The representation of Chinese traditional death and life values in

Chinese horror video games

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Master's Thesis

June 2024

Word Count: 20183

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid growth of the video game industry, various genres of video games have developed and gained popularity among players. Horror video games, as one of the genres, have become more and more popular in recent years. Additionally, the representation of cultural heritage in video games has been widely applied in the game industry as can be perceived in video games such as *Assassin's Creed*. Thus, it is important to explore this topic. From a cultural perspective, the Chinese traditional culture is regarded as a cultural heritage. Hence, it is valuable to study the way in which it is represented in video games and investigate how it serves as a new approach to developing and preserving cultural heritage. The concept of "Chinese horror", a type of horror that introduces traditional Chinese concepts and objects in horror texts, has attracted more and more of the younger generation. From the aspects of horror video games and cultural heritage, the paper focused the research question: *The representation of Chinese traditional death and life values in Chinese horror video games*. After selecting, the sample of this study is composed by six Chinese horror video games. Textual analysis was applied as the research method in the qualitative research to extract texts from the selected horror video games and analyze data in a systematic avenue. Four themes were identified as findings of the study by analyzing. The first theme is *eliciting emotional reaction through shared cultural background*, discussing how Chinese horror video games apply include representations of Chinese traditional culture-related life and death to stimulate players' emotions. The second theme is *arousing suspense and tension with cultural elements*, focusing on how cultural elements can elicit player's suspense and tension when interacting with the elements. The third theme is *exploring unknown past events*, demonstrating how Chinese horror video games merge traditional supernatural powers and induce players to explore past events. The last theme is *reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication*, showcasing how Chinese horror videos use traditional life and death values as a mirror to link reality and bring the game's impact to players out of the game. In conclusion, the use of Chinese traditional death and life values in horror games is provided as both physical and psychological horror that resonates with players' cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the values also play a role in connecting the players' lives and the video game, carrying the gaming experience beyond the virtual realm, reinforcing the influence of traditional concepts.

KEYWORDS: *Video game, Cultural heritage, Chinese traditional death and life value, Thematic analysis*

Acknowledgement

Two years ago, I came to the Netherlands alone. With the excitement of living in a new country and a new university, I started my master's degree study at Erasmus University Rotterdam. When I looked back from the beginning, I could hardly imagine that I could finish my master's program in time. The teaching mode and speed was completely a new thing to me, I vividly remember that in the first semester, I failed the very first group assignment and I felt super struggled with writing the first individual assignment even though it was just a hundred-words research idea. There were how many times I told myself I wanted to quit; there were how many times I pulled myself up, saying that I should believe and take responsibility for my choice. With joy and tears, I am proud of myself that I am going to finish the master's.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to all those who have supported and guided me throughout the completion of this thesis. Firstly, I thank my supervisor, Teresa de la Hera, for her patience and encouragement, invaluable support, guidance, and insightful feedback while writing this thesis. I am also deeply grateful for the support from my family and friends in China; although we could not meet each other in person, our hearts always bond us together. Lastly, I sincerely thank Sira for her endless encouragement and understanding during these past nine months. I am grateful to have such warm and kind people who have accomplished this journey with me.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research question

At the end of 2023, the worldwide market for video games reached a total of $184.0 billion in revenue (Newzoo, 2024, para 5), and it is expected to grow at an annual rate of 8.76% between 2024 and 2027 (Statista, 2024, para 1). In a global comparison, China is projected to generate the most revenue in the video game market, with US$94,5 million in 2024 (Statista, 2024, para 1). The growing trend shows that the Chinese video game market has great development potential.

As one of the forms of art (Atkinson & Parsayi, 2020, p. 520; Smuts, 2016, p. 12), video games, much like other art forms, serve as mediums for conveying cultural values and narratives, influencing players to connect with specific cultural elements or historical contexts (Chen, 2013, p. 422; Balela & Mundy, 2015, p. 7). Consequently, video games have the space to develop and become the medium to present and preserve culture. Some game developers indicated that to recreate historical scenes in video games, they referred to the literature of the scholars of that time and cooperated with historians to be accurate and creative while respecting the culture and providing players with the most vivid and living experience (D'Agostino, 2023, para 14). Through their interactive nature, video games connect players and cultures, offer players an immersive experience to shape their perspectives and identities, and foster understanding of diverse cultures.

Horror video games frequently incorporate survival and death as central elements, leveraging blood, monsters, and violence to heighten immersion and gameplay. Within this genre, certain survival and death motifs are intertwined with cultural themes, as exemplified in *Fatal Frame* (Tecmo, Ltd., 2001), where ghosts drawn from Buddhism and indigenous Shinto beliefs serve as antagonists (Pruett, 2010, p. 5). Despite these cultural connections, the components are seldom discussed from an academic perspective to explore whether these game components reflect or resonate with cultural concepts such as death and life values.

When it comes to Chinese horror video games, although they are relatively niche among the various genres, their popularity cannot be neglected. For instance, a new Chinese horror video game, *Laughing to Die* (Dajili, 2024), within 20 days after release on Steam, has received more than 1200 reviews, with 95% of them being positive reviews. Chinese horror video games are expected to have greater growth potential, firstly, with the development of new techniques such as Visual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR), horror games can be expected to be more immersive, more realistic, and more terrifying than ever before (Reed, 2023, para 15). Secondly, thanks to the rise of the live-streaming industry, horror games have gained popularity as they are perfect for creating excitement and an atmosphere that attracts audiences (Liu, 2023, para 8). Supported by advanced technologies and the upgrowing audience base of live-streaming, horror video games attract more players and viewers to pay attention.

Motivated by the promising trajectory of the video game industry, particularly within horror games, this research delved into the distinct features of such games and the existing research void, exploring how death and life values are represented within horror video games. By adopting a

Chinese perspective and focusing on the Chinese context, the study examined how Chinese traditional beliefs surrounding death and life are depicted in Chinese horror video games, thus the research question was formed:

The representation of Chinese traditional death and life values in Chinese horror video games

1.2 Academic relevance

From an academic perspective, cultural heritage plays a crucial role in nation-building and history preservation, it can be seen as the repository of previous human experience and practices passed down from generation to generation (Balela & Mundy, 2015, p. 3). The investigation into the representation of cultural heritage in digital form is ongoing, researchers are actively engaged in studying the representation of cultural heritage through various digital initiatives. Portalés et al.'s (2018, p. 1) study showed that digital games could be used to represent cultural heritage in museums. This means that digital games have already been used successfully to preserve cultural heritage and that digital games can be seen as a sustainable and innovative information systems tool to visualize the historical processes and evolution of heritages. With the significant consumer base of video games, video games emerge as a promising platform for effectively representing and safeguarding cultural heritage, helping users consume representations of heritage and cultural identity (Zeiler & Thomas, 2020, p. 266). Scholars have discovered the effect of applying cultural-related elements in video games as they have found that they can be used to promote educational values and play a role in enacting theories on cultural pluralism (Camuñas-García et al., 2023, p. 2; Reyes-De-Cózar et al., 2022, p. 4; Mortara et al., 2014, p. 323). The entertainment aspect of video games allows for diverse depictions of cultural heritage, offering a more accessible means for the public to engage with it without necessarily adhering strictly to historical accuracy (Cole, 2022, p. 917; De Wildt & Aupers, 2020, p. 326). Regarding the reasons mentioned, there is significant value in exploring how cultural heritage is portrayed in video games.

Chinese life and death are traditional values and one of the cultural heritage of the Chinese nation, deeply ingrained in the nation's cultural identity, spanning from ancient times to the present day. Nevertheless, Chinese people do not like to discuss death openly in public as they regard it as a cultural taboo (Lou & Liu, 2020, p. 639). Consequently, compared with discussing life and death in the scenario of healthcare and ancient theory explanation (Chen et al., 2017, p. 1389; Fraser, 2013, p. 411), there is a small scale of study interpreting the life and death values from a cultural perspective. Life and death values are mentioned in the research by Jia (2014, p. 69) and Bachner (2018, p. 1145), whereas their study focuses on cultural text rather than directly examining these values. This article discussed this life and death openly from an academic perspective in an exploratory way, contributing to the identification and expansion of Chinese cultural heritage in digital form. Moreover, despite existing research exploring the application of Chinese culture in horror contexts, particularly in film studies (Bachner, 2018, p. 1145; Cahill, 2011, p. 35), there is a noticeable dearth

of literature specifically delving into the representation of Chinese cultural heritage in the context of horror video games. Therefore, this study offers valuable insight into a domain that remains relatively unexplored in current academic discussions, connecting Chinese traditional life and death values to digital games and providing guidance for research on other types of media presentations on the concept of life and death.

1.3 Social relevance

For social relevance, horror video games rank as the third favorite genre among GenZ, which has seen a surge in popularity in the Asian market (Williams, 2023, para 23). Chinese horror video games have gained considerable attention worldwide. For example, the mobile survival horror game *Identity V* (Netease, 2018) which employs a captivating horror art style that echoes dark storybook illustrations, ranked horror games that earned the most from global player spending in 2023 (Knezovic, 2024, para 8), proving the popularity of the game. The flourishing global popularity of Chinese horror video games, coupled with the thriving video games market, suggests great potential for developing Chinese horror video games. Research in this area can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for conveying Chinese culture to a global audience through horror digital games, fostering cross-cultural understanding.

A new term "Chinese horror" has been coined to characterise horror texts that strategically incorporate elements of Chinese traditional culture. These stories create eerie atmospheres that strongly connect with audiences by using common cultural themes and long-standing beliefs. They access a shared unconscious mind based on traditional Chinese culture, provoking instinctive responses to common situations, intensifying feelings of fear and discomfort (Gcore, 2022, para 17). Among the various horror texts, horror video games can be regarded as a successful text that can deliver the essence of Chinese horror as they have proven to have the capacity to capture attention within China and among non-Chinese audiences in recent years (Renney, 2023, para 5), showing that the quality of Chinese horror games is recognized by players and industry insiders. For example, *Firework* (Shiying Studio, 2021) has received an impressive 95.97% rating, securing the 9th highest rating among horror games on Steam (Steam DB, n.d.). Chinese critics review the game as a horror and suspense story with a tragic core created using Chinese horror movies and traditional cultural elements (Cowlevel, 2021, para 8-18). In the meantime, non-Chinese video game critics also paid attention to the game, saying it is worth trying (Bell, 2022, para 6). Given China's rich historical and cultural background, these horror video games, including *Firework,* often draw inspiration from traditional cultures, either tangible and intangible, such as religious rituals, folklore, funerals, and marriages, they are the important cultural heritages that reflect enduring Chinese culture. Examining Chinese horror video games through the lens of cultural heritage preservation not only expands the discourse surrounding these games but also integrates them into cultural studies, offering valuable insights into the intersections of culture, technology and entertainment, driving innovation within the

gaming industry. Moreover, it empowers gamers to discern the existential themes inherent in these games and release their fear of discussing life and death.

1.4 Chapter overview

This paper is structured into five cohesive parts. This is accompanied by an introduction, where the initial chapter explains the motivating factors behind undertaking this study, delving into the academic and societal significance of the research, and a concise outline of the research methodology and its implications. Moving forward, the second chapter provides an overview of previous research pertaining to three fundamental concepts central to this study: horror video games, cultural heritage representation in video games, and Chinese traditional death and life values. Through a critical examination of existing literature, these concepts serve to elaborate on the arguments and research gaps of the current study. The concepts also underscored the research's importance and value, while constructing a theoretical framework to steer the overall investigation. Chapter Three offers a detailed exposition of the research methodology, including a thorough description of the thematic analysis approach, the rationale behind selecting six specific horror video games and synopses of the narratives of each of the games, the process of data collection and analysis, and the operationalization of theories discussed in the preceding chapter. The fourth chapter provided a detailed explanation of the analysis results of this research, which were divided into four themes. Accompanied by an illustration of the analysis process through figures, the collected data interpretation was grounded in integrated selective codes, ultimately leading to research conclusions. The fifth chapter summarized the findings of the study, evaluating the appropriateness of the research methodology and applied theories. Furthermore, the chapter deliberated on the limitations encountered during the study and delineated avenues for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter has synthesized theories from three distinct academic domains: *the horror video game* (2.1), *cultural heritage representation in video game* (2.2) and *Chinese traditional death and life values* (2.3). The sub-chapter *the horror video game* (2.1) delved into the definition of the term "horror video games" and how horror texts evolved from spoken tales to various media texts. The sub-chapter also highlighted the current research revolves around players' emotional responses toward horror video games and the integration of new technologies. By elaborating on the current academic research, the sub-chapter uncovered the study's scarce perspective on Chinese horror video games, emphasizing the value of introducing Chinese horror video games into the field. The sub-chapter *cultural heritage representation in video game* (2.2) showcased the definition of cultural heritage and how digital games combine tangible and intangible cultural heritages into games, using games as comprehensive platforms for the preservation and representation of cultural heritage. This sub-chapter also engaged with the scholarly debate over the representation of cultural heritage in commercial versus serious video games. Following this line, this paper clarified that this study focuses on commercial video games to explore the broader representation of cultural heritage rather than precise accuracy. Revolving around Confucianism, Buddhism Taoism (Daoism) and folklore in China, Sub-chapter *Chinese traditional death and life values* (2.3) extract the opinions of death and life shown in the three main religions and Chinese folklore, applying Chinese traditional life and death thoughts into practical context. Furthermore, the sub-chapter discussed the current research in the field of life and death, which turned out to be relatively concentrated on end-life healthcare research. When talking about Chinese traditional death and life values through the lens of cultural studies, this sub-chapter elaborated on how death and life values are represented and understood in movies. Consequentially, this sub-chapter stresses the importance of introducing the discussion of Chinese traditional life and death values into new fields, video games, offering the younger generation an approachable tunnel to understand not only life and death but also Chinese traditional culture.

The integration of theories from three academic fields are organically connected to the research question. The horror video game and Chinese traditional death and life values directly align with the research focus. Since Chinese traditional death and life values are Chinese cultural heritage, cultural heritage representation in video game provided the theoretical support and former cases of how cultural heritages are displayed in video games, showing the feasibility of this study. By identifying gaps in current research across these three fields, this study highlights the under-explored area of Chinese horror video games and the representation of death and life values in video games, underscoring the importance and potential impact of this research.

2.1 The horror video game

There is no clear definition of horror video games as various scholars stress differing perspectives. Kirkland (2009, p. 63) suggests that horror games are shaped by their inherited gameplay through the

aspects of narrative, representation, and characterization to constitute the definition and substance of the genre. Taylor (2009, p. 49) argues that many games labeled as horror may not effectively evoke fear, as classifications often prioritize aesthetic or narrative elements over the ability to instill genuine terror in players. Perron (2005, p. 14) aligns with the statement and delves into the concept of horror video games in the psychological aspect, contending that true horror games should induce fear in players, prompting them to react to the virtual environment. Christopher and Leuszler stress the diversification of horror video games, criticizing previous studies for predominantly focusing on survival horror games, which they believe merely replicate horror narrative tropes within a survival-focused framework. They propose the concept of "art-horror," drawing from horror cinema, to emphasize the aesthetic dimensions of horror games (Christopher & Leuszler, 2022, p. 212). Thus, horror games achieve their impact by immersing players in unique narratives and authentic visuals, effectively transferring the fear experienced by characters to the player's own psyche (Christopher & Leuszler, 2022, p. 211).

Impressively, I found the definition of horror video games is rather the definition of survival horror games since the term is frequently employed in the ongoing discourse surrounding horror video games, even representing the whole genre because of its distinctive feature. This inclusion might stem from the pivotal role played by The *Resident Evil* series (Capcom, 1996) in establishing the survival horror genre, paving the way for the global popularity of horror video games (Taylor, 2009, p. 47). However, it is tricky that despite survival horror games overgeneralizing the whole genre of horror video games, when discussing horror games, I think we cannot avoid the topic of survival horror because it is too representative. Simultaneously, although Christopher and Leuszler argued the research's overemphasis on survival horror video games, they still inevitably chose survival horror video games as some of their cases (Christopher & Leuszler, 2022, p. 221). Survival horror games typically emphasize combat mechanics in gameplay, sometimes incorporating puzzle-solving elements (Therrien, 2009, p. 34). However, as horror video games have evolved, it has become evident that equating them solely with survival horror is overly simplistic. Contemporary horror video games also emphasize the design of narrative immersion and player experience over combat mechanics. For example, the *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato, 2017) utilizes visual novel mechanics to craft psychological horror, immersing players in the narrative to intensify the sense of dread (Neri, 2018, p. 4).

Given the aforementioned studies, it is essential to realize that the definition of horror video games remains vague and over-indicated in using the definition of survival horror video games to describe horror video games overly. I agree with the definition by Perron and Taylor and the art horror proposed by Christopher and Leuszler, emphasizing the importance of the aesthetic and psychological experience that horror video games bring to players. Although character depiction and narrative are necessary for horror games, psychological reaction and visual impulsion are more prioritised factors that can attract players to play horror video games than characters and narrative.

Considering the development of Chinese horror games is still in its early stages, they might not achieve high quality in visual technology. In addition, As Christopher and Leuszler indicate, the genre of horror video games should not be limited to survival horror video games. Hence, the term horror video games in this study is defined as video games that can elicit players' fear, regardless of the degree of fear and the form of the presentation of horror elements.

The evolution of horror as a theme has traversed a significant span, permeating various mediums from spoken tales of folklore to the realms of literature, film, and beyond (Gantz, 2019, p. 31). Among these diverse forms of expression, horror video games emerge as a noteworthy medium, sharing commonalities with traditional horror narratives while also carving out their own distinct characteristics. Much like their cinematic counterparts, horror video games draw upon frameworks derived from both film and literature, weaving together visual and textual elements to evoke fear and suspense (Kirkland, 2011, p. 25). In crafting their chilling atmospheres, horror video games employ a repertoire of familiar tropes and motifs, including malevolent humans, grotesque creatures, and supernatural forces, to engender authentic visual and auditory experiences (Martin, 2019, p. 4). The psychological impact of horror video games mirrors that of other media forms, tapping into shared neurobiological and physiological mechanisms to evoke fear and uncertainty within players (Nummenmaa, 2021, p. 4). When it comes to the differences between horror video games with other horror texts, Kirkland (2011, p. 25) suggests horror video games also possess unique attributes, such as fragmented narratives that compel players to piece together the story, distinguishing them from the more linear structures found in Gothic fiction and horror cinema. Researchers also argued that compared to the movies providing multiple gazes and the flexible roles swinging between sadistic and masochistic identifications of audiences, horror games "typically reduce the plurality of gazes available, focusing on direct first- or third-person identification with the avatar (Habel & Kooyman, 2013, p. 4) ". Yet, where horror video games truly diverge from their counterparts lies in their interactive nature. Unlike the passive experience movies serve, specific agency mechanics allow players to experience between subjection to the game world and autonomy and power over the environment (Habel & Kooyman, 2013, p. 11). Audiences in video games do not simply identify with a certain existing character but occupy the dual identity of player-character as they are the ones who can control their action and lead the processes of the game.

Current research on horror video games primarily focuses on two key aspects: players' emotional responses and the integration of new technologies. Scholars have delved into the psychological nuances of players, revealing that the uncertainties inherent in horror games can evoke negative emotions, potentially impacting their overall experience and engagement (Gowler & Iacovides, 2019, p. 11). Meanwhile, Maureira et al. (2015, p. 709) found that subliminal priming of players cannot be used to influence players' sentiments in horror games, indicating that gamers' negative feelings are most likely from what they encounter during game playing. I side with Gowler and Iacovides' opinion and argue that the subconscious could pique players' emotions by embedding

cultural backgrounds that players recognize and are familiar with in digital games. However, the realm of horror gaming is not solely characterized by negative emotions. Clasen et al. (2020, p. 226) point out that these games can elicit positive emotions, particularly among players familiar with the horror genre, who seek thrill or intellectual challenges. Going along with Clasen et al., I believe horror video games have the potential to evoke players' sentiments such as empathy, sorrow and joy. Moreover, the level of emotional arousal is intricately tied to players' immersion in the game. Research indicates that individuals with high levels of immersion, self-efficacy, and fear tend to derive greater enjoyment from horror gaming experiences (Lemmens et al., 2021, p. 232; Lin et al., 2017, p. 3237). Gender and personal beliefs also play significant roles in shaping players' experiences with horror video games. Studies suggest that there's a gender disparity, with male gamers exhibiting a stronger preference for frightening material and expressing greater enjoyment in playing such games compared to their female counterparts (Clasen et al., 2020, p. 224; Lynch & Martins, 2015, p. 313). Moreover, individuals with a pronounced belief in the paranormal often seek out horror media featuring supernatural elements, while those with weaker paranormal beliefs lean towards content grounded in natural horror (Clasen et al., 2020, p. 213).

In the realm of technology, scholars are increasingly exploring the impact of virtual reality (VR) on horror gaming experiences. Studies delve into how VR can heighten fear responses, with findings revealing that players experience greater fear when they perceive the events in the virtual world as plausible rather than merely feeling present in a virtual environment (Lin, 2017, p. 3555). With immersive environments and intensified emotional engagement, VR horror games offer players a more visceral experience than traditional gaming formats (Lin et al., 2017, p. 3237). Therefore, VR horror video games provide a higher sense of immersion and are more effective in intensifying the emotional experience (Peng et al., 2019, p. 5; Lemmens et al., 2021, p. 231). Interestingly, gender differences persist even in VR environments, with female players often exhibiting heightened sensitivity to fear stimuli, particularly in dark settings. They tend to employ coping strategies such as self-talk and distraction more frequently than male players (Lin, 2017, p. 356; Zhang et al. 2023, p. 5) However, research suggests that this heightened sensitivity does not equate to a lower tolerance for fear among women, as evidenced by contrary findings (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 5). Besides the two themes of horror video game research, scholars also explore broader themes within horror gaming research. They examine how frameworks developed for analyzing horror games can be applied to understand unexpected player reactions in non-horror games (Brown & Marklund, 2015, p.1). Additionally, there's a growing interest in the cultural implications of horror gaming, with scholars like Christopher and Leuszler (2022, p. 363) debating whether player immersion in horror games reflects broader ideological identities.

While significant research has contributed to the academic understanding of horror video games, a notable gap persists in connecting these games with traditional cultural heritage. Piscard (2009, p. 107) studied the application of traditional Japanese culture in the context of horror texts,

and indicates that Japanese horror movies use folklore, ghost stories, and supernatural myths combined with the anxiety of Japanese society to evoke psychological creepiness, showing the success of incorporating traditional culture in horror texts. However, it is important to note that Piscard's study primarily addressed the challenges of integrating cultural elements in Japanese horror games within the global commercial market, rather than solely focusing on the representation of traditional culture (Piscard, 2009). Moreover, existing discussions predominantly reflect Western perspectives, and I argue that academic studies overlook the Asian viewpoint. Therefore, new research is urgently needed to bridge these academic gaps and offer an Eastern perspective within the realm of horror video game studies.

2.2 Cultural heritage representation in video game

Culture encompasses the rich tapestry of norms, traditions, beliefs, and values passed down through generations, serving as a conduit for understanding a society's distinct identity and heritage (Balela & Mundy, 2015, p. 3; Pyae, 2018, p. 106). This cultural legacy, comprising both tangible artifacts like architecture and intangible elements such as customs and folklore, plays a pivotal role in shaping national identity (Balela & Mundy, 2015, p. 3). Anthropology delineates cultural heritage into tangible forms like artifacts and intangible aspects like social customs, highlighting their significance in preserving a society's essence (Balela & Mundy, 2015, p. 3). Besides tangible heritages, intangible cultural heritages such as social are also cultural attributes that can not be neglected, their importance can be different from one cultural society to another (Pyae, 2018, p. 113). Scholars are concerned that globalization allows individuals to be exposed to different cultures, which might jeopardize the preservation of a particular culture's uniqueness (Cosovi´c & Ramic-Brki´c, 2020, p. 61). To counteract this threat and ensure the preservation of cultural heritage, scholars are increasingly turning to digital means. Windhager et al. (2018, p. 2312) have shown that current information visualization technologies can assist in the visualization of tangible cultural heritages. Nevertheless, they also pointed out the challenge that there is a remarkable shortage of interfaces enabling access to intangible objects or practices (Windhager et al., 2018, p. 2322). Along with Windhager et al., I believe intangible cultural assets also need to be focused on.

In response, digital games emerge as a promising avenue for safeguarding both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, offering a comprehensive platform for their preservation. According to the classification of video games by Majewski (2015, p. 5), the realm of study of the application of cultural heritage in digital games distinguishly focuses on serious games and commercial games. Serious video games are designed for educational purposes, with the objective of supporting the audiences in learning through a fun and interactive experience (Machidon et al., 2018, p. 255; Zainal et al., 2011, p. 463), motivating further engagement and likability toward cultural heritage (Tzima et al., 2020, p. 2). Scholars explore how serious video games, often employing virtual reality, can enrich players' understanding of cultural heritage, despite challenges like user engagement and immersion (Machidon et al., 2018, p. 256). Furthermore, serious games have practical applications

within museum contexts. Mortara et al. (2014, p. 324) suggested that serious games enable emotional connections to cultural heritage, crucial for raising awareness about heritage preservation, both tangible and intangible.

There are relevant discussions on how to apply serious game resources for education and training. Ćosović and Brkić (2019, p. 2) aligned with the previous research, pointing out that suggest that games can benefit children and the elderly alike, promoting knowledge acquisition and cognitive health through engaging educational experiences. By observing the players' outcomes of a jigsaw puzzle game in recognizing the patterns and subjects of ancient Chinese bronze mirrors, researchers reported that serious video games have advantages in knowledge learning, retaining and dissemination (Ye et al., 2020, p. 313). Additionally, Grammatikopoulou et al. (2018, p. 446) explore the potential of body-motion-based interactive games in preserving intangible cultural heritage, hinting at avenues such as dance and drama within the digital gaming area. However, as serious digital games aim for educational value and are rather applied as by-products in museums, thus the audience and the use scenario are to some extent limited compared to commercial video games. Moreover, according to Mortara et al. (2014, p. 321), the visual presentation of chosen serious video games is relatively simple, and I argue it is challenging to engage players in the context of horror video games. Consequently, this study is focusing on commercial horror video games.

Commercial video games share the commonalities of serious video games as they also have considerable educational value. Previous case studies on the *Civilization* series (Sid Meier, 1991) have proved that commercial video games involve comprehensive cultural heritage and can be applied as educational tools for teaching history and fostering connections with cultural values (Pagnotti & Russell, 2012, p. 44; Squire et al., 2008, p. 247). By analyzing various genres of commercial video games, researchers concluded commercial video games can develop students' knowledge and abilities (Reyes-De-Cózar et al., 2022, p. 13). Since commercial video games are more market-focused and public-oriented than serious games Majewski (2015, p. 5), meaning that achieving complete and precise cultural representation might not be their primary goal. Champion (2020, p. 19) underscores the insufficient exploration of cultural heritage's significance in commercial video games, highlighting a lack of awareness regarding the fragility of heritage and the importance of cultural preservation. Along this line, Bird (2021) discussed the case of Native Americans, sharply pointing out that the fictional histories in commercial games such as *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014) could "lead to problems of historical entrapment, erasure, fictionalization, and dispossession, when done incorrectly and without the input or best interest of the Indigenous groups being represented in mind (Bird, 2021, p. 255). "

However, Copplestone's research (2016, p. 432) found that while cultural-heritage practitioners emphasize the importance of accuracy in representing cultural heritage, this viewpoint contrasts with that of video game developers and players. This divide seems largely attributable to differences in how these groups engage with and perceive cultural heritage and their familiarity with

the medium of video games (Copplestone, 2016, p. 434). As a video game player myself, I am not opposed to the imprecise expression of cultural heritage in video games as I could rank the entertainment of the games higher. Other scholars argue the inaccuracy of cultural heritage representation in commercial video games does not change the original value of a particular culture and does away with differences among various cultures. Rollinger (2020, p. 39) suggests that through cultural mashups, players can actively participate in and even reinterpret historical events within the context of a game. This flattening of cultural elements in video games can enhance their accessibility and encourage players to craft their own narratives while acknowledging the fragmented nature of cultural heritage (Cole, 2022, p. 926). Simultaneously, De Wildt and Aupers (2020, p. 326) highlight the vital role that commercial digital games play in enacting theories on religious pluralism and cultural heritage representation, indicating how these games can facilitate the expression of eclectic religious practices. Considering the commercial and genre features of selected horror video games, this study did not aim to pay much attention to the accurate presentation but to the representation of a bigger picture of cultural heritage.

Moreover, the literature overview by Cerezo-Pizarro et al. (2023, p. 9) intuitively illustrated that the current publications on cultural heritage in video games are centralized in Western countries, marking a similar problem in the academic field of horror video games. Additionally, the study about horror video games only took 2% of the total genre of relevant research (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023, p.10). Hence, due to the remarkable deficiency of cultural heritage study in horror video games, I believe investigating cultural heritage representation in video games from an Asian perspective provides fresh angles to this research area. Further, the study helped to identify the intangible information and tangible objects or discourses representative of Chinese traditional death and life values in horror video games. Moreover, the relative neglect of horror video games within academic discourse served as an impetus for this research endeavor. Consequently, the study not only sheds light on cultural heritage representation but also enriches the understanding of horror video games within the broader context of academic inquiry.

2.3 Chinese traditional death and life values

The traditional Chinese values are deeply ingrained in the Chinese nation due to their enduring culture spanning over four millennia, these values continue to shape the perspectives of individuals on matters of life and death (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 153). As a result, the Chinese death and life values, as one of the traditional values, have significant cultural value and can be considered as cultural heritage. Normally, the values of death and life are mainly based on rituals and various religions (philosophies). Given China's broad land area and the characteristics of a multi-ethnic country, the practices of rituals have nuanced differences across different provinces and ethnic groups (Yin et al., 2020, p. 1202). However, most of the core of the ceremony is based on traditional religious cultures, which is the second base mentioned above, that is, the three religions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. For Confucianism, Zhang (1993, p. 14) underscores the enduring influence of filial piety

within Confucian culture, evident in rituals documented in classical texts like the *Book of Rites (Liji)*, which remains pivotal in East Asian ritual theory (Puett, 2015, p. 543). The ritual practices related to values of life and death, especially weddings and funerals, are deeply rooted in Confucian philosophy. Hsu et al. (2009, p. 155) identified the significance of ancestor worship among Chinese individuals, as they hold the belief that the souls of deceased individuals persist on earth, and any dissatisfaction from ancestors can result in misfortune for both the immediate family and the entire family lineage. It is thought that ancestors influence a family's prosperity, well-being, and achievements, if a family experiences tragedy, it might be linked to the ancestors' dissatisfaction (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 155). Therefore, funerals are regarded as a significant ceremony that demonstrates respect and filial reverence towards ancestors. Moreover, Researchers have shown the process of the funeral, from bowing to the deceased and hitting the head, wailing and making a tablet for the death and enshrining the tablet (Chen, 2012, p. 1043; Puett, 2015, p. 545), symbolizing the values of filial piety, family collectivism, ethical order, and family continuity (Chen, 2012, p. 1048).

Simultaneously, the traditional wedding processes are also considered as one of the filial piety practices that follow Confucianism, as documented in the *Book of Rites* (Chen, 2023, p. 133). Cheng (2021, p. 136) states that one of the most serious kinds of being unfilial is not having any children, as expressed in the phrase "Among the three forms of unfilial deeds, the most serious is to have no offspring" (不孝有三，无后为大). Therefore, families are expecting children to get married soon and have offspring as a way to show their filial piety to older generations. Besides Confucianism advocating ancestor worship and extending filial piety, in terms of how to live a life, Confucianism advocates putting efforts into current life. Moreover, Confucianism advocates for active engagement in worldly affairs, rejecting notions of reincarnation (Wang, 2023, p. 9). Being proactive, facing life's challenges, and making continuous efforts are essential for achieving moral principles and self-improvement in this lifetime.

The intertwining of life and death values across the three major religions finds its roots in the ancient Chinese dynasties. Over time, current opinions of Confucianism have merged into Buddhism and Taoism, and the thoughts from Taoism have also merged into Buddhism and Confucianism. Both Confucianism and Taoism were promoted and sublimated by highly developed Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism (Chen, 2007, p. 39). Consequently, people often blend the principles of the three religions in their actions and beliefs. However, compared to the mainstream ideology status of Confucianism (Gao, 2020, p. 87), Taoism and Buddhism are less emphasized by Chinese civilization, consequently, their concepts are more often used interchangeably. For instance, when a family member passes away, families offer forty-nine days to wake the dead's spirit. Chinese people consider the seventh day as the deceased's spiritual return to the living world and regard the forty-ninth day as the day from death to reincarnation. During this period, the deceased experiences the pain of passing away every seven days. This tradition is said to delve from Taoism, as for the Taoists, the number seven is related to their belief that a human being has seven Pos (Cheung et al., 2006, p.

71). Three Hun and seven Po are the methods for Taoists to control life and death, preserving the body and spirit (Gao, 2019, p. 64). While scholars pointed out that the tradition also originates from Buddhism as Buddhists believe after the seven seven-day periods are over the destiny of the reincarnation of the spirit is determined (Cheung et al, 2006, p. 71).

While Taoism and Buddhism may be integrated in some activities, they maintain distinct perspectives on life and death values. The Taoist regards death as a natural part of the lifespan, emphasizing the relationship between life and death with Yin and Yang, advocating non-assertiveness, and gratefulness toward life (Lai, 2007, p. 334; Hsu et al., 2009, p. 156). Reversion is a key concept in Taoism, meaning that all things ultimately revert to their primordial, original tranquil state of equilibrium, the Tao itself. Taoism seek to transcend the ordinary world to experience the limitless freedom associated with Tao, which is seen as a form of immortality (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 157). Interestingly, the researcher proposed immortality also reflects people's fear of death, avoidance and attachment to life, hoping to obtain eternal life through practicing the art of immortality or becoming immortal (Wang, 2023, p. 136). Additionally, the utilisation of charm paper, Bagua, and the practice of ghost marriage are associated with Taoism (Topley, 2011, p. 102). Different from domestic religions, Buddhism was trickling into China around the middle of the Han dynasty, and understandings of death and life in Chinese Buddhism have combined with the original Buddhist teachings and Chinese indigenous philosophies such as filial piety and ancestor worship. Buddhism's fundamental principles include samsara, nirvana, and karma, emphasising the impermanence of existence and the release of egocentrism (Wang, 2023, p. 143). Buddhism teaches that all things in the world are interconnected, suggesting that the mental energy of a deceased individual does not cease with the body's death but instead transitions into a different form (Jing, 2006, p. 94) According to the Chinese Buddhism, the final thought a person has before death will impact their next reincarnation (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 163), highlighting the significance of building virtue and performing good deeds.

When it comes to academic research, by identifying, although studies in the field of life and death values are relatively scarce, the focus on the values can be distinctively perceived in the field of end-life healthcare and the attitude toward death from people in different age stages. Researchers studied the life-and-death attitudes of the elderly in southwestern China and their opinions of end-of-life care needs are in accordance with the Chinese culture, implying the importance of developing targeted communication strategies and care models (Lei et al., 2021, p. 62). Liu and Van Schalkwyk (2018, p. 273) investigated the death preparation mechanisms employed by elders living in a rural community in southern China. They aligned the former researches result that in more traditional and rural Chinese communities, there is no real fear of death but talking about death is considered by some as a social taboo that will bring bad luck or even death itself (Chan & Yau, 2010, p. 231; Liu & Van Schalkwyk, 2018, p. 271). Additionally, the village elderly participants believed that death is

natural, destined to happen and is a transition to an afterlife, so their death preparation aims to feel peace about their living, death and the afterlife (Liu & Van Schalkwyk, 2018, p. 277).

However, scholars argued that the current research results in China are mainly based on clinical samples and focus on elderly people or patients facing serious diseases, lacking the attitude collection for the younger generations (Wang et al., 2020, p. 60). The study by Wang et al. (2020, p. 70) discovered that compared to female university students, males were more likely to fear death, think of death as an escape or release from burdens, and avoid thinking about death altogether. From the studies mentioned above, death-related discussions are relatively taken seriously. These findings underscore a passive attitude toward death prevalent among Chinese people, influenced by traditional beliefs that deem death discussions improper. Additionally, when discussing the view of death, the value of life is constantly ignored. To sum up the studies related to death above, I propose that a new perspective of research on death is needed to discuss death and life in a relatively light approach and provide younger generations with a space where they can openly discuss death and life.

When extending the academic research scope to cultural study, relevant discussion of life values can be captured in Chinese movie research. Research by Jia (2014, p. 68) has shown the way in which the traditional cultural values orientation is presented in Chinese movies. For instance, influenced by Confucianism, movies stressed the importance of being benevolent and loving when taking action, as well as when living in the world one should obey the will of Heaven respect and love others, and share benefits, and thus will be rewarded (Jia, 2014, p. 69). Bachner (2018, p. 1144) described infants eating when doing a case study of a Hong Kong horror movie, implying the societal desire for eternal youth and immortality. However, it is important to note that value-related cultural studies are not directly connected to investigating the value application and representation. Jia's research focused on cultural values, including death and life values, but the topic is still relatively broad. In comparison, Bachner's study material is closer to this study, namely the cross-research of horror media text and cultural metaphors. Nevertheless, his attention is on the complex entanglement of cultural specificities and political relationships between China and Hong Kong, not aiming to examine the representation of death and life values in horror texts. As a result, a conclusion can be drawn that there is a considerable gap in death and life values research in the context of media text, not to mention the study in specific media forms and genres, that is, what I want to study, video games. Therefore, exploring these concepts within the context of video games would be intriguing and could address a current research need.

Last but not least, it is crucial to note that due to the extensive depth of rituals across these three religions, it is difficult to delve fully into their theories. Consequently, it is also challenging to introduce all relevant objects that can represent those religions in tangible practices. To investigate the aspects pertaining to Chinese traditional death and life values in a theoretical manner, this study was mainly guided by the systematic summarization of religion offered by the previous scholars mentioned above and added supplementary theories in the result part. The elements, both tangible

and intangible, relevant to the three religions and other ritual practices were clearly elaborated when identifying and analyzing the data in video games.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

This research utilized a qualitative research method that helps uncover how meaning-making and social arrangements reinforce one another (Brennen, 2021, p. 4). For one reason, this research focused on describing the presentation of Chinese traditional life and death values related elements in horror video games and how those elements deliver the traditional values to summarize a representation pattern. Thus, the research was descriptive research. For another reason, the research aims to investigate the incorporation of Chinese traditional life and death values within the textual aspects of horror video games. Further, interpret them and connect them to a bigger societal and gaming studies perspective, rather than focusing on their effects on specific individuals or undertaking experimental comparisons. Consequently, the qualitative methodology is deemed appropriate for this study, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of the intricate ways in which these values are embedded within the gaming scenario.

Taking a further look, textual analysis was regarded as the suitable research approach for this study. Frey et al. (1999, p.1) introduced textual analysis as the method to describe the texts, aiming to interpret the content, structure, and functions of the messages contained in texts. For more than thirty years, the concept of "text" has expanded to encompass various forms of cultural production (Aitken, 2013, p. 234). The text includes written words and non-written words such as images, music and so on (Aitken, 2013, p. 236). As a result, video games can be seen as a textbase and comprehensive media that contains various texts. Textual analysis serves as a crucial method for understanding the meanings, values, and messages embedded within various forms of data. While it is commonly utilized in communication studies, it transcends disciplinary boundaries and finds application in fields such as sociology and media studies (Smith, 2017, p.1). Textual analysis endeavors to establish connections between the ways of knowing and how they shape our understanding of the messages conveyed by texts to diverse audiences. By delving beyond the mere content of the text. This approach provides a pathway for researchers to explore the broader implications of texts on the lives of individuals, groups, and communities within society (Smith, 2017, p. 3).

Compared to quantitative textual analysis, which begins with a concrete theory and testing variables, qualitative textual analysis focuses on an interpretive paradigm that seeks to shed light on how knowledge is situated within social contexts. Researchers are interested in gathering information in particular contexts to make sense of the world around them, recognizing the variety of ways that a text can be interpreted and utilized by those who view it (Smith, 2017, p. 3). In addition, Smith emphasized the importance of the relationship between the research question and textual analysis. He suggested that "the research question offers a guiding light in the analysis of texts. Within qualitative approaches to textual analysis, research questions can begin broadly but ultimately focus on attempting to answer some form of puzzle in regard to social life." (Smith, 2017, p.4). Since the

research question is relatively broad as numerous texts are involved in Chinese traditional life and death values, textual analysis can help the researcher identify the key elements from the selected video games. Through data collection and analysis, researchers can gradually refine the research focus and align findings with societal contexts.

To be concrete, the research employed thematic analysis, a method falling under the broader category of textual analysis. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 81) highlighted, the thematic analysis, encompasses two distinct approaches: essentialist and constructionist. Differing from essentialist focuses on investigating participants, this research applied constructionist approaches, which focus on exploring how events, realities, meanings, and experiences are shaped by various discourses operating within society. The constructionist approach emphasizes the importance of language, culture, and societal norms in constructing and shaping individuals' understandings and experiences (Mogaji & Farinloye, 2018, p. 5). In thematic analysis, the primary emphasis lies in scrutinizing and transforming research data to pinpoint and articulate significant patterns inherent within the data – commonly referred to as "themes." By engaging in this process, researchers delve deep into the collected data, meticulously identifying recurring concepts, ideas, or trends that emerge across various datasets. Through careful examination and synthesis, these themes are extracted, elucidated, and ultimately presented in a coherent manner (Coughlan et al, 2021, p. 3). As researchers assert, "a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82).

When it comes to practical application, thematic analysis encompasses two primary approaches: inductive and deductive. The deductive thematic analysis follows a predetermined path established by previous research or existing theoretical frameworks, guided by existing knowledge or hypotheses, aligning the analysis with pre-existing theoretical constructs (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 111). In this process, I approached the data with pre-established codes derived from prior concepts and ideas and further collected and coded data by following the established initial code book. Conversely, the inductive approach involves initially describing and analyzing the phenomenon based on concepts derived directly from the data itself. This process began with open coding, where I identified and labeled patterns and themes emerging from the data without preconceived notions. Researchers explore the data organically through iterative abstraction and categorization, allowing emergent patterns and themes to surface naturally (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 109). By combining these two approaches, I could leverage the flexibility of inductive analysis while benefiting from the structure and insights provided by deductive analysis. This hybrid approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of the research phenomenon, enhancing the depth and richness of the analysis. Ultimately, by integrating both inductive and deductive approaches, I could develop a nuanced understanding of the data and its implications.

3.2   Sampling

Qualitative research focuses on extracts from the material collected, from which novel interpretations are made or results are presented as examples (Flick, 2004, p. 166). As Flick suggested "sampling decisions are taken with the focus on further elaborating or substantiating the categories developed in the analysis so far." (Flick, 2013, p. 10). Specifically the sampling strategy selected for this study is purposeful sampling, a prevalent sampling technique in qualitative research that involves purposefully selecting instances that provide valuable and relevant information to assure the validity of the research samples (Palinkas et al., 2013, p. 539). The selected horror video games met the following criteria: firstly, the video games should be developed by Chinese studios from the mainland, Taiwan or Hong Kong in the last five years. Each video game should be developed by different game studios to avoid repeating the approaches of the text presentation such as using the same music and scenario in different selected games. Secondly, video games must have Chinese as one of the main playing languages and the original language of texts in the games, including character communication, written text and music lyrics must be Chinese. Finally, the selected games need to have a clear storyline so that the player can formulate a relatively logical storyline in their mind after playing it. This helped me understand the game comprehensively and collect more stories and data related to Chinese traditional death and life values.

The study chose the full gameplay videos from professionals as research objects. Compared to playing horror video games myself, the gameplay videos done by professional players are more complete, which helped me understand the video games' storyline better. In addition, selecting gameplay videos concentrates me on analyzing the video games as I do not need to take how to advance the video games' process into concentration while trying to gather data. Bilibili serves as an ideal platform from which to choose gameplay videos. For one thing, it is one of the well-known ACG (Anime, Comics, Games) content platforms in China (Yang, 2024, para 3), thus a considerable source of Chinese horror video games can be found. Further, despite the fact that Chinese horror video games and their English gameplay options can also be found on YouTube, after checking, I noticed that the English translation of the Chinese horror video games misses some details and is inaccurate in translation. Hence, I did not choose gameplay videos from YouTube.

After selection, this study selected six Chinese survival horror games from five professional video gamer channels on Bilibili:

- *Paranormal HK* (Ghostpie Studio, 2020), the recorded game video uploaded by 渗透之 C 君 (ShentouzhiCjun). The *Paranormal HK* is set in the old streets of Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong, with ancient Chinese folklore serving as the horror elements such as tenement buildings and Cantonese Opera Bamboo Theatre. The video game's storyline incorporates numerous urban legends native to Hong Kong, and some scenes pay homage to famous horror films about Hong Kong.

- *Fireworks* (Shiying Studio, 2021), the recorded game video uploaded by 逍遥散人 (Xiaoyaosanren). The background of *Fireworks* is set in a remote mountain town, with an accidental fire at a funeral involving a closed case of murder, the secrets in this village are uncovered by the main character who can communicate with the deceased.

- *Paper Bride 3 Unresolved Love* (HeartBeat Plus, 2022), the recorded game video uploaded by 劍訣浮雲 (Jianjuefuyun). It is one of the works from the *Paper Bride* series, which mainly revolves around the girl who goes to her boyfriend's hometown, revealing the impact of feudal ideas on a family for generations. This video game combines Chinese folk customs such as ghost marriage; *Mirages* (Mansen Game Studio, 2023), the recorded game video uploaded by 友利奈绪大魔王、 (Youlinaxudamowang 、).

- *Mirages* is a 3D side-scrolling narrative and horror game on the subject of traditional folklore. The story is set in the 30s in the last century of China. One night, seven brides headed to the Captain Mansion but strayed into a place full of ghosts - Regret City. Horror haunts the small town due to destiny, actors, warlords, and offspring of the town are drawn in.

- Lastly, *Paper Dolls 1 and 2* (Beijing Litchi Culture Media, 2019 and 2020), the recorded game video uploaded by 琴南倾北 (Qinnanqingbei). *Paper Dolls* series is a first-person horror adventure game steeped in Chinese culture. The player will act as a man separated from his daughter after a car accident. After waking up, he finds himself in a deserted Qing dynasty dwelling. As finding his daughter in the mention, a terrifying story buried for a hundred years is gradually unraveled.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Regarding data collection, watching gameplay videos uploaded on Bilibili by professional players helped me gather research data. At the same time, get familiar with the story, engage with the environment and develop gameplay knowledge. As Fernández-Vara suggested, when it comes to the introduction of game texts, the researcher should be familiar with the context of the game before the data collection process as no cultural artifact exists in isolation (Fernández-Vara, 2019, p. 33). Generally speaking, a complete game comprises auditory and visual elements, all considered valuable text (Aitken, 2013, p. 236). Hence, when it comes to in-game songs with lyrics, were examined to determine whether there are connections between songs and death and life values. In terms of visual elements, the data for the fixed items, such as key objects and visual environment settings, were captured in the form of screenshots. The conversational data were gathered by short video recording, with the aim of recording complete dialogues.

After calculation, the total time required to complete watching the selected game videos successfully was 15 hours and 48 minutes, adding the time that information searching and visual recording of the data, the total data collection time was around 30 hours. This initial exploration helped to gain an understanding of the most critical elements of the game and how the game operates,

gathering and identifying the research data in the context of the core research topic, death and life values.

The data analysis process followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to conducting thematic analysis. The first step is familiarising data, this was done by thoroughly watching the chosen horror video games before the coding process. By transcribing text from selected horror stories to research data and recording them to prepare and create the initial codes, the research gathered data from each selected horror video game until the data was exhausted. At the same time, the researcher took notes about every detail noticed when examining recorded text to pay attention to the latent information and view it critically and innovatively.

The second phase is to generate initial codes to code similar features in several systematic groups and collate data relevant to each code. As the initial codes were based on reviewing the capture of different forms of text from video games, it is necessary to note that the initial data were groped by the concept similarity instead of the forms of text. After the initial codes were coded, they were reviewed a few times to get an understanding of what was present in the data.

Step three is to search for themes, inducting codes into axial codes, whereby the data was placed into larger categories based on the initial codes and tried to create potential themes. In this stage, the codes provided a deeper meaning by assigning the initial codes to each axial code. As previous researchers suggested, a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Hence, this phase inevitably involved subjectivity in reviewing and diving into the deep meaning of initial codes because coding doesn't merely rely on the superficial implication of the material.

The fourth phase included creating potential sub-themes from axial codes, checking if the themes are suitable in relation to axial codes and the entire data set, and examining patterns within the axial codes and how they could relate to the theories. All the sub-themes were reviewed and compared to avoid the repetitive themes and combine the similar themes to form the main themes.

Then, defining and naming the themes, which is the fifth step of the process. It is the stage to refine the specifics of each theme and decide the overall story the analysis tells. The themes discovered the key result of the way in which the Chinese traditional death and life values were represented in selected horror video games.

Finally, by combining the literature, the last step reported the analysis outcome and explained how the themes were related to theories. Consequently, the selected horror video games were combined to provide a deeper elaboration of generated themes and answer the research question.

Finally, a systematic table (code tree) of coded data was created, and the results of the analysis were grouped as several themes and sub-themes in the code tree. The gathered information underwent analysis using software Atlas. Ti, facilitating organization and interpretation of the data in a systematic approach.

3.4 Operationalization

In the process of generating a code book, as the focus of this study revolves around Chinese traditional death and life values, the Chinese traditional death and life values in the theoretical framework are considered the main guide for conducting the data collection and analysis. The initial stage involves identifying and collecting data relevant to Chinese traditional death and life values within the context of the selected video games, then coding the data on the basis of Chinese traditional culture. These initial codes include tangible elements like funeral objects such as Zhizha, as well as intangible aspects delivered from written texts such as conversations about ghosts or the deceased.

After gathering data from the selected Chinese horror video games till exhausted, the screenshots and videos were uploaded to Atlas.Ti. All data were coded during the process of labeling, and initial codes were generated after finishing labeling and familiarizing the data with the database. Next, with the initial codes, I reexamined the data to ensure the codes accurately represent the data. The code refinement process involved several steps: defining codes more precisely, merging similar codes, splitting broad codes into more specific ones, and verifying the accuracy of code names, especially those with specific terms and meanings such as Seven Worship Periods and Charm Paper, and eliminating redundant or irrelevant codes. After all codes were organized and refined, a formal codebook (see Appendix A) was created. In the code book, each entry contains a code name, a detailed definition and an example from one of the selected video games. In the end, the code book was examined by applying the codes to each data. It is a crucial adjustment before starting data analysis to enhance the clarity and applicability of the codebook.

3.5 Credibility and ethics

The research credibility includes validity and reliability. Due to the limited sample sizes and potential for varied interpretations among researchers, this study acknowledges the necessity of addressing questions regarding validity and reliability. As a result, the project adhered to Silverman's (2011) recommendation. As Silverman suggests, the reliability of textual analysis should concern the data repeatability of the research, allowing researchers to use the results in the same way (Silverman, 2011, p. 65). Therefore, this study first provided a detailed and transparent account of its methodology. Along this line, sample selection criteria and information about the data collection process were clearly outlined to enhance the feasibility of repeating the study. Additionally, regarding data analysis, adherence to a structured six-phase guide ensures a thorough explanation and increases the reliability of the research, offering a clear and systematic overview of the entire process.

When it comes to validity, analytical induction is applied to enhance the validity of the study (Silverman, 2014, p. 96). Starting with a set of limited cases to uncover causal relations through the identification of the essential characteristics of the phenomenon studied (Silverman, 2014, p. 97). Additionally, the comprehensive data treatment was also applied, meaning that the collected data are

open to repeat until generalization is able to apply to every single unit (Silverman, 2014, p. 100). Furthermore, given that individuals possess distinct perspectives, which pertain to acknowledging the potential impact of the researcher's viewpoints and background on the research, the comprehension of the information might not be accepted by all following researchers. Consequently, the ensuing analysis is grounded in an interpretation, aiming to present an impartial outcome to facilitate the study's validity and offer a space for researchers to reconsider and construe the findings.

Moreover, it is important to mention the potential ethical considerations in this study. This study was unintrusive research, so the study did not involve any person as the sample. All selected horror video games in this research were clearly listed in this paper and the gameplay videos were all public content that can be freely accessed through Bilibili channels. By checking through the full gameplay videos, the researcher made sure that there was no sensitive or personal information contained in the selected gameplay videos, determining that this research had no ethical harm. Furthermore, this research maintains credibility while minimizing potential biases and ethical concerns by adhering to rigorous methodological standards and ensuring transparency in data collection and analysis.

4. Result

This chapter presented the results of the thematic analysis to answer the research question. Four themes are formed for the final result presentation by filtering initial codes and grouping them into themes (see Appendix B). Considering the purpose that horror video game developers apply elements related to Chinese traditional life and death values to enhance the game's playability. The first theme *eliciting emotional reactions through shared cultural background* (4.1), aiming to demonstrate how the elements related to death and life, such as ghosts, funerals and taboos, adapted from cultural and folklife can elicit players' emotions. It is important to mention that players' emotional arousal by in-game elements discussed in the theme is relatively compulsive as players are not in the driving seats but the objects forced to accept to encounter the elements. The second theme *arousing suspense and tension by cultural elements* (4.2) also focuses on players' psychological reactions. However, the sub-themes discussed in this theme are distinguished from the previous theme: the extent of psychological reaction is lighter. As players are able to decide if they want to use the items or engage in reading texts, they take more initiative when gaming. Hence, the emotional impulsions are less and players feel less intense.

The third theme, *exploring the unknown past events* (4.3), emphasizes elaborating how supernatural elements related to traditional culture play roles in horror video games to represent death and life values. Compared to the second theme which players wonder what is happening or what will happen, by tracing supernatural practices used in the past or redoing the supernatural practices in the games, players gradually uncover the events that happened in the past, helping them understand the story more effectively. Unlike the themes above, the feature of the last theme, *reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication* (4.4), connects the game plot with reality and extends the gaming experience beyond players' real lives. By introducing daily concepts relevant to family and social rules, religions and personal behaviors, players resonate with the elements and initiate their reflection on their lives. Additionally, some of the social and family rules are critically represented in video games, as in the sub-theme of the symbolism of following Chinese traditional rules. To some extent, the avenue of presenting social and family rules has a positive impact on players' understanding of Chinese traditional life and death values.

4.1 Eliciting emotional reaction through shared cultural background

This theme includes three sub-themes: *fear and empathy from the existence of ghosts* (4.1.1)*, instinctive avoidance and experiencing a sense of contrast in particular folklife* (4.1.2)*,* and *dread revolving around the taboo death* (4.1.3). The three sub-themes revolve around how traditional Chinese culture relates to death and life values portrayed as stimulating players' emotions. Importantly, two common features are found through the three sub-themes: firstly, the scene settings are relatively passive, giving players restricted choices and compelling them to confront upcoming events. This lack of control enhances the feeling of helplessness and vulnerability, crucial components in horror narratives. Secondly, these objects are deeply rooted in Chinese traditional

culture and folklore, allowing players to recognize and strongly resonate with them quickly. Additionally, the elements discussed in this theme are directly connected to ghosts and death, which intensifies how in-game elements can arouse emotional impact on players.

4.1.1. Fear and empathy from the existence of ghosts

Similar to the monsters and villains, the use of ghosts in many horror texts, such as survival horror games, are portrayed as physical scares (Kirkland, 2011, p. 22). In horror video games, fighting against or escaping from ghosts is the primary purpose of using the element, the confrontation with ghosts provides distinct anxiety emotion to players, such as in the survival horror game *Devour* (Straight Back Games, 2021) and *The Bridge Curse 2: The Extrication* (Softstar Entertainment, 2024). Interestingly, confrontation is not the main purpose of setting ghosts in the game in Chinese horror video games. Game plots where players need to confront ghosts almost only appear once or twice in some selected video games, such as Kathy, the girl possessed by a ghost in *Paranormal HK*, players need to escape from the supervision while finding items (figure 4.1). However, distinctive Chinese traditional cultural features can be observed in ghosts that involve conflict. For instance, the NPCs wearing traditional opera costumes become ghosts and chase players for revenge in *Paper Doll* (figure 4.2) and *Paranormal HK* (figure 4.3). Due to actors' dramatic makeup and body movements, Chinese Opera is frequently utilized in horror movies to generate eerie and unsettling scenes (Ang, 2023, p. 49). This introduction of opera figures amplifies the players' connection with traditional culture, boosting the feeling of fear and anxiety by tapping into familiar cultural elements. The cultural resonance not only deepens the immersion but also heightens the emotional impact of the game.
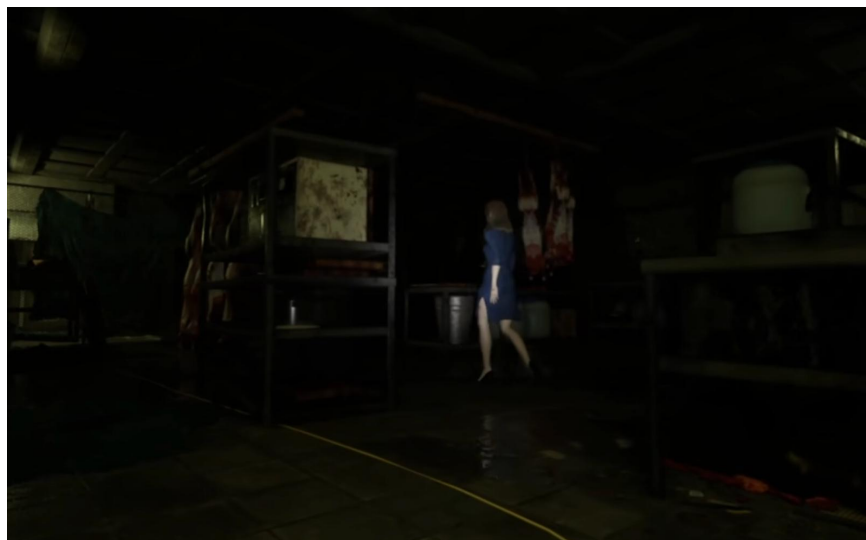

Figure 4.1. The ghost (Kathy) is walking around to find players. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

Figure 4.2. A ghost guard made of paper wearing traditional opera costumes and makeup, is trying to attack players. (Paper Doll, 2019)

危险，赶紧跑！

Figure 4.3. A dead dismembered Cantonese Opera actress, her partner brought her back to life by sewing her limbs and using spells. However, because of the misuse of the spell, the actress became a monster wearing traditional opera costumes. In this scene, she wants to catch and eat players. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

On the other hand, as in early ancient China, people usually believed that people would become ghosts after death (Gu & Xu, 2004, p. 80). In video games, dead people will become ghosts and exist among living people. As a result, it is challenging for players to distinguish whether the NPCs they just had a conversation with a ghost or a living person. When players realize the previous person they talked to is a ghost, the after-effect makes them doubt the NPCs they will encounter with

fear in the following gaming. For example, the store owner Wang in *Firework* is firstly shown as a living person, as the story goes, the player will find he is the dead victim in the fire case that the player comes to investigate (figure 4.4). Hence, players will often be vigilant about the existence of ghosts and start doubting the NPC around them in the video game. Moreover, the ghosts are also introduced in an implicit way, in which players can not see the ghosts physically but can perceive them from various clues provided in video games. As implied in the notes and conversations the dead has already become a resentful ghost and is eager to kill people, the character portrayed by players is also the target of the ghost. Although the ghosts do not show up, the concept of the existence of ghosts has been rooted in players' minds.

林理洵　是刚才在小卖铺见到的人……

Figure 4.4. Players encounter a funeral in a store, the dead, as seen in the portrait, is the shop owner who just sold batteries to players. (Firework, 2021)

Additionally, the setting of ghosts not only stimulates anxiety and fear, but also arouses players' empathy toward the ghosts. Scholars argue that horror texts can "offer a narrative arena in which to develop a dialogic relationship with death and to fathom what mortality means as beings living to die." (Davis & Crane, 2015, p. 427). With the game going on, players can gradually uncover what happened to the dead and why she became a ghost. The games attempt to draw a relatively complete storyline for ghosts, guiding players to understand ghosts. For instance, the ghost mom in *Paranormal HK* is said to have killed several neighbors in the building and is deemed a scary villain (figure 4.5). Nevertheless, with the discovery, players found the insulted mom killed herself because she wanted to become a ghost to protect her daughter from being the subject of gossip and being kicked out of the residential building by neighbors. Chinese people are reluctant to talk about death (Chan & Yau, 2010, p. 231), thus missing the opportunity to understand death and the dead. In this gaming process, players can unthread their misunderstandings about death and dead people, deepen their understanding and sympathy for the characters, and facilitate their engagement and love of the game.
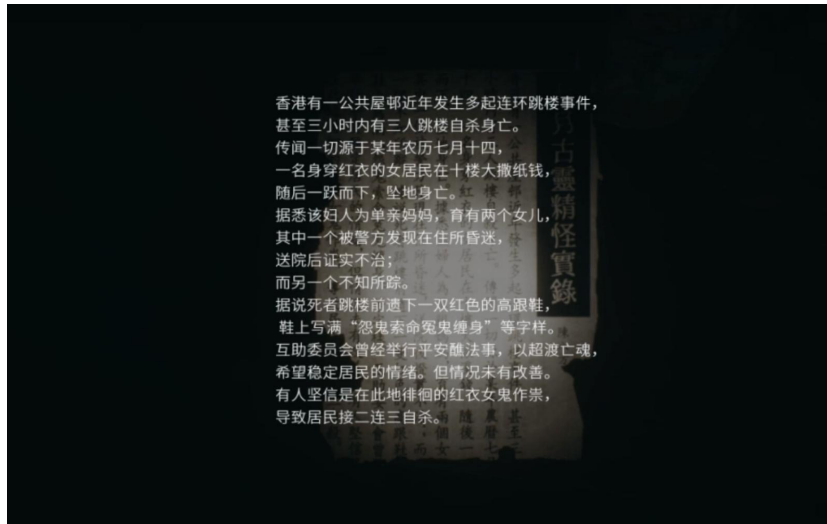
Figure 4.5. A note, the last two sentences say that 'people live here believe the reason of neighbors' sequential suicide is related to the ghost in red lingering here.' (Paranormal HK, 2020)

4.1.2. *Instinctive avoidance and experiencing a sense of contrast in particular folklife*

"Fear is a powerful emotion, because it alters what we hear and see." (Nummenmaa, 2021, p. 3). In the selected Chinese horror video games, they apply objects that are used on certain occasions in Chinese traditional culture to create fear. In traditional Confucian opinion, the living should "serve the dead as if they were alive (事死如事生)." (Muller, 1991, p.1). This is evident in the use of Zhi Zha (paper arts), offerings, and ghost money at funerals, which are meant to ensure that the deceased has a comfortable life and sufficient living materials in the netherworld. In a funeral, although it is an occasion associated with death, people create a scenario where the dead are still alive by preparing and burning objects made of paper that resemble objects for daily use, such as servants, houses, and food. This practice blurs the boundary between the living and the dead, creating an ambiguity about whether the deceased are truly gone. As one of the classical Zhi Zha works, paper dolls are frequently used in Chinese horror video texts as spiritual carriers of ghosts, such as in the horror movie *Get in the Dark* (Cheng, 2023). The human-like dolls are dreadful and arouse fear in players as they resemble humans, which play with players' primordial fear of strangers and abnormalities, leading players to fall into the uncanny valley (Nummenmaa, 2021, p.11). In horror video games, paper dolls are also ideal carriers for the incarnation of ghosts. For instance, in the game *Paper Doll*, these paper dolls are depicted as ghosts that attack players, who must use Vajrakilaya to seal them during gameplay (figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6. Using Vajrakilaya to the ghost (paper doll). (Paper Doll, 2019)

In terms of the offerings, they are applied to remind players that the deceased (ghost) exists. The offerings are normally placed in specific places, such as the tablet of the dead or in front of the portrait of the dead. Horror video games set the offerings in daily life scenes such as in the living room and at a roadside table outside of the restaurant, or randomly put on the corridor or the street, aligning with the gloomy light and restricted perspective, players fear they will encounter the ghost. For instance, in *Paranormal HK*, there is a scene in which offerings are set in a corner of the corridor. When players come close, they can see a pale hand quickly take an offering from the other side of the corner, reinforcing the existence of ghosts (figure 4.7).

Figure 4.7. A hand quickly takes an offering from the other side of the corner. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

The wedding is one of the main topics in Chinese horror texts, such as marriage in the horror movie *The Maid* (Feeley, 2014. p. 54). Horror video games also apply the wedding elements to stimulate the emotional fear of players. The sense of contrast of emotion and color formed the origin

of fear. For the former, the wedding is considered a festive occasion, delivering the happiness of combination and continuity of life. However, horror video games use ghost marriage in the game, that is, getting married to a ghost or a deceased, pointing life toward death. This kind of setting not only turns a happy event into a tragedy and even horror brings a strong psychological gap to the players, players can also feel the living bride is actually an object of sacrifice to the dead. For the latter, red is the traditional color used in Chinese weddings. Red symbolizes warmth, festivity and passion (Plitnick et al., 2009, p. 449). However, red could become ghastly, repressed and dangerous in the doom light, increasing players' alertness in the dim condition (Plitnick et al., 2009, p. 456).

       Horror video games use the contract of color to present the bride in a traditional red gown, as can be observed in *Paper Bride 3* (figure 4.8), grabbing the bride from a festive scene to a scary scenario. It brings the feeling of horror and discomfort through the figure (De Lima et al., 2020, p. 367), enhancing players' emotions of fear. From the folklore perspective, wearing festive colors like red on death-related occasions is taboo. In addition, it is a widely held belief that ghosts dressed in red are the most dangerous and harbor the strongest desire for revenge. Horror video games exploit this cultural consensus by using red to heighten the sense of danger associated with ghosts. Merging from this motif into wedding scenes, these video games emphasize the stark contrast between the joyous occasion and the horror, creating a powerful visual impact. By intertwining traditional practices with horror elements, these horror video games create a rich, immersive experience that taps into deep-seated emotions and shared cultural beliefs.
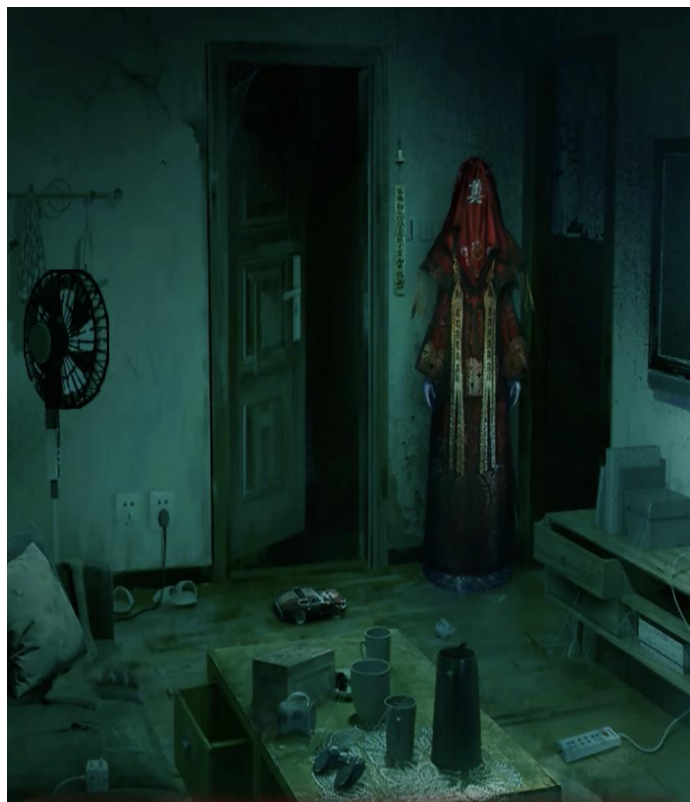

Figure 4.8. Bride in a traditional red gown, standing in the room with a gloomy light. (Paper Bride 3, 2022)

4.1.3.   Dread revolving around the taboo of death

Different from the objects shown in the funeral discussed above, the codes in this sub-theme are mainly items revolving around the deceased. That is, they have a specific name or image of the deceased on them. For example, the tomb with the deceased's name on the tablet and the portrait of the deceased. As a result, the image of the deceased becomes concrete. Although the origin of the consideration of death as a taboo remains controversial, in the long-term social practice, talking about death as a taboo is a long-standing social consensus. Chinese people believe talking about death may bring bad luck and even cause early or 'pre-mature' death (Chow & Chan, 2006, p. 1). Along this line, the funeral, as one of the practices that represent death, also evokes negative thoughts about death. Finding academic literature that could elaborate on the relationship between the funeral and bad luck was a significant challenge. However, when searching the keywords '葬礼 (funeral)' and '晦气 (bad luck)' in Chinese on Google, more than 50 search results are relevant to 'How to get rid of bad luck after attending a funeral.' In the Chinese local search engine Baidu, over 15 pages of search results are fed back when searching for the same keywords. Among them, the recommended searches for 'getting rid of bad luck from a funeral' account for 7 out of 10 searches. The funerary practitioners are considered bad luck bringers as they are 'contaminated by the pollution of death (Kipnis, 2021, p. 67).' In *Firework*, a conversation between an NPC and players embodies this concept. NPC talks with players about why another talented NPC did not choose a forensics doctor as a profession since his parents believed the job would bring them bad luck (figure 4.9). For players, the conversation of NPCs also reminds them that they are presenting in the discussion taboo. Accompanied by the forensic autopsy room scene, players dread breaking taboos and attracting bad luck to themselves.

Figure 4.9. Conversation between an NPC and players, talking about why another talented NPC did not choose a forensics doctor as a profession. (Firework, 2021)

Kipnis indicates that because of urbanization, the scale of funerals has reduced as society is isolated, and funerals nowadays are rather family affairs (Kipnis, 2021, p. 55), with the participants being the deceased's family members and friends, some with some close colleagues. For intimate people, the funeral is considered a somewhat ill-omened occasion, let alone seeing the funeral of strangers. Additionally, in the influence of urbanization, Kipnis further points out that the narrative frequently used in horror stories is that "those who become ghosts are those who have been neglected by their families in both life and funerary ritual…even though the cause of their homelessness was familial, the people they end up harming are strangers" (Kipnis, 2021, p. 70). In horror video games, the players and the dead NPC are both strangers to each other. From the perspective of players, as people have an aversion and dread to death, the feelings become stronger when encountering a funeral or the image of a dead stranger. On the other hand, since the deceased-related objects show up in an improper space, neither the funeral home nor the mourning hall, and there is no trace of family companionship. To some extent, the space corresponds to Kipnis's saying that it is a neglected funeral, which implies the possibility that players, players' dread accumulates by encountering the taboo scenes and associating death, taboo, and ghosts.

Further, Chan & Yau (2010, p. 227) indicate that the avoidance of death-related topics and objects is a social taboo rather than an actual fear, while in horror video games, exposure to death becomes unavoidable, transferring the subconscious of avoiding taboo into a real dread. Items such as coffins and tombs explicitly present the dead in front of the player, stimulating players' dread. Consequently, players instantly can feel the existence of death and are exposed to the taboo without allowing to quit or go somewhere else. As a result, players have to continue the game in the dread of breaking taboos, and the sense of being compelled to face ominous things also discomfort players (Cao, 2018, p. 776). Take *Mirages* as an example, players have to go through the portraits of deceased strangers and coffins to find a way out of Regret City (figure 4.10), and they can also interact with those items to learn the truth about the deceased's death. In doing so, they expose themselves to the taboo of closely interacting with the dead, heightening the sense of dread and compulsion.

Figure 4.10. Players go through portraits of deceased strangers and coffins to find a way out.
(Mirages, 2023)

4.2 Arousing suspense and tension by cultural elements

This theme contains two sub-themes: *suspense and tension from using interactional cultural items*
(4.2.1) and *suspense and tension from reading non-interactional texts* (4.2.2). Similar to the previous
theme, this theme explores how horror video games extract life and death values from traditional
culture to create a cultural connection between players and the game. However, compared to the in-
game elements coded in the theme of emotional reaction, the elements in this theme elicit less extend
of fear and dread. This is because players often have more control over the gaming process, or the
traditional concepts involved are relatively abstract and do not provoke immediate, strong emotions.
Nummenmaa (2021, p. 21) suggests that one effective approach for maintaining audience interest
and increasing excitement in horror texts is introducing new details and gradually unraveling the
plotline continually. The in-game elements discussed in this theme serve to reinforce the game's
storyline, providing relevant information that immerses players in the created context and maintains
their engagement.

4.2.1 Suspense and tension from using interactional cultural items

Suspense is defined as the emotions combined with the feeling of displeasure (fear) and pleasure
(hope) about the prospect of undesirable events and uncertainty about the outcome (Frome & Smuts,
2004, p. 15). Frome and Smuts (2015, p. 31) found that video games can be the ideal carrier for
generating suspense. However, they suggest that players are helpless spectators in wait-and-see in the
gaming process (Frome & Smuts, 2004, p. 19). In contrast, this study's results argue that horror video
games can allow players to proactively create a sense of suspense by using interactional and non-
interactional elements.

Players use interactional items primarily to progress in the game, such as solving puzzles and
unlocking new areas. Interestingly, these items are designed to immerse players in the unfolding

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events and anticipate future occurrences. The instant feedback these interactional items provide creates an unique experience where players are caught in a moment of suspense and tension between the present action and its impending outcome. As players prepare to use these items, a sense of suspense naturally arises: what will happen once the item is used? This anticipation heightens the overall tension and engagement within the game. In addition, unlike horror movies provide multiple perspectives, the player's initiative is restricted by a single perspective (Habel & Kooyman, 2013, p. 4. Thus, the perspective limitation and relatively safe in-game environment, with no jump scares at the moment, mobilize the player's jittery.

Notably, every select Chinese horror video game adapted traditional items from Taoism, such as Bagua and charm paper. The reason why horror video games prefer to use Taoism items in the game is highly likely because of the inspiration they gained from Hong Kong horror movies. Hong Kong vampire (Jiangshi) movies were popular in the 1980s, considerable signs of folk culture, Taoism, and Buddhism are presented in this genre (Guo, 2022, p. 786). Mostly, the Taoist priest is the only person capable of dispatching or exorcising this unholy threat (Diffrient, 2019, p. 120), they use traditional religious tools such as charm paper and Bagua compass to eliminate the ghosts and monsters. In consequence, the Taoism items are regarded as effective tools for expelling ghosts and evils. Along this line, some fictional religious elements can also be perceived in horror video games, which most of their prototypes are original from Taoism, such as the Bagua-like figure in *Paranormal HK* (figure 4.10) and a compass in *Mirages* (figure 4.12).

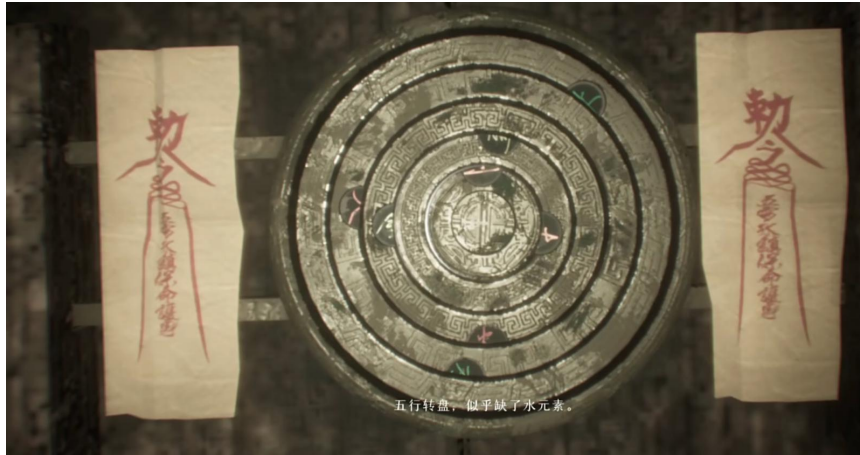*Figure 4.11. A Bagua-like figure. (Paranormal HK, 2020)*

Figure 4.12. A compass. (Mirages, 2023)

Additionally, during this gaming process, players have the autonomy to decide whether to continue playing and to face the consequences of using certain items. This decision-making process heightens the suspense, as players must weigh the potential risks and outcomes of their actions. Objects associated with Taoism, which are relevant to ghosts and the expulsion of evil in traditional culture, play a significant role in this dynamic. The use of these religious items introduces an element of solemnity and mystery, reinforcing the game's connection to traditional values within a horror context and enhancing the tension and immersion. These items are imbued with cultural significance, and their introduction into the game environment creates a bridge between traditional cultures and gameplay. The result is a richer, more engaging experience that evokes a deeper psychological response from players, as they navigate the eerie atmosphere and anticipate the potential repercussions of their in-game decisions. For instance, in *Paper Doll 2*, several doors need players to use blood to remove the seals of charm paper with mythological creatures. After they unseal the spell and open the door, different scenes will be presented in front of players, including seeing a monster jump toward the players and attack them and an inside shrine with a sacrificial blood pool in the center (figure 4.13).

Figure 4.13. An inside shrine with a sacrificial blood pool in the center. (Paper Doll 2, 2020)

4.2.2   Suspense and tension from reading non-interactional texts

Another element that induces players' suspension and tension is the non-interactional texts. In selected horror video games, the non-interactional elements refer to the death and life value related content in conversation or written texts that players can only read but cannot interact with. The interconnection among the codes in this sub-theme, such as the seven worship periods and spirit returns, is they are all concepts relevant to death and ghosts, they are relatively abstract concepts as they are nearly impossible to feel or see in real life, let alone having actual feelings of fear. An interesting condition of the non-interactional texts is that players need to engage in the game to read the texts and elicit their roles as agents to use their power of autonomy (Habel & Kooyman, 2013, p. 11). Vise versa, the emotional arousal might be challenging if players are not buried themselves to read the texts.

In addition, Hun and Po are significant terms in Taoism, spreadly demonstrated in Hong Kong horror movies (Guo, 2022, p. 781). The Hun connects with Yang, attaching to Qi the Po connects to Yin, attaching to the body. After death, there is no Hun in the body, leaving only a little Po. If the dead absorb some Hun of the living, they will become vampires (Jiangshi) that have the power to move, but only imitate human action without self-consciousness (Guo, 2022, p. 781). Consequently, players become suspicious about what will happen if an NPC misses one of the Huns or Pos. Will the NPC become a living dead and attack the players? What will be the outcome for the character controlled by the players if they lose one of their Huns or Pos? For instance, the conversation between two main NPCs in *Paper Bride 3* about the severe consequences of the separation of Hun and Po on people, players can feel every time they sacrifice one of Pos, the character will get weaker (figure 4.14). A sense of uncertainty was aroused in the players' hearts: if the character would die or would the ghost come to ingest the rest of Huns and Pos?

Figure 4.14. The character controlled by players can not see things clearly after sacrificing one of Pos. (Paper Bride 3, 2022)

Yin and Yang are not only related to Hun and Po, in a larger scope, Yin and Yang represent the netherworld and this world (Gu & Xu, 2004, p. 80). The record in a note in *Paranormal HK* says that the intrusiveness between Yin and Yang is forbidden, and breaking the order of Yin and Yang will have a terrible influence on the world (figure 4.15). Players learn that there are some negative consequences after breaking the balance of the inner harmony of an individual or mixing the line between this world and the netherworld. Nevertheless, these concepts are only mentioned in the dialogue or written text and are not as intuitively scary as the ghosts and the dead discussed above. As a result, it is more about creating an atmosphere of tension and suspense for players rather than giving them a strong emotional impact.
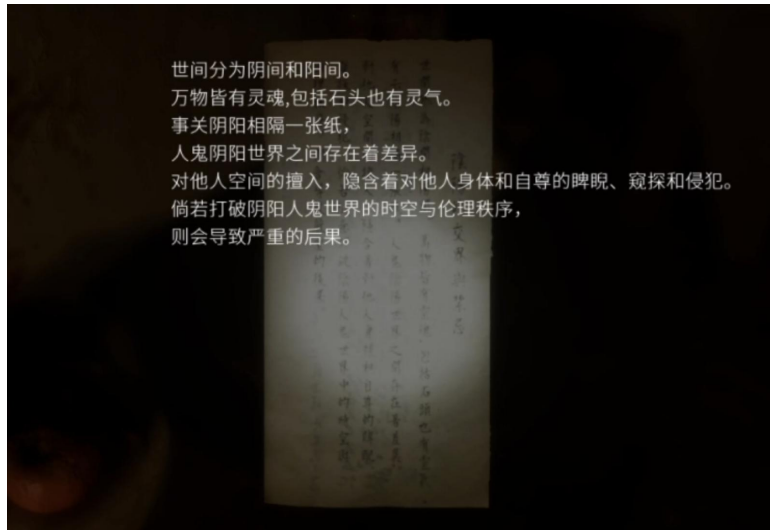
Figure 4.15. A note says that breaking the order of Yin and Yang will have a terrible influence on the world. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

Importantly, compared to the interactive elements mentioned above, the effect of non-interactive elements is more dependent on the gaming context. These elements serve as a bridge between the game's story and the players' psychology. On one hand, as these elements signify death and ghosts, they continuously provide psychological cues to players, reminding them that they are in an abnormal environment and increasing their tension. On the other hand, these elements organically connect the entire storyline, rationalizing the ghosts' appearances and motivations and the cause and development of the in-game narrative. In most cases, the Huns, Pos, and souls retrieved by the spiritual-calling ritual are not visible in the game. The constant discussion about these invisible specters further stimulates players' curiosity. This curiosity and other visual elements enhance the gaming atmosphere, keeping players engaged and immersed in the suspenseful environment.

4.3   Exploring the unknown past events

This theme revolves around one sub-theme: i*nvestigating the unknown past event with the assistance of the supernatural* (4.3.1). Traditionally, the most substantial fear for humans is unknown (Carleton, 2016, p. 11). Hence, following this line, the term unknown ought to be discussed as an under-umbrella theme in one of the aforementioned themes. However, exploring the unknown in this study is more interconnected with the game narrative than emotional and psychological reactions. Different from the other themes that players will experience ongoing things, the exploration of the unknown is the unknown from the game background story, that is, the past events before players (controllable characters) arrived. In other words, exploring the unknown sets the premise that players have no clue about certain past events that have already occurred.

4.3.1   Investigating the unknown past event with the assistance of the supernatural

There is a rich tradition that horror video games utilize the unknown to create fear in players (de Lima et al., 2020, p. 367). Although Chinese traditional thoughts do not advocate the use of

supernatural power to connect death and the netherworld, instead, people are expected to pay attention to this life and tend to keep the unknown of death and ghosts. *The Analects of Confucius* recorded the attitude of Confucius toward death and ghosts as vague and ambiguous: "If you can't yet serve men, how can you serve the spirits (未能事人，焉能事鬼)?" and "If you don't understand what life is, how will you understand death (未知生，焉知死)?" (Muller, 1991, p.1). This perspective suggests that avoiding the exploration of death and ghosts serves as an excuse to encourage people to focus on and better understand their current life. Along this line, paranormal practice is one of the mainstream approaches to communicating the dead (ghosts) and close to the netherworld, the popularity is also repressed in life. However, ancient China has a rich history of using supernatural power and divination to commute heaven and the netherworld. From the Shang dynasty (1600 BC), the emperor started applying Turtle-Shell divination to inquiries about things from gods and ghosts (Wang, 2018, p. 40). Gradually, folks wanted to communicate with the passed away family members to know their life in the netherworld or the next life after reincarnation. The classical literature, *Chu Ci,* writing in the Warring States period (476BC), recorded the folklore that people wanted to call the deceased's spiritual back to their side since they thought the (nether) world is dangerous and terrifying, and wished spirit could go back hometown early, where is the palace that they feel warm and safe (Wang, 2018, p. 42). It can be perceived from the literature that since ancient China, people have already believed that the outside world is dangerous as it is full of unknowns, they want the close family members to return to where they are both familiar. In this process, they have to ask psychics to use supernatural powers, such as conducting divination and Fashu, to connect the deceased or find an avenue to bring their spirits back.

As discussed in other themes, death, ghosts, and family are frequently used elements in horror video games. Consequently, using supernatural power to summon spirits is a crucial practice that connects family-related stories with themes of death and ghosts. Interestingly, horror video games show the supernatural by merging supernatural practices such as divination and special rituals into past stories in games. For players, exploring supernatural practices is actually the exploration of the unknown of what happened in the past. The clues of the supernatural practices that NPCs conducted in the past are contained in the scattered notes that players can collect when playing. As the things that happened by using supernatural power in the past are unknown, one of the core missions for players is to understand the storyline while playing the game. Consequently, the exploration of the unknown goes through the entire journey of playing the video game. One of the fragmented dairy from Liu in *Paper Doll* says, 'I can try the curse… what I need is a few wooden dolls and some silver needles…' (figure 4.16). Players realize the curse was used as players can see a string of wooden dolls hanging in a line and the fragmented wooden dolls they have collected (will collect) during playing. In this circumstance, players realize that the supernatural power indeed impacted the past, yet the specific reasons behind the situation remain unknown. Driven by curiosity, players delve deeper into the story to uncover what truly happened.
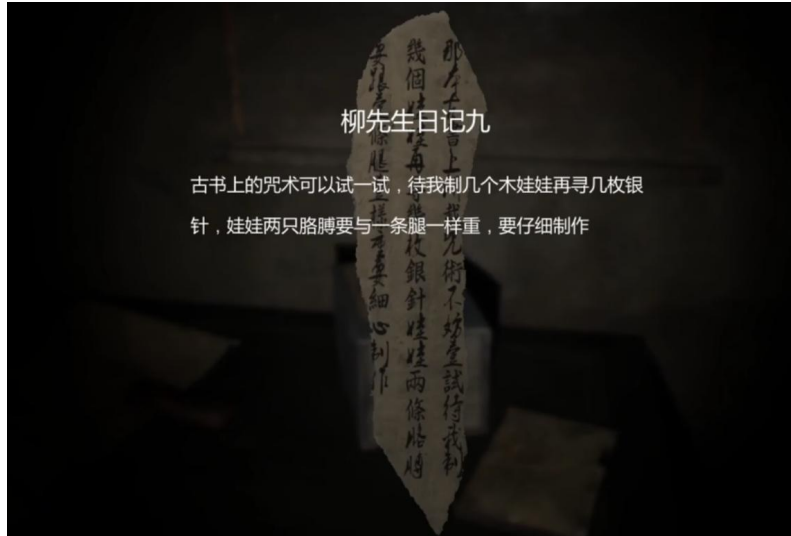
Figure 4.16. A piece of Liu's diary, the record shows that he wants to try the ancient curse but needs to make some wooden dolls first. (Paper Doll, 2019)

Another approach horror video games provide the opportunity for players to explore the unknown of supernatural power is that players need to redo the supernatural ritual to restore the truth of what happened in the past. During this process, the identity of players transforms from the explorers of the past to the witnesses or initiators of the past event, players can only explore the unknown by being present in the past. For instance, in *Paranormal HK*, players use divination to communicate with a dead little girl. Her mother, now a ghost, hears her daughter's voice, screams, and rushes to the room where the players are (figure 4.17). The mother and daughter were the subject of neighborhood gossip before their deaths. The mother became a ghost to protect her sick daughter from bullies. In this scenario, players may feel they are perceived as the neighbors who once hurt the family, enhancing their emotional connection to the story and deepening their engagement with the game's narrative.
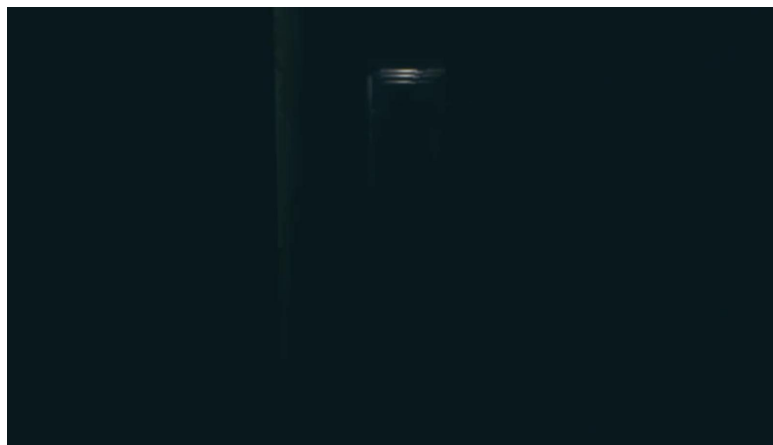

Figure 4.17. The ghost mom hears her daughter's voice and rushes to the room where the players are. In the picture, she is standing outside of the room. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

4.4 Reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication

The final theme elaborates on three sub-themes: *the symbolism of following Chinese traditional rules* (4.4.1)*, objects relevant to family and religion as symbolisms of respect* (4.4.2), and c*haracter behavior in-game as the implication of personal behavior in real life* (4.4.3). Unlike the previously discussed themes that enhance players' engagement by resonating with familiar traditional culture, symbolism and implication in horror video games aim to bridge the gap between players' reflections on reality and the game. Elements such as family and social norms are closer to real life and evoke tangible personal feelings than concepts such as death and ghosts discussed above. While other themes limit players' emotions to the context of the game, symbolic and implicative elements provoke reflections on reality and extend their impact beyond the game, thereby deepening the players' engagement and enhancing the overall gaming playability.

4.4.1 The symbolism of following Chinese traditional rules

In this research, symbolism is defined as applying concepts, characters, or images to carry meaning beyond their literal representation regarding the context of horror video games. In traditional Chinese opinion, following the rules and orders of family and society is important. Confucians believe that Li (rites and proprieties) embodies virtue ethics, stressing its importance as the norm everyone needs to follow when living in this world. In essence, Li, in the context of Chinese society, represents not only a set of rites and social practices but also shared social rules. Tu (2020, p. 142) indicates that Li reminds people of responsibilities and corresponding rights in society and requires people to do things matching their social identities. Consequently, following conventional norms when being a social person and following family rules as a child is vital to Chinese people. Socially, deviating from these norms can result in negative consequences, impacting not only individuals but entire regions or groups. As can be perceived in *Mirages*, the NPC says the traditional norm in this city is not to hold wedding rites in the evening. However, as the conversation is between two girls (one of them is controlled by players) in bridal attire during the evening (figure 4.18), players can strongly realize that they have broken the rules and will face the consequence of rule-breaking.

Figure 4.18. NPC says the traditional norm in Yichuan City is not to hold funeral rites in the day and wedding rites during the evening. (Mirages, 2023)

From the family perspective, a similar pattern of following rules can also be observed in horror games. While the consequences of violating social norms may have a broader impact, breaking family rules typically results in direct confrontation with parents or elders. Players can intuitively feel what will happen if they do not respect the wishes of their older generations and thus may associate the scenes in the video game with their familial relationships in real life. Still, take a clip in *Mirages* as an instance, when the character (controlled by players) interferes with his parents' marriage arrangement for his sister, his dad incarnates a slender ghost, condemning and trying to catch the unfilial son (figure 4.19). The players need to escape from the haunt of their parents while listening to their complaints to the player. This familiar kinship resonates with players in real life, reflecting their relationship with their parents and further stimulating their thinking of the consequences of breaking family rules.

Figure 4.19. The character's dad incarnates a slender ghost, condemning and trying to catch the unfilial son (players). (Mirages, 2023)

Interestingly, Chinese horror video games often depict resistance to family rules, reflecting the evolving attitudes of younger generations toward traditional norms. As Confucianism is a mainstream ideology (Gao, 2020, p. 87), stresses the strict rules establishment in the family. As a result, some unreasonable and prejudiced traditional ideas have also been passed down. With societal development, young people have come to recognize the inherent flaws in certain traditional rules upheld by their families. For example, because only male family members can be recorded in the genealogy and become the family's descendants in Chinese traditional culture (Wang, 2023, p. 55), to continue the family, the older generations attempt various approaches to help the whole family have male offspring at all costs. Nowadays, people criticize feudal thoughts that discriminate against female offspring and harm the well-being of the living (Yu, 2017, p. 15). In *Paper Bride 3*, the NPC confessed that the ghost caught his grand-cousin's girlfriend as 'debt repaying' because he once wished the ghost that he wanted his cousin, the only male offspring in the younger generation, to have a boy to continue the whole family line (figure 4.20). In the plot, players understand that misery is caused by the elderly's feudal thoughts. Hence, Chinese horror video games can serve as a platform to imply the negative impacts of entrenched feudal ideologies and caution players against blindly clinging to the outdated dross of traditional culture, which may ultimately lead to tragic consequences.

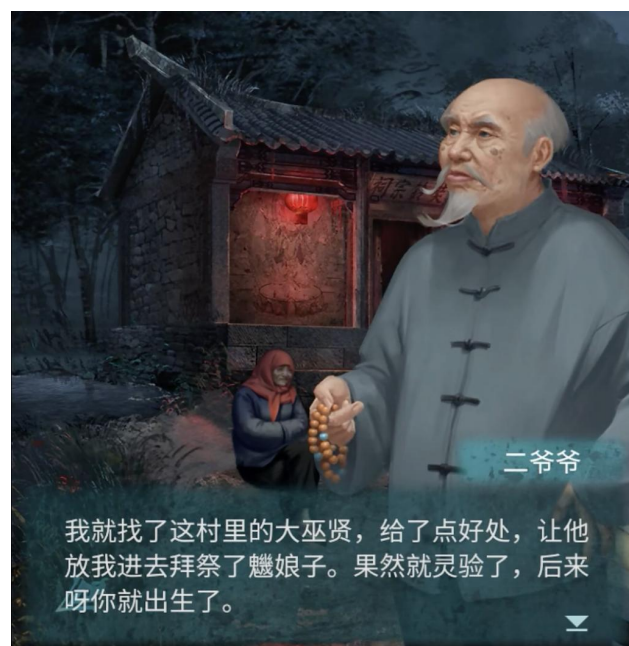*Figure 4.20. The elderly confesses that he once wished the ghost that he wanted to have a boy to continue the whole family line. (Paper Bride 3, 2022)*

4.4.2   *Objects relevant to family and religion as symbolism of respect*

Confucianism regards ancestor worship as an essential approach to showing filial piety and maintaining social order (Lai, 2011, p. 2). As discussed above, Chinese people emphasize Li and the

norms following for family, further derivative the respect of family ancestors. Confucius stresses in *The Analects of Confucius* that people are expected to "serve parents and ancestors with propriety when they are alive. When they die, bury them with propriety, and then worship them with propriety (生，事之以礼；死，葬之以礼，祭之以礼) (Muller, 1991, p.1)." Under the influence, the ancestral shrine is considered an important place for ancestor worship practices. On the one hand, the ancestral shrine symbolizes how prosperous the family is, as shown by the number of ancestor memorial tablets and descendants who come to worship. On the other hand, it also emphasizes the existence of ancestors and the value of following the rules (Xie, 1994, p. 59). The use of ancestor-relevant objects tends to blur the boundary between reality and game. Since every memorial tablet engraved the ancestor's name, when people step into the ancestral shrine and see the memorial tablet, they constantly remind the visitors and worshipers that their actions and behaviors are under examination and can be seen by their ancestors. Objects related to ancestor worship, such as memorial tablets and ancestral shrines, are typically depicted in the in-game background. While most of these objects are not designed as interactive items, their presence is the symbols that remind players of the existence of ancestors and evoke a sense of responsibility and reverence toward them. As a consequence, players feel the concrete stress as these items are closer to their real life, rather than the negative emotions delivered by specific occasions and ghosts that players rarely see in real life in video games.

Notably, the elements related to Gods and Buddhas are also applied in every selected horror game. Although Chinese people have always been considered atheists, from the previous research, the three religions, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, are flattened and seamlessly connected with Chinese traditional death and life values (Feeley, 2014, p. 41). However, Chinese people's respect of Gods and Buddhas is mainly out of practicalism, instead of devout believers in the context of traditional religions. According to Pews research, only 10% of Chinese people have religion with a formal religious identity (Nadeem, 2024). Chinese people believe that worshiping Gods and Buddhas can bring good luck and be blessed, even worshiping them at the last minute before taking action. In horror games, the hanging paintings or statues of Gods and Buddhas appear in space, indicating to players that they are safe in this space. For example, in *Paper Doll*, after players offer incense to the hanging painting of the Buddhas, they can see the following notice: "Blessed by the divinity, this place is absolutely safe (figure 4.21)." Items of Gods or Buddhas symbolize a force that can bless players in the scary space and assist players in competing with the ghosts. However, it is conditional that the blessing and assistance are under the premise that players need to show respect and belief in the Gods or Buddhas, reinforcing the impression of the importance of respect to Gods or Buddhas. As shown on the note in *Paper Doll*: "The Gods will appear to bless the player if they can sense your sincerity" after the player lights an incense stick and places it into an incense burner (figure 4.22). On the contract, it is also important to note that if the statues or paintings are damaged or sprinkled with blood, such as the statues of Buddhas shown in *Paranormal HK*,

implying the power of Gods or Buddhas can no longer withstand the intense and resentful ghosts (figure 4.23). Under this circumstance, players could arouse fear as they will conflict with the ghost, which is even more potent than the power they respect and believe in.

Figure 4.21. Blessed by divinity after burning the incense sticks, also for games' quick save. (Paper Doll, 2019)
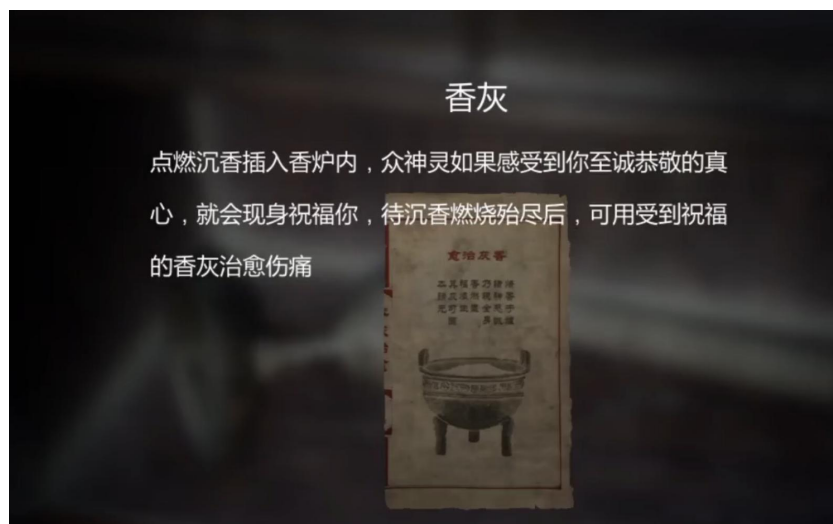

Figure 4.22. After burning the incense sticks, the Gods will appear to bless the player if they can sense your sincerity. (Paper Doll, 2019)

Figure 4.23. The statues of Buddhas are sprinkled with blood. (Paranormal HK, 2020)

4.4.3   Character behavior in-game as the implication of Personal behavior in real life

Different from symbolism, implication tends to imply the influence of causation without saying or knowing it directly. Chinese people believe in the causation between their actions and their future. The thought of doing good things and accumulating kindheartedness and virtue can be found in the three main religions. Confucianism deems that life is a continuous pursuit process, and moral values and doing good are the eternal themes in the process (Wang, 2023, p. 15). "The family that accumulates goodness is sure to have superabundant happiness, and the family that accumulates evil is sure to have superabundant misery (积善之家必有余庆，积不善之家必有余殃)" in *I Ching* shows the causation between virtue practice and life (Legge, 1963, p. 47). Regarding Buddhism, karma and reincarnation are the core concepts in the religion, which believes that a person's rebirth depends on their previous thoughts and actions. Each intentional action, good or bad, produces corresponding karma, and good karma will allow for a good rebirth and vice versa (Hsu et al., 2009, p. 163; Tenzing, 1996, p. 1). Despite Taoism not stressing the importance of virtue and the proactive actions of practicing virtue, *Tao Te Ching*, the representative literature of Taoism, mentions, "In the Way of Heaven, there is no partiality of love; it is always on the side of the good man (天道无亲，常与善人)." (Legge, 2013, p. 32) Due to the influence of religious combinations, Chinese people merged the concepts from the two religions in their life practice. Hence, Chinese people are inclined to interpret the future that can be impacted by their past or current behaviors as not limited to this life but also the life after death in the netherworld and even rebirth.

In horror video games, the causation of personal behavior performances in two forms. The first form is players evidencing the consequence of doing terrible things from a beholder's perspective. For example, in *Firework*, the NPC Tian Xiangrong looted the antiques and jewelry of the tombs of the dead. After the accidental death of his son, his wife blames the son's death on Tian

as she considers taking burial objects from a dead person's tomb as owing a debt to the person (figure 4.24). Consequently, the living need to pay something back to pay off the debt. Their son, in the story, becomes the object of repaying Tian's debt to the deceased. Simultaneously, players can see the causation shown in karma. In *Mirages*, when players have a conversation with the pig in the barn, the pig will tell players that he was the barn guard in the past life. Since the grain in the barn was stolen, he apologized by death as he could not make up for the fault of the improper guards (figure 4.25). Pigs are normally considered the main source of meat, thus, being born a pig indicates the inevitable fate of being slaughtered. In the context of Mirages, the pig guard implies to players that people who have done wrong will still suffer the pain of karma even if they are reincarnated. The second form is players experience the influence of karma from the first-person perspective. In *Paper Doll 2*, as the reincarnation of one of Madam Yin's souls (figure 4.26), the players portray character comes to the dilapidated dwelling to release the caging souls of dead innocent opera actors killed by Madam. Yin decades ago, releasing them to reincarnate. As players progress, they are confronted with various challenges that symbolize the process of atonement and redemption. This immersive experience deepens the narrative and reinforces the themes of karma and moral consequences. By directly engaging with the karmic repercussions of past actions, players gain a profound understanding of how their in-game actions are interwoven with the storyline.

Figure 4.24. He (Tian's wife) condemns him on the bus, implying the death of their son is because Tian took burial objects from a dead person's tomb and thus owed a debt to the dead. (Firework, 2021)

Figure 4.25. The barn guard who reincarnated into a pig. (Mirages, 2023)

Figure 4.26. A voiceover says that the character that players control is the reincarnation of one of Madam Yin's souls. (Paper Doll 2, 2020)

These two aspects significantly illustrate the influence of personal behavior on the future, enriching the story background and details in horror video games while also mirroring players' real-life behavior. As players face various situations and make numerous decisions daily, the concepts of karma and causation in these games stimulate players to reflect on their own actions. This reflection connects their personal experiences with the game's narrative, creating a deeper engagement with the story and fostering a sense of introspection about their behavior in real life.

5. Conclusion

This research explored the representation of Chinese traditional death and life values in Chinese horror video games. This study lays the groundwork for future research on the intersection of cultural heritage and video game narratives. Highlighting the integration of traditional values into horror video games, opens avenues for exploring how these cultural elements can enrich storytelling and enhance player engagement across various genres. To examine how the in-game elements of traditional death and life values are presented and what the purpose of horror video games use the elements, this study first builds an extensive theoretical framework and conducts a qualitative textual analysis. Analyzing filtered data through thematic analysis identifies four themes: *eliciting emotional reaction through shared cultural background, arousing suspense and tension by cultural elements, exploring the unknown past events,* and *reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication.* The first theme, *eliciting emotional reactions through shared cultural background*, illustrates how cultural elements such as ghosts, funerals, and taboos, derived from traditional Chinese folklore, can provoke emotional responses in players.

Notably, these emotional responses are relatively involuntary, as players are compelled to face these elements rather than choosing to do so. The second theme, *arousing suspense and tension by cultural elements*, also revolves around players' psychological reactions, but the sub-themes here involve less intense psychological effects. Players have more control over their interactions, such as choosing whether to use certain items or read texts. This autonomy results in less intense emotional impacts, as players can engage with the game on their own terms. The third theme, *exploring the unknown past events,* highlights how supernatural elements tied to traditional culture are employed to depict life and death values in horror video games. In contrast to the second theme, which centers on players' curiosity about present or future events, this theme involves uncovering past events through supernatural means. This progressive discovery aids players in understanding the game's story more thoroughly. The fourth theme, *reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication*, connects in-game narratives with real-life experiences, extending the impact of the game beyond the virtual environment. By incorporating concepts related to family and social rules, religions, and personal behaviors, players can relate to these elements and reflect on their own lives. Additionally, examining the four themes, the study also found that the purpose of Chinese horror video games is to utilize elements to depict Chinese traditional death and life values not only adhering to the general concepts but reinforcing the core of the game and boosting its pliability. Horror video games also provide players with a fresh lens to interpret and challenge their former impressions of ghosts and traditional Chinese norms.

To sum up, the use of Chinese traditional death and life values in horror games extends beyond merely providing physical horror that resonates with players' cultural backgrounds. These games establish a profound connection to players' realities by embedding familiar cultural elements and narratives. As a result, players are able to carry the gaming experience beyond the virtual realm,

experiencing after-effects as they draw parallels between the in-game plots or elements and their own lives. This immersive approach not only enhances the horror experience but also fosters a deeper reflection on personal and cultural beliefs, making the gameplay more impactful and meaningful.

It is essential to mention that all the codes presented in the results presented above are based on the extracted visual texts. The musical texts, and lyrics in songs, were also coded as study codes, but the lyrics in the songs presented are rather irrelevant to horror. The songs' topics include a summary of the story of the whole horror game and the metaphor for the tragic fate of the NPC. Additionally, except for a scene from the opera, *The Purple Hairpin*, which is played in the middle of the video game *Paranormal HK*, connecting with Chinese traditional culture, the rest of the songs are concentrated at the end of the video game. The songs are not so much relevant to traditional death and life values as more like relaxing the player's mood after playing the game, providing a buffer area for players to come back to real life from video games.

5.1 Theoretical implications

The study referred to theories from three key areas to establish a comprehensive framework. The first academic field discussed is horror video games, which is the focal point of this study. This field provided foundational insights into how horror elements are constructed, perceived, and experienced by players. Next, relevant studies and theories of cultural heritage presentation in video games were examined. This interdisciplinary approach explored how video games can serve as mediums for cultural transmission and preservation. Finally, the theoretical framework was further refined by narrowing the discussion to Chinese traditional death and life values, specifically focusing on folklore and the principles of the three main religions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. This specification was essential to address the research focus accurately.

The chosen theories have proved suitable for this research in several ways. Firstly, theories from the field of horror video games about players' emotional responses supported the formation of themes during the analysis session. For example, the results aligned with Gowler and Iacovides's (2019, p. 11) statement that the uncertainties inherent in horror games can evoke negative emotions. By employing established concepts from video game studies, themes could be systematically identified and categorized. In addition, the study uncovers the academic study potential of non-survival horror video games, to some extent corresponding to the suggestion from Christopher and Leuszler (2022, p. 211) that the research range of horror video games should be extended outside of survival. Simultaneously, integrating theories from cultural heritage presentation in video games significantly illuminated theoretical gaps and underscored the urgency of introducing cultural heritage representation from a game research perspective. They provide a lens to examine how video games can encapsulate and convey cultural narratives, traditions, and values.

In addition, the study particularly put eyes on commercial video games. As Majewski (2015, p. 5) indicates, commercial video games do not aim to represent culture accurately, on the contrary, they introduce cultural elements to evoke players' cultural identity and games' playability. Agreeing

with Rollinger (2020, p. 39) and Cole (2022, p. 926) positive attitudes toward the inaccuracy of cultural heritage representation in commercial video games. However, it is important to note that the representation of Chinese traditional death and life values are embedded in the complete Chinese cultural context, which is embodied in the field of Chinese traditional death and life values, theories related to folklore and the three religions served as crucial theoretical supports in this study. With the help of theories, it can be recognized the application of ancient Chinese thoughts and religious and folklore tools represent Chinese traditional death and life values throughout the studied horror video games, The representation of Chinese cultural heritage, especially the concept of life and death advances to a new area of research: video game studies.

With regard to the research method applied in this research, the qualitative thematic analysis is particularly suitable for this study. For one reason, this study had no participants and focused solely on analyzing the gameplay video texts. Textual analysis is a qualitative research method well-suited for examining texts in various formats and interpreting their meanings and context (Frey et al. 1999, p.1). Another reason is that the study's objective is to extract codes from the video game text and identify patterns to conclude as themes. Thematic analysis, in this context, is invaluable as it helps to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data (Elo & Kyngas, 2008, p. 109). By using thematic analysis, the study effectively embed Chinese traditional death and life values organically under the perspective of video game research, ensuring that the cultural nuances are accurately represented and interpreted. Moreover, thematic analysis is an effective approach to gathering the scattered texts in video games and coding them, further forming logical, coherent themes. Consequencely, this hybrid approach supported this research in a comprehensive exploration way. Notably, this study breaks new ground by integrating thematic analysis from the psychological perspectives of players into the realm of in-game text analysis, broadening the potential applications of thematic analysis within the field of game studies.

5.2 Societal implications

Firstly, this research offers a clear guide for general readers to intuitively identify the elements related to Chinese life and death values. Through gaining insight into the intricate ways in which the values are woven into the fabric of horror video games, readers can improve their understanding of how cultural elements are set in Chinese horror games, broadening their cultural horizons and enhancing their ability to identify the application of traditional values in other texts. With the popularity of Chinese horror video games worldwide, this research also provides a platform for dialogue between Chinese and Western audiences to promote the dissemination and communication of Chinese culture. Secondly, understanding the representation of Chinese traditional values of life and death allows developers to create more authentic and culturally resonant gaming experiences, catering to diverse audiences fostering cross-cultural appreciation within the gaming community and creating a platform for contributing to the preservation of cultural heritage. The video games studied in this research belong to commercial video games, providing valuable insights for professionals in

the gaming industry. Armed with knowledge of Chinese traditional cultural elements, developers can make more informed decisions during game development, leading to higher-quality horror games and potentially lucrative business opportunities. Finally, for scholars, this research provides insights into the practical application of Chinese views on life and death within contexts of video games, thus addressing a gap in the intersection between culture and gaming. By examining how these themes are represented and interpreted within Chinese horror video games, scholars can deepen their understanding of cultural dynamics within digital media and explore new avenues for cultural analysis within the gaming industry.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this study provides valuable insights into what way Chinese traditional death and life values are represented in Chinese horror video games, this study had several limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, given the vastness and depth of Chinese culture, it is challenging to exhaustively elaborate on traditional life and death values within the scope of this study. Moreover, as the study emphasizes the perspective of game research rather than cultural study, the accuracy and depth of the representation of Chinese traditional culture might not be fully guaranteed. Scholars specializing in cultural studies may find it beneficial to examine the cultural accuracy depicted in video games and assess the study's results from their specialized research perspectives in future investigations. This approach could provide theoretical support for video game development and the preservation of cultural heritage within games. Secondly, the study employed qualitative research methods, which inevitably involve personal interpretation. Consequently, the subjective analysis and accumulation of personal knowledge could limit the research. Future researchers can build upon these findings, critically examine the results, and further develop the four identified themes. By doing so, they can provide a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between traditional values and their representation in video games.

Additionally, the chosen Chinese horror video games have their own limitations. The selection of video games was restricted by certain criteria, as discussed in the sampling section. With the continuous development of Chinese horror video games, in-game elements are likely to become more varied and carry deeper cultural implications. Future researchers could use the results of this study to investigate the evolution and diverse representations of life and death values in other horror games. Furthermore, the research results could be applied to the broader video game field to determine whether elements related to traditional life and death values in other video game genres exhibit similar patterns or can be analyzed using similar themes.

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Appendix A: Code book

Code	Description	Example
The Nether World	The world of the dead, where the deceased stay temporarily before reincarnation	Conversation between characters in *Paper Bride*
Yin and Yang	A term from Taoism, describes an opposite but interconnected, self-perpetuating cycle	The notes shown in *Paranormal HK*
Seven worship periods	Forty-nine days to wake the dead's spiritual	Conversation between characters in *Paper Bride*
Spirit returns	The return of souls or (huns and pos) of somebody who has died	The ritual practice shown in *Paper Bride*
Fashu	Application of alleged supernatural powers of magic by conducting special rituals to do something on purpose such as praying or warding off evil	The notes shown in *Paranormal HK*
Hun and Po	Types of souls in Chinese traditional culture relate to Yin and Yang. Every human being is considered to have three Huns and seven Pos.	The notes shown in *Paranormal HK*
Divination	The attempt to gain insight into a question or situation by way of an occult ritual or practice to interact with supernatural agencies	The ritual practice shown in *Paper Bride*
Charm paper	Traditionally used for numerous ritual purposes to encourage good fortune or to prevent harm	The ghost repression practice shown in *Paranormal HK*
Ghost	The dead who have not reincarnated	The ghost mom shown in *Paranormal HK*
The Ghost Festival	The day that ghosts and spirits, including those of deceased ancestors, come out from the Nether World to visit the living, also known as the Zhongyuan Festival in Taoism and the Yulanpen Festival in Buddhism.	Mentioned by one of the NPCs in *Paranormal HK*, she is waiting for her dead daughter to come back on that day
Double Third Festival	The festival holds elaborate ancestor worship ceremonies. The day that ghosts and spirits, will come out from the Nether World	The day the main character gets a ghost marriage in *Mirages*
Gods and Buddhas	Items relevant to Gods and Buddhas, such as statues and paintings	Paining hangs in the room in *Mirages*

The respect of Gods and Buddhas	Believing individuals will be punished if they do something bad to the shrine or statues of Gods and Buddhas	In the monologue from the main character in *Paper Bride*, he promises the god statues to fix the broken he made to beg god will not punish him
Reincarnation	Meaning that the soul of a human being is immortal and does not disperse after the physical body has perished. The passing of a soul from one body to another (human or animal) after death.	The granary guards reincarnate into animals in the *Mirages*
Long Living	The pursuit of longevity and immortal life	The in-game item in *Paper Bride*
Taboo on the Dead	Includes the taboo against touching the dead, people close to or surrounding the dead, and anything associated with the dead	The NPCs discuss stole treasures from wealthy dead's tomb in *Firework*
The deceased's reluctance to leave This World	The deceased linger in This World as they are mentally clinging to something in the world	The souls ghosts that linger in the Regret City in *Mirages*
Zhizha	Paper art is used for festive or funeral decorations and offerings, such as paper houses, paper cars, and paper phones. People burn them for the dead so they can use the things in the nether world	The main objects placed in the funeral materials store that the main character goes to in *Paper Bride*
Ghost money	Also known as Joss Paper, it is most often used for venerating those departed as people believe their deceased family members can spend the money in the nether world or have sufficient means in the afterlife	The object that NPC uses in *Mirages* to ask the ghost how to get out of the Regret City
Spiritual flag	Long narrow flag to call back the spirit of the dead	The in-game element in *Paper Bride*
Fictional religious elements	Game developers adopted concepts from different religions and created new religious-like elements	The Buddha Liuzang that villagers worship in *Paper Bride*
The ghost marriage	Marriage in which one or both parties are deceased, mainly aims to continue the family line or fulfill the request of the deceased. In a ghost marriage, many of the typical marriage rites are observed.	The opening animation of *Mirages*
Bride	The woman who wears traditional Chinese wedding clothes	Figures shown in *Paper Bride*

Wedding preparation	Items prepare for the wedding, such as gift boxes, clothes for the couple	The items shown at the wedding celebration store in *Paper Bride*
Karma	People's intentions and actions influence their future, mainly about one's rebirth	What the NPC did in *Paper Bride* caused the curse
Name of religions	Name of religions mentioned in conversation	The conversation between the main character and NPC in *Paper Bride*
Bagua	A set of symbols from China intended to illustrate the nature of reality as being composed of mutually opposing forces reinforcing one another, normally used such as astronomy, divination, meditation, astrology and feng shui	The symbol found in the opera theater in *Paranormal HK*
Five elements	Used in many traditional Chinese fields of study to explain a wide array of phenomena, including cosmic cycles and related individual personality and destiny	The in-game element in *Mirages*
Four pillars of destiny	Also known as "Ba-Zi," which means "eight characters," is a Chinese astrological concept to divine an individual's destiny or fate by applying their birth year, month, day, and hour	The in-game element in *Paper Bride*
Four Symbols	Four mythological creatures, viewed as the guardians of the four cardinal directions, are closely associated with various aspects, including color, seasons of the year, virtues, and the Five Elements	The in-game element in *Paper Doll*
Ancestral shrine	A small temple dedicated to deified ancestors and progenitors of surname lineages or families in the Chinese tradition. Ancestral temples are closely linked to Confucian philosophy and culture and the emphasis that it places on filial piety.	The in-game element in *Paper Bride*

Lantern	Decoration applies in both weddings and funerals	The in-game element in *Firework*
Memorial tablet	For memorizing the deceased family numbers, normally placed in ancestral shrine, home or cemetery	The in-game element in *Firework*
Tomb	The place regarded as burying the deceased, normally, there is a tombstone in front of the tomb	The in-game element in *Firework*
Funeral wreath	A symbol of continuity, the funeral wreath represents the circle of eternal life.	The in-game element in *Firework*
The portrait of the deceased	Pictures of relatives who have passed away, normally for memorize the family member and put on coffins at the funeral, it will be burned or kept at home after the burial	The in-game element in *Firework*
Coffin	The funerary box is used for viewing or keeping a corpse, either for burial or cremation	The in-game element in *Firework*
The Offerings	Objects offer to gods or family ancestors to show respect and/or pray for blessing, including food, burning incense, candles, flowers and drinks	The in-game element in *Firework*
Social norms	Reminding individuals to be well-behaved or act by following the social norms	Conversation between characters in *Paper Bride*
Personal Behaviour	Individuals' proactively behaviour would lead to different outcomes in, rewards for good behaviors and comeuppance for doing bad things	Conversation between characters in *Mirages*
Family continuation	The way of keeping the family lines, is usually through marriage and procreation.	Conversation between characters in *Paper Bride*
Harmonious and happy in family	Good wishes that individuals hoped their family would be harmonious and happy, as Chinese people believe harmony in a family makes everything successful.	Conversation between characters in *Mirages*
Patriotism	The feeling of love, devotion to a country and the willingness to do good things for its citizens	Conversation between characters in *Mirages*

Filial obedience to parents	Obedience to what parents said or arranged, showing love and respect, and keeping bringing reputation to family	Conversation between characters in *Mirages*
Questioning to fate	Individuals who question their written fate and believe they can rewrite their lives by taking actions	Conversation between characters in *Mirages*
Natural laws	Natural laws that do (should) not change by human will such as birth, getting old, and death	The in-game element in *Paper Bride*
Accept one's fate	Believing all the things and materials acquired in life are planned by fate	The conversation between characters in *Mirages*
Satisfaction of life	Be satisfied and accepting to the current life, or feeling lucky in certain situations	The couplets hang in the room in *Paper Doll*
Debt	If someone borrowed or owed something from the dead and the gods, the person or his/her offspring need to pay it back, otherwise, the person will be punished by ghosts or gods	The Chapter title in *Firework*
Songs with lyrics	Songs with lyrics played in video games	The ending song in *Firework*

Appendix B: Code tree

Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
Eliciting emotional reaction through shared cultural background	Fear and empathy from the existence of ghosts	Ghost
		The deceased's reluctance to leave This World
		The Ghost Festival
		Double Third Festival
		The Nether World
	Instinctive avoidance and experiencing a sense of contrast in particular folklife	Zhizha
		The ghost marriage
		The offerings
		Bride
		Ghost money
	Dread revolving around the taboo of death	Coffin
		Tomb
		The portrait of the deceased
		Funeral wreath
		Taboo on the Dead
Arousing suspense and tension by cultural elements	Suspense and tension from using interactional cultural items	Four Symbols
		Fictional religious elements
		Bagua
		Charm paper
	Suspense and tension from reading non-interactional texts	Spiritual return
		Yin and Yang
		Hun and Po
		Seven worship periods

Exploring the unknown past events	Investigating the unknown past event with the assistance of the supernatural	Fashu
		Divination
Reflecting reality by using symbolism and implication	The symbolism of following Chinese traditional rules	Filial obedience to parents
		Family continuation
		Social norms
	Objects relevant to family and religion as symbolism of respect	Gods and Buddhas
		Memorial tablet
		Ancestral shrine
		The respect of Gods and Buddhas
	Character behavior in-game as the implication of Personal behavior in real life	Personal Behaviour
		Karma
		Reincarnation
		Debt