. Male-protagonist games provide a particularly clear condition in which this separation can be observed. Realization can occur within the rules of the game space. Transfer crosses the boundary silently. Claiming faces the discursive cost of reality on its own. The game space is thus the condition that makes the separation observable, not merely the place where it happens.

The consequence structure that separates realization from claiming also highlights a distinction that is not explicitly developed in Gutiérrez's framework. Gutiérrez defines personal-level empowerment partly in terms of self-efficacy, understood as the subject's perception of her own capacity (Gutiérrez, 1994). The reported changes in action and perceived capacity are consistent with self-efficacy, but a single interview cannot establish growth over time. But players withdraw claiming in public discourse. Public claiming is not developed as a distinct analytical dimension in the framework. Whether empowerment can be publicly claimed by its subject is a different question from whether empowerment can be realized, and it is a question that becomes visible when claiming carries heavy consequences. The social costs attached to explicitly gendered claims in current Chinese public

discourse provide an important context for interpreting the distance between realization and claiming. When empowerment is realized in a context where claiming it is costly, this distance suggests that realization and claiming may need to be distinguished when empowerment is studied under conditions of discursive constraint.

## **7.2 Reflexivity and the Limits**

As a Chinese woman who plays male-protagonist games, I share part of the gaming experience and discursive situation with my participants. In interviews, this made it easier to enter their narratives and stay sensitive to feelings that are not easily spoken directly. This shared ground also shapes the analysis. My understanding of certain expressions in the data comes partly from my own accumulated experience as a player.

This closeness also carries risk. My emotional investment in this type of gaming experience may lead me to assign more weight to certain expressions in the analysis. It may also lead me to fit participants' accounts into existing analytical patterns too quickly. My position makes it easy for me to interpret this withdrawal in relation to familiar gendered pressures. It may also make me underestimate the possibility of other explanations. The analysis I offer is shaped by this position.

The argument is also bound by the conditions of the data. The separation of realization from claiming is most visible in a context where claiming carries identifiable social costs. Whether it appears in contexts where claiming carries lighter consequences is beyond what my data can answer. My data also cannot track how the same player claims differently across public discourse and women-only communities. These boundaries point toward different directions for further

research.

Cross-contextual comparison is the most direct way to examine the scope of the core finding. If the separation is shaped by the cost of claiming, different discursive conditions should produce different relations between realization and claiming. Such comparison could distinguish two possibilities. The separation may be specific to the Chinese discourse. Or it may appear more broadly once the cost of claiming reaches a certain degree. Tracking how the same player claims differently across settings requires a longitudinal or ethnographic design. My interviews capture retrospective accounts of different settings, not real-time observation. A longitudinal design could reveal how claiming occurs and is withdrawn in specific settings. My analysis focuses on male-protagonist games. Whether other game types shape the relationship between empowerment and claiming differently is a further direction. I also treat “women players” as a unified category without systematically examining differences such as sexual orientation, age, marital and family status, caregiving responsibilities, socioeconomic position, and gaming experience. The experience of controlling a male protagonist may carry different meanings for players of different sexual orientations. Their relationship to the male protagonist position, and the cost their claiming carries, may take different forms.

## **8. Conclusion**

Can women’s sustained engagement with fixed male-protagonist games lead to empowerment? The data do not answer in one word, because empowerment meets three different fates at three levels. At the personal level, strength developed through play can carry into everyday life, shaping how players refuse, judge, and endure difficulty. At the interpersonal level, the game connects women into

communities, where shared awareness and support can develop. At the political level, critical consciousness took a clearly structural form, yet it circulated mainly within personal and community settings and was not necessarily accompanied by broader collective action.

But the data give more than these three fates. The question of where empowerment stops assumes the answer is a location. What the data show is a mechanism. The stopping point is not an absence of recognition, nor a lack of strength. Nor do the data support the stronger view that cultural practice simply substitutes private satisfaction for the drive toward social change (Radway, 1991). The recognition of structure is clear, personal resistance continues, and what remains most clearly blocked is the collective turn, through both external constraints and the discursive costs attached to claiming. What has come apart is realization and claiming. The strength developed through play does not always stay there. What has not equally taken place is the act of claiming it in discourse. This claiming is blocked at different depths. Some players recognize the strength but do not name it as empowerment. In other cases, meaningful change may be narrated in terms of relaxation, entertainment, or coping. Empowerment can therefore be held without being spoken of in the language of empowerment. The findings link this separation to the social costs attached to gendered claiming in the discursive field players inhabit. These costs can constrain speech and may also shape how the experience itself is narrated and understood. The game space can protect realization but cannot escort claiming across its boundary.

This finding speaks to a tension left open in the theoretical framework. One tension within Gutiérrez's (1994) discussion of empowerment concerns the relation between an actual increase in capacity and the subject's perception of that increase.

The findings complicate this distinction under conditions where claiming carries social costs. Concrete changes in action, judgment, and self-efficacy are described, while these changes are often narrated in terms far below “power.” Changes in capacity and the language through which those changes are understood therefore do not necessarily move together. Gutiérrez’s framework does not develop public or discursive claiming as a separate dimension of empowerment. My findings show why this distinction matters. Where claiming carries substantial social costs, realization and claiming can come apart, leaving empowerment in an unclaimed state. The findings point to a condition under which realization and claiming do not necessarily move together. This distinction becomes particularly visible in the context examined here.

The findings are consistent with the thesis’s initial conjecture that empowerment emerging in informal cultural spaces may take forms and encounter limits different from those emphasized in institutional accounts of empowerment. The form differs. Empowerment here does not pass through organizations, advocacy, or claims to rights. It passes through a space that runs on another set of rules (Foucault, 1986), completes its realization where no one is watching, and can enter everyday life without requiring public claiming. The levels differ. In this study, empowerment is most visible at the personal and interpersonal levels rather than through formal political participation. For the informal game spaces examined here, the key limit does not lie in access to the experience itself but in what can be claimed once that experience returns to everyday discourse. This space can hold forms of realization that remain relatively protected within play, but it cannot protect the act of claiming once that claim enters public discourse.

The strength is real. It already lives in these players’ lives, in a refusal, in a yardstick

held against difficulty, in a line that joined an inner voice. Participants did not always describe this strength in terms of power or empowerment. How they understand and describe it beyond the interview context remains uncertain. That lies beyond the boundary of the game space, and beyond the boundary of my study.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Guide (English version)**

### **Warm-up**

1. What have you been playing recently?
  - What draws you to this game?
  - When did you start playing games?

### **Part One: Entering and experiencing the game space**

2. How did you start playing single-player RPGs with male protagonists?
  - What attracted you at first?
  - Did you play this type from the beginning, or did you move over from other genres?
  - Was there a moment when you thought this type of game might not be for you?
3. Is there anything you experience in games that you rarely experience in everyday life?
  - Can you give a specific example?
4. When you play, how much of what happens is up to you?
  - How does this compare with everyday life?
5. Has a choice you made in a game, or your reaction to a plot, ever surprised you?

### **Part Two: Relationship with the protagonist and practice in the game**

6. When you play, what is your relationship with the protagonist like?
  - Why is it like this?
  - Was there a specific moment when you felt especially close to him, or especially distant?
7. When you play, is the protagonist's gender noticeable to you?
  - Was there a moment when you suddenly realized he is male? How did you experience that moment?

- What did you do after that?

### Part Three: Gaming and wider life

8. Do you talk about these games with other people?
  - If you do: who do you usually talk with? Are they mostly women or mostly men? Is talking with men different from talking with women?
  - If you rarely do: what makes you not want to talk about it?
  - Have you talked about what it is like to play these games as a woman?
9. What do you think about women players gathering to talk about games?
10. What do these games bring you? What do they mean to you?
11. Have you experienced something in the game that did not remain with you after you stopped playing and returned to everyday life?
  - Can you describe that experience?
  - When this gap appears, what do you usually do?
12. Has something you experienced in a game later led you to do or say something different in real life?
13. Has anything happened in real life that suddenly reminded you of a moment in a game?
14. Is there anything in your life that you wish you could handle the way you handle things in the game?
15. When you experience a sense of capability, freedom, or control through the protagonist, do you understand it as yours, his, or something shared?
16. Why do you think the protagonists of these games are mostly male?
17. While playing these games, were there moments when you encountered something restrictive or uncomfortable but continued playing?

- How did you handle it at the time?

#### Closing

18. We have talked about a lot. Is there anything important that I did not ask about? Anything you want to add, or anything you want to ask me?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide(Chinese version)

### 暖场

1. 最近在玩什么游戏？
  - 这个游戏吸引你的地方是什么？
  - 你是什么时候开始玩游戏的？

### 第一部分：进入与体验游戏空间

2. 你是怎么开始玩以男性角色为主角的单机 RPG 的？
  - 最初吸引你的是什么？
  - 你一开始玩游戏就玩这类，还是从别的类型转过来的？
  - 有没有哪个时刻，你觉得这类游戏可能不太适合自己？
3. 游戏里有没有什么感受，是你在现实生活中很少有的？
  - 可以说一个具体的例子吗？
4. 玩的时候，事情在多大程度上是你说了算的？
  - 现实生活里呢？
5. 你在游戏里做过的某个选择，或者你对某段剧情的反应，有没有让你自己感到意外？

### 第二部分：与主角的关系及游戏中的实践

6. 玩的时候，你和游戏主角之间是一种什么样的关系？
  - 为什么会是这样？
  - 有没有哪个具体时刻，你觉得离他特别近，或者特别远？

7. 玩的时候，主角的性别对你来说明显吗？
  - 有没有哪个时刻，你突然意识到他是男性？当时是什么感觉？
  - 那之后你做了什么？

### 第三部分：游戏与更广泛的生活

8. 你会和别人聊这类游戏吗？
  - 如果会：一般和谁聊？聊的人里女性多还是男性多？和男性聊、和女性聊有什么不一样？
  - 如果很少：是什么让你不太想聊？
  - 你们聊到过“作为女生玩这类游戏是什么感受”吗？
9. 你怎么看女性玩家聚在一起讨论游戏这件事？
10. 玩这类游戏给你带来了什么？你怎么看它对你的意义？
11. 有没有过这种情况：在游戏里觉得很好，关掉游戏回到现实之后那种感觉就消失了？
  - 可以描述一下那种感觉吗？
  - 这种落差出现的时候，你一般会怎么做？
12. 有没有因为游戏里的某种体验，你后来在现实里做了或者说了什么不一样的事？
13. 现实里有没有遇到过什么事，当时让你突然想起游戏里的某个时刻？
14. 你生活里有没有什么事情，是你希望自己能像在游戏里那样处理

的？

15. 你在游戏里通过主角获得的那些感觉，比如能力感、自由感、掌控感，你会觉得那是你的，还是他的？

16. 你觉得为什么这类游戏的主角大多是男性？

17. 玩这些游戏的过程中，有没有哪些时刻让你觉得受限，或者不舒服，但你还是继续玩了？

○ 当时你是怎么处理的？

结束

18. 我们聊了很多，有没有什么你觉得重要但我没有问到的？或者有没有什么想补充的，或者想问我的？

## **Appendix C: Informed Consent Form**

### **Consent to participate in a Master Thesis at the Faculty of Social Sciences**

I agree to participate in Women's Experiences of Playing single-player games with male protagonists

This is a student project conducted as part of a Master's degree in Social Studies of Gender at Lund University. The study explores how Chinese women experience playing single-player with male protagonists, including how they relate to game characters, what meanings they find in these games, and whether gaming experiences connect to their everyday lives. Participation involves one online interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

### **Information on the processing of personal data**

#### **The following personal data will be processed:**

Contact information, audio recording of the interview, and basic demographic information shared during the interview (such as age, occupation, and place of residence).

#### **The following sensitive personal data will be processed:**

No sensitive personal data will be deliberately collected. Should participants voluntarily disclose such information during the interview, it will be removed or anonymised during transcription.

#### **Personal data will be processed in the following ways:**

Audio recordings will be transcribed and then deleted. All personal identifiers will be removed during transcription, and participants will be assigned pseudonyms. Transcripts will be stored on an encrypted device accessible only to the researcher. All data will be deleted after the thesis has been examined and received a passing grade.

We do not share your personal data with third parties.

Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, with organisation number 202100-3211 is the controller. You can find Lund University's privacy policy at [www.lu.se/integritet](http://www.lu.se/integritet)

You have the right to receive information about the personal data we process about you. You also have the right to have inaccurate personal data about you corrected. If you have a complaint about our processing of your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer at [dataskyddsbud@lu.se](mailto:dataskyddsbud@lu.se). You also have the right to lodge a complaint with the supervisory authority (the Data Protection Authority, IMY) if you believe that we are processing your personal data incorrectly.

I agree to participate in Women's Experiences of Playing single-player games with male protagonists

|          |                    |
|----------|--------------------|
| Location | Signature          |
| Date     | Name clarification |

## **Appendix D: Informed Consent Form(Chinese Version)**

### **参与社会科学学院硕士论文研究的知情同意书**

本人同意参与研究项目：《女性玩家在男性主角单机游戏中的体验》

本研究是隆德大学社会性别研究硕士项目（Master's degree in Social Studies of Gender）的学生毕业论文。研究探讨的是中国女性玩家在男性主角单机游戏体验，包括她们与游戏角色的关系、她们在游戏中发现的意义，以及游戏体验是否与日常生活产生联系。参与方式为一次线上访谈，时长约 60 分钟。访谈将进行录音并在之后转录为文字。参与完全自愿，您可以在任何时候退出，无需说明理由。

#### **个人数据的处理**

将处理以下个人数据：

联系方式、访谈录音，以及访谈中提及的基本人口学信息（如年龄、职业和居住地）。

将处理以下敏感个人数据：

本研究不会主动收集敏感个人数据。如参与者在访谈中自行提及此类信息，相关内容将在转录过程中删除或匿名化处理。

个人数据的处理方式：

访谈录音将在转录完成后删除。转录过程中，所有可识别个人身份的信息将被移除，参与者将被赋予化名。转录文本将存储在仅研究者可访问的加密设备上。论文通过审核后，所有数据将被删除。

我们不会与第三方共享您的个人数据。

隆德大学（Lund University, Box 117, 221 00 Lund, Sweden, 组织编号 202100-3211）是数据控制者。您可以在 [www.lu.se/integritet](http://www.lu.se/integritet) 查阅隆德大学的隐私政策。

您有权了解我们处理的有关您的个人数据，也有权要求更正不准确的个人数据。如果

您对我们处理您个人数据的方式有投诉，可以联系我们的数据保护官：

[dataskyddsbud@lu.se](mailto:dataskyddsbud@lu.se)。您也有权向瑞典数据保护局

（Integritetsskyddsmyndigheten, IMY）提出投诉。

本人同意参与研究项目：《女性玩家在男性主角单机游戏中的体验》

|    |    |
|----|----|
| 地点 | 签名 |
| 日期 | 签名 |

## Appendix E: From Codes to Themes

This appendix shows the path from initial codes to the four final themes. Initial coding was conducted in NVivo in Chinese and was hybrid, as described in Chapter 5: deductive coding used concepts from the theoretical framework as an initial lens, while inductive coding stayed open to meanings the framework had not anticipated. This produced 424 codes across fifteen transcripts. The codes were exported to Excel and first organized by topic into six domains, with the larger domains subdivided. Themes were constructed afterwards, on top of this topical organization. Once the theme structure was finalized, it was synced back into NVivo. Code examples below are translated from the Chinese originals.

| <b>Topic domain<br/>(subgroups)</b>                                                                                                                                              | <b>Example codes</b>                                                                                                                                       | <b>Final destination</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| A. Relationship with the protagonist, 152 codes (A1 identity positioning; A2 closeness and distance triggers; A3 gender and identification; A4 emotional and relational quality) | “God’s-eye view as the basic frame of participation”; “Player’s soul poured into the character”; “Misogynistic plot triggers rejection of the protagonist” | Theme One: Gender Negotiation with the Male Protagonist — the only theme with formal subthemes: Maintaining Distance (52 codes) became Distancing; Negotiating in Between (63) became Demotion; Moving Closer (36) became Radical Processing |
| B. Game function and meaning, 55 codes (B1                                                                                                                                       | “Self-characterization of gaming as mostly                                                                                                                 | Split: B2 fed Theme One; B1 and B3 fed Theme                                                                                                                                                                                                 |

|                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| functional positioning; B2 strategies for handling discomfort; B3 game as emotional and self-space; B4 evaluation criteria)                                                    | escape”; “Becoming my real self again through the game”                                                           | Two: The Functions and Mirror Effects of the Game Space; B4 set aside                                                              |
| C. Agency and sense of power, 23 codes                                                                                                                                         | “The sense of control is mine”; “Dependent sense of control: indirect agency through a powerful male protagonist” | Theme Two                                                                                                                          |
| D. Gender consciousness and structural cognition, 78 codes (D1 critique of game design; D2 social gender structures; D3 players’ own positioning; D4 industry power structure) | “Designed to please male players”; “Bound up, living within frames”; “You won’t say I’m a feminist, will you”     | Theme Four: Critical Consciousness and the Blockage of Political Transformation                                                    |
| E. Gaming sociality, 30 codes (E1 women-only communities)                                                                                                                      | “All-female group as a space for women’s issues”; “Deleted after they found out I have a family”                  | Only E1 (10 codes) entered Theme Three: Empowerment and Coping, as its interpersonal level; the remaining 20 codes on mixed-gender |

|                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                              |                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                              | community interaction<br>were set aside                         |
| F. Game–reality<br>relationship, 86 codes<br>(F1 positive transfer; F2<br>active boundary<br>maintenance; F3 reality<br>reflected through the<br>game; F4 game as mirror<br>of real-life lack) | “Work is not as hard as<br>Soulslike games were”;<br>“Games are games,<br>reality is reality”; “Self-<br>negation of<br>empowerment effects” | Split: F1 and F2 fed<br>Theme Three; F3 and F4<br>fed Theme Two |

Theme construction went through two recorded stages. An early round of five candidates included one framed as “gaming experience as mostly coping, with empowerment limited and conditional.” An early five-theme version included a candidate framed as “gaming experience as mostly coping, with empowerment limited and conditional.” During theme review, I separated this evaluative interpretation from the underlying pattern in the data. The evaluation was moved to Chapter 7, while the underlying pattern—that some experiences crossed into reality while others were kept separate—developed into Theme Three. The Excel spreadsheet preserves the next stage, a five-theme structure in which the meanings of the game space and the game-reality mirror stood as separate themes. During theme review these two were merged into the final Theme Two, whose movement from what the space provides to what it reflects back follows directly from that merge. Domain C was absorbed into Theme Two in the same revision, with agency reinterpreted as one of the functions the game space carries.

Two further features of the process are worth recording. First, only Theme One

carried formal subthemes. Its three subtheme groups, labeled in the spreadsheet as maintaining distance, negotiating in between, and moving closer, became the three negotiation positions of the final chapter: distancing, demotion, and radical processing. The other themes were written as continuous analyses without subtheme divisions, following the shape of their material rather than a uniform template. Second, not all codes entered a theme. Twenty-nine codes were set aside: the codes on game evaluation criteria, most of the codes on mixed-gender community interaction, which fell outside the analytical focus on empowerment, and three codes suspended as unresolved.

## Appendix F: Glossary

| <b>Term</b>                    | <b>Definition</b>                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Context in this thesis</b>                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>RPG (Role-Playing Game)</b> | A game genre in which players typically control a character through a narrative world, often involving exploration, progression, decision-making, and character development. | Most games discussed in this thesis are RPGs, although some adjacent narrative-driven genres are also included. |
| <b>Single-player game</b>      | A game designed primarily for one player, without requiring direct interaction with other players during play.                                                               | The thesis focuses on narrative-driven single-player games with fixed male protagonists.                        |
| <b>Fixed male protagonist</b>  | A predefined male main character whose gender and core identity cannot be changed by the player.                                                                             | This is the central structural feature of the games examined in the thesis.                                     |
| <b>Male-protagonist game</b>   | An umbrella term used in this thesis for narrative-driven single-player games organized around a fixed male protagonist.                                                     | Used throughout the thesis to refer collectively to the games in the study.                                     |
| <b>Cross-gender play</b>       | Playing through or controlling a character whose gender differs                                                                                                              | Used to discuss women players                                                                                   |

|                                                                |                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                | from that of the player.                                                                                                          | acting through male protagonists.                                                 |
| <b>Avatar</b>                                                  | A playable or controllable character through which a player acts in a game world.                                                 | Used in the literature on player-character relationships and identification.      |
| <b>Hardcore gamer</b>                                          | A culturally loaded label commonly associated with highly committed gaming identities and historically masculine gaming norms.    | Used in the literature on gendered gaming culture and the “hegemony of play.”     |
| <b>Otome game</b>                                              | A story-focused game genre primarily marketed to women, usually featuring a female protagonist and multiple male romance options. | Used as a contrast to the fixed male-protagonist games examined in this thesis.   |
| <b>MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)</b>                  | A multiplayer game genre in which teams compete using characters with distinct abilities, typically in short matches.             | Appears in background discussion of game genres and women’s gaming participation. |
| <b>MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game)</b> | An online role-playing game in which large numbers of players share a persistent game world.                                      | Appears in prior research on player motivations and gender differences.           |

|                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>“Mo” (嬷)</b>                     | A Chinese online fan-culture expression referring to an intensely affective, possessive, and often transformative way of engaging with a fictional character. It can involve selecting, imagining, modifying, or rewriting aspects of the character according to fans’ own desires and aesthetics. | Used in Theme One to describe how some women players actively reshape male protagonists through fan practices such as mods and fan fiction. |
| <b>“Women hold up half the sky”</b> | A well-known slogan associated with socialist-era Chinese gender equality discourse.                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Used to contextualize state narratives of women’s equality in China.                                                                        |
| <b>“Inciting gender antagonism”</b> | A phrase used in Chinese online governance and public discourse to criticize or regulate content framed as intensifying conflict between men and women.                                                                                                                                            | Relevant to the constraints surrounding public feminist expression in China.                                                                |
| <b>Douban (豆瓣)</b>                  | A Chinese social networking and cultural discussion platform centered on books, films, music, interest groups, and user communities.                                                                                                                                                               | Appears in the thesis as a space where women players discuss games, gender, and related                                                     |

|                          |                                                                                                                  |                                                                                        |
|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                          |                                                                                                                  | issues, including dedicated female-player communities.                                 |
| <b>Xiaohongshu (小红书)</b> | A Chinese social media and lifestyle-sharing platform based largely on user-generated posts and recommendations. | Used as one of the main recruitment channels for interview participants in this study. |

## **Appendix G: Recruitment Advertisement**

The following recruitment advertisement was posted on Xiaohongshu in Chinese. The original Chinese version is presented first, followed by an English translation.

### **Original Chinese Version**

#### **诚招访谈对象 | 女玩家 × 男主角单机游戏**

大家好！我是一名性别研究的研究生，正在进行毕业论文研究。

我想探讨的是：当女性玩家在单机游戏里操控一个男性主角去战斗、探索、做决定的时候，这种体验对她们意味着什么，又如何映射到她们的现实生活中。

如果你也是一个玩男性主角单机游戏的女生，我非常希望能和你聊聊你的游戏体验和现实生活。

#### **希望你：**

- 自我认同为女性，年满 18 岁及以上
- 完整通关过至少一款男性主角的单机游戏（如《巫师》《荒野大镖客 2》《最终幻想》《仙剑》《古剑》《极乐迪斯科》等）
- 有一年以上的游戏经历

#### **访谈详情：**

- 形式：线上一对一访谈（腾讯会议或 Zoom）
- 时长：约 45–60 分钟
- 访谈将录音，录音仅用于学术研究，完全匿名处理
- 访谈开始前将提供知情同意书

### **报名方式：**

由于我需要根据报名信息进行样本筛选，有意参与的朋友请在联系时附上以下信息：

1. 玩过哪些男主角单机游戏，大概玩了多少年
2. 目前的身份（学生/在职/其他）、是否有家庭照护责任

### **我想和你聊什么：**

你在游戏里的体验和感受，你怎么看待男性主角这件事，你的日常生活、你面对的压力和选择，游戏和你的现实生活之间有没有什么联系等。

**联系方式：** 可后台私信我

感兴趣的话欢迎联系我，也欢迎转发给身边可能感兴趣的朋友！

非常感谢点进帖子的大家！

### **English Translation**

#### **Interview Participants Wanted | Women Players × Male-Protagonist Single-Player Games**

Hello! I am a graduate student in gender studies currently conducting research for my master's thesis.

I am interested in exploring what it means for women players to control a male protagonist in single-player games—to fight, explore, and make decisions through him—and how these experiences may relate to their everyday lives.

If you are a woman who plays single-player games with male protagonists, I would very much like to talk with you about your gaming experiences and everyday life.

#### **You are invited to participate if you:**

- Self-identify as a woman and are aged 18 or above

- Have completed at least one single-player game with a male protagonist, such as *The Witcher*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Final Fantasy*, *Chinese Paladin*, *Gujian*, or *Disco Elysium*
- Have at least one year of gaming experience

**Interview details:**

- Format: One-to-one online interview via Tencent Meeting or Zoom
- Duration: Approximately 45–60 minutes
- The interview will be audio-recorded. Recordings will be used only for academic research and all data will be anonymized
- An informed consent form will be provided before the interview

**How to participate:**

Because participants will be selected based on the information provided at recruitment, please include the following when contacting me:

1. Which male-protagonist single-player games you have played and approximately how many years you have been playing games
2. Your current situation (student/employed/other) and whether you have any family caregiving responsibilities

**What I would like to talk with you about:**

Your experiences and feelings while playing games, how you view playing through a male protagonist, your everyday life, the pressures and choices you face, and whether you see any connections between gaming and your life outside the game.

**Contact:** Please contact me through a private message on Xiaohongshu.

If you are interested, please feel free to contact me. You are also welcome to share this post with anyone who might be interested.

Thank you very much for reading!