02
Bound by Love

Game design | Role-playing games | Family relationship research

Project brief:
The game lets players experience the oppressive **parent-child** relationship in a Chinese family, which **encourages mutual respect and trust** for true communication between parents and children.
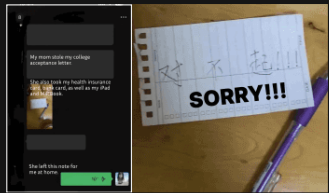
2024. 5 - 2024. 7
Individual project
Demo: https://youtu.be/EgML2UNNXnA

INSPIRATION
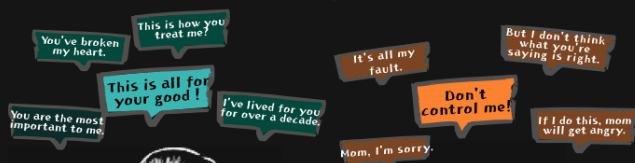
● **A ture story of an incoming freshman**
I came across a story from network about JiaJia, who posted that her mom stole her university admission letter because her mom wanted her to become a local teacher. This sparked a heated discussion online about **extreme control from parents.**

SORRY!!!

"My mom has strong controlling tendencies; she has interfered in every aspect of my life."
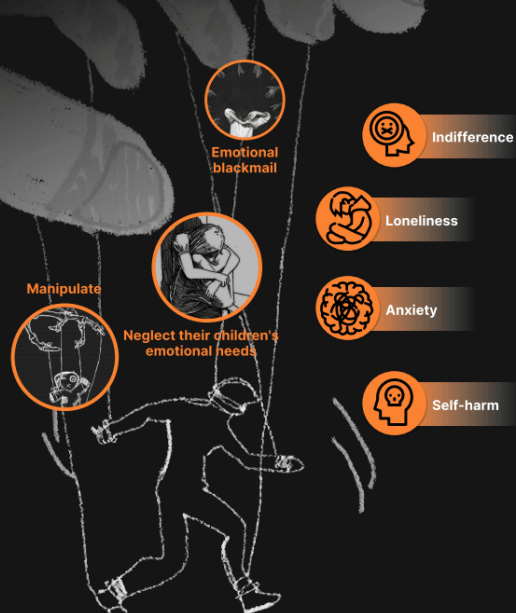
● **My similar experience**
For me, though my mom doesn't control me in such an extreme way, she still put a lot of subtle pressure on me. Before entering university, I felt **exhasted under her extreme care.** Even though I got into one of China's top universities, it seems like I still have endless heavy goals.
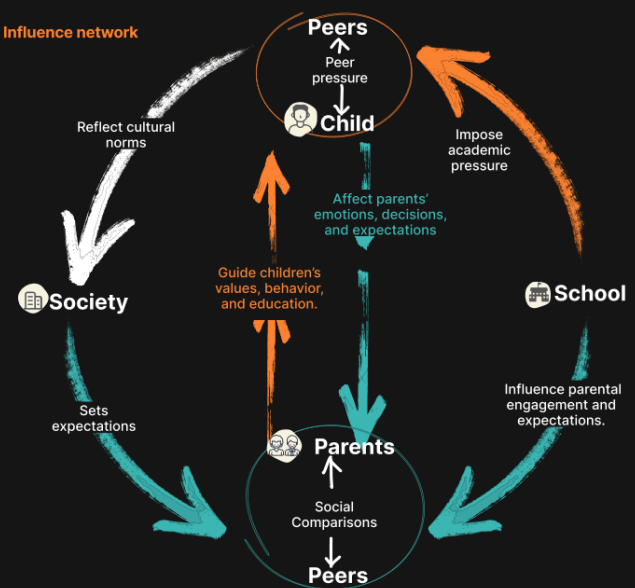
You've broken my heart.
This is how you treat me?
This is all for your good !
But I don't think what you're saying is right.
You are the most important to me.
It's all my fault.
I've lived for you for over a decade.
Don't control me!
Mom, I'm sorry.
If I do this, mom will get angry.

RESEARCH ON CHINESE FAMILIES

● **How parental control shapes relationships and its impact**
In many traditional Chinese families, there seems to be a strong emphasis on parental control and authority. Parents often take an overly involved or controlling role in their children's lives.

Emotional blackmail

Manipulate

Neglect their children's emotional needs

● Indifference
● Loneliness
● Anxiety
● Self-harm

● **Influence network**

Peers — Peer pressure — Child
Reflect cultural norms
Impose academic pressure
Affect parents' emotions, decisions, and expectations
Guide children's values, behavior, and education.
Society
Sets expectations
School
Influence parental engagement and expectations.
Parents — Social Comparisons — Peers

External pressures on families put **parents in the spotlights.** In an oppressive parent-child relationship, parents, who should help manage stress, end up being the main source of it. I want to understand how both parents and children view this relationship and its reasons.

Parent-child user research

·Education and success
83% of respondents agree that a person's level of education is an important factor for success.

·Extracurricular overload
78% of parents in Beijing choose to enroll their children in extracurricular tutoring classes.

·Limited equality
43% of mothers hope to establish an equal interactive relationship with their children.

·Education-first mindset
38% of parents agree with the statement "In order for my child to have a happy future, I believe education should be prioritized while they are young."

·Clear arrangements
30% of parents have clear arrangements and expectations for their children's daily life and studies.

·Academic focus
80% of 8th-grade students say their parents care most about their academic performance.

·Neglected interests
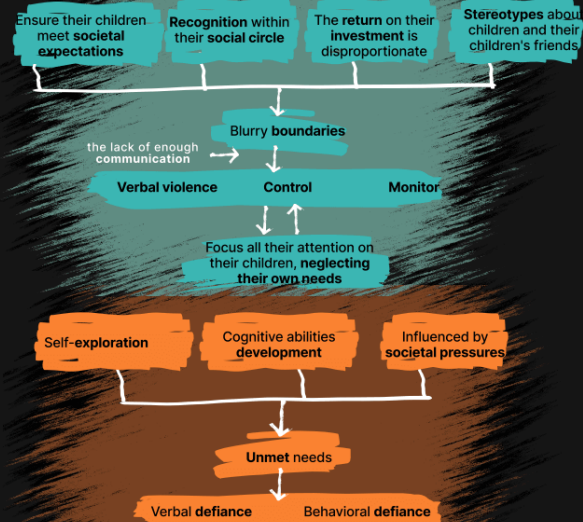**11%** of students think their parents focus on their interests or talents.

·Communication
22% of eighth-grade students said "Parents almost never spend time talking with me."

·Lack of support
38% of teenagers turn to their parents as their main source of support when facing troubles.

83% 43% 78% 38% 30% 80% 11% 22% 38%

Parent-child insight

Ensure their children meet societal expectations
Recognition within their social circle
The return on their investment is disproportionate
Stereotypes about children and their children's friends

the lack of enough communication — Blurry boundaries

Verbal violence — Control — Monitor

Focus all their attention on their children, neglecting their own needs

Self-exploration | Cognitive abilities development | Influenced by societal pressures

Unmet needs

Verbal defiance — Behavioral defiance

In China, this tense parent–child relationship is very common. However, its effect are hardly be noticed. So, I created a game where people can experience this oppressive, Chinese-style family dynamic and to inspire them to build relationships with mutual respect and trust.

IDEATION

Why game?

Emotions expression ession
The game uses task mechanics, scene changes, and other elements to express complex emotions.

Deep role immersion ersion
The game creates a strong connection between the user and the character, allowing for deep focus and engagement.
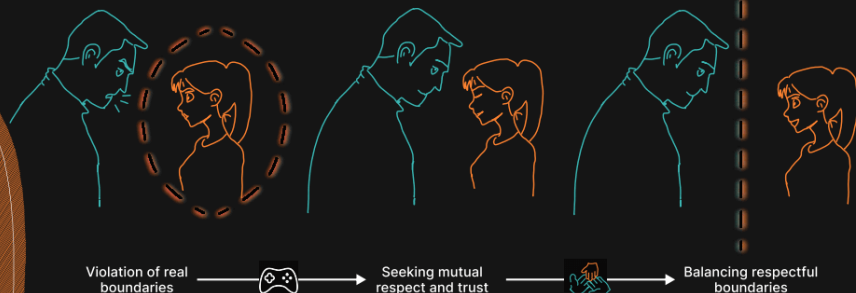
Target players

Parents
For those looking to better understand the impact of their behavior on their teenage children and learn how to foster healthier interactions.

Teenagers
For those who may be facing challenges in their relationships with their parents, offering them a way to reflect on and understand their emotions and reactions.
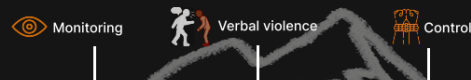
What they can get from the game?

Violation of real boundaries → Seeking mutual respect and trust → Balancing respectful boundaries

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STORYLINE

Monitoring — Verbal violence — Control

Play mode
Single-player: Players experience the game from the child's perspective

Game mechanics
Challenges should be designed to reflect the parent's different typical behaviors

Winning conditions
The player "wins" by asserting child rights

Ending
The child gains respect but loses it again

Core themes
Shows a trained parent-child relationship from different aspects

About "Control"
Symbol of control
Visualize control using a spider, a puppet, or anything with threads.

Other characters
Use other characters to represent the child's friends, making it easier to express the parents' social interference in the child's life.

Control behaviors
Through certain detailed objects or scenes, allow players to understand the daily controlling behaviors of parents.

About "Love"
Small spider
Touch players with adorable characters.

Parents' past
Through parents' excellent experiences, understand that they were once independent and positive.

Parents' care
Expressing parents' instinctive love through certain detailed objects.

I hope

Parents
Let parents experience the impact of their own actions from the child's perspective, encourage them to try to understand their children and also care about their needs.
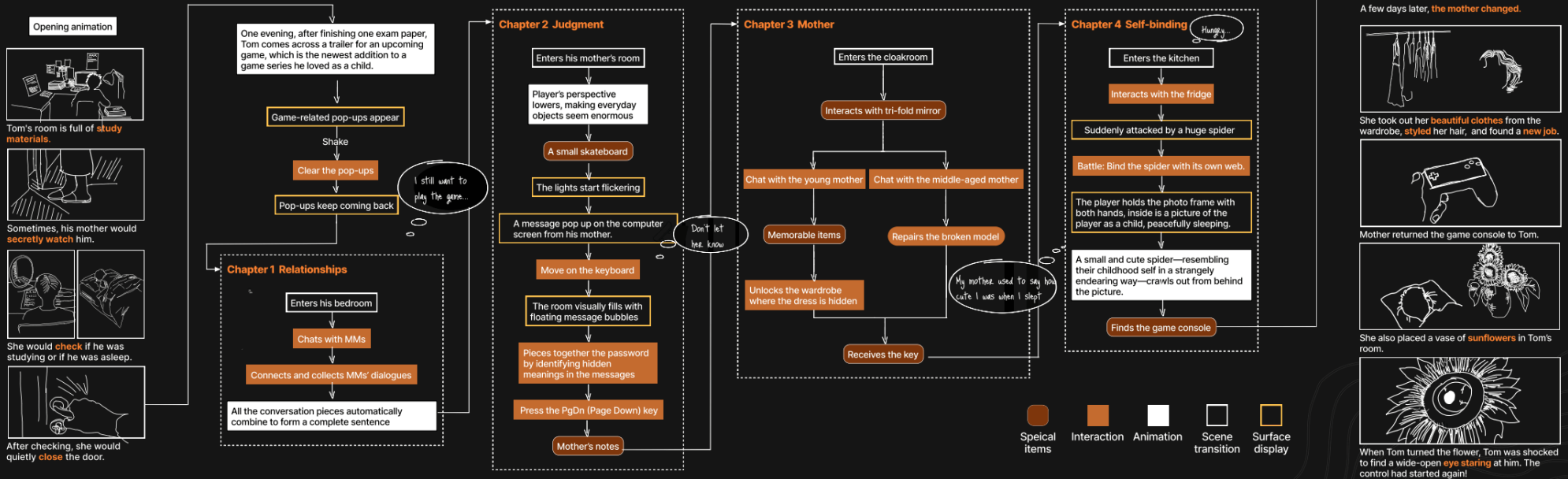
Teenagers
Through playing this game, children can understand that their parents' love is unquestionable and intuitive, and that the suffocating control comes from misguided beliefs or approaches.
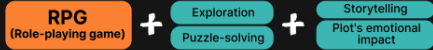
GAME FLOW

Tom's room is full of **study materials**.

Sometimes, his mother would **secretly watch** him.

She would **check** if he was studying or if he was asleep.

After checking, she would quietly **close** the door.

One evening, after finishing one exam paper, Tom comes across a trailer for an upcoming game, which is the newest addition to a game series he loved as a child.

Game-related pop-ups appear

↓ Shake

Clear the pop-ups

Pop-ups keep coming back

I still want to play the game...

Chapter 1 Relationships

Enters his bedroom

Chats with MMs

Connects and collects MMs' dialogues

All the conversation pieces automatically combine to form a complete sentence

Chapter 2 Judgment

Enters his mother's room

Player's perspective lowers, making everyday objects seem enormous

A small skateboard

The lights start flickering

A message pop up on the computer screen from his mother.

Don't let her know

Move on the keyboard

The room visually fills with floating message bubbles

Pieces together the password by identifying hidden meanings in the messages

Press the PgDn (Page Down) key

Mother's notes

Chapter 3 Mother

Enters the cloakroom

Interacts with tri-fold mirror

Chat with the young mother | Chat with the middle-aged mother

Memorable items | Repairs the broken model

Unlocks the wardrobe where the dress is hidden

My mother used to say how cute I was when I slept

Receives the key

Chapter 4 Self-binding

Hungry...

Enters the kitchen

Interacts with the fridge

Suddenly attacked by a huge spider

Battle: Bind the spider with its own web.

The player holds the photo frame with both hands, inside is a picture of the player as a child, peacefully sleeping.

A small and cute spider—resembling their childhood self in a strangely endearing way—crawls out from behind the picture.

Finds the game console

Ending animation

A few days later, **the mother changed.**

She took out her **beautiful clothes** from the wardrobe, **styled** her hair, and found a **new job.**

Mother returned the game console to Tom.

She also placed a vase of **sunflowers** in Tom's room.

When Tom turned the flower, Tom was shocked to find a wide-open **eye staring** at him. The control had started again!

Legend
- **Speical items**
- **Interaction**
- Animation
- Scene transition
- Surface display

GAME WORLDBUILDING

Game Type

RPG (Role-playing game) + Exploration + Puzzle-solving + Storytelling + Plot's emotional impact
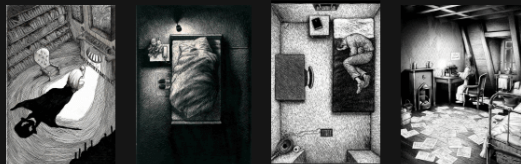
Background

In China, almost all high school seniors must take the Gaokao (National Higher Education Entrance Examination), **an important exam** that give chances to enter top universities.

Parents also pay a lot of attention to the exam and some even go so far as to closely **monitor** and **control** their children's daily lives to help them succeed.
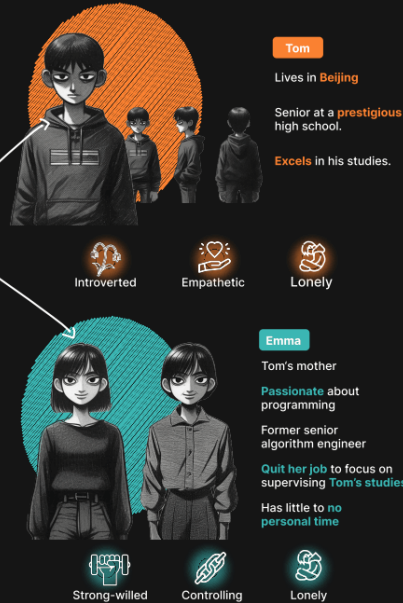
Gaokao

Visual style

- **Pencil drawing**
- **Dark atmosphere**
- **Psychological horror**

Character design

Tom
Lives in **Beijing**

Senior at a **prestigious** high school.

Excels in his studies.

- Introverted
- Empathetic
- Lonely

Emma
Tom's mother

Passionate about programming

Former senior algorithm engineer

Quit her job to focus on supervising **Tom's studies**

Has little to **no personal time**

- Strong-willed
- Controlling
- Lonely

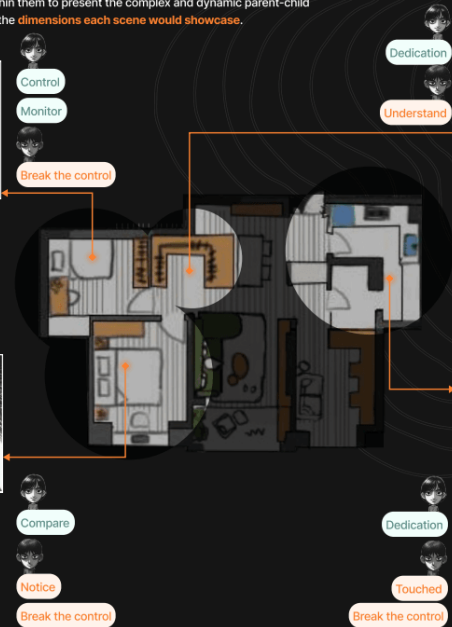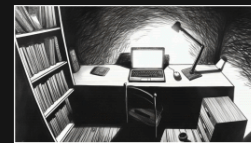## Scene setting

I designed several **scenes and the objects** within them to present the complex and dynamic parent-child relationship from different aspects, and listed the **dimensions each scene would showcase.**

Tom's bedroom
Control · Monitor · Break the control

The place where Tom sleeps and studies

The giant eye dominates the room, evoking a sense of being watched or surveilled.

Emma's bedroom
Compare · Notice · Break the control

The place where Emma sleeps and works

The blank computer screen suggests a lack of clarity or direction in her own goals or ambitions, possibly sacrificed to prioritize her family's needs.

Cloakroom
Dedication · Understand

The place piled with Tom's clothes mostly

It symbolizes the Emma pouring too much of herself into her child, even at the expense of her own needs.

Kitchen
Dedication · Touched · Break the control

The place where Emma goes to great lengths to prepare three meals a day for Tom

The cold, detached atmosphere of this central space for family reflects a lack of warmth or connection within the family dynamic.

Items

Tom's bedroom

Diary   **Contact list**   **MM**

Demonstrating the mother's desire for monitor through recording and analyzing the child's social life, showing her need to know everything about the child.

Emma's bedroom

Skateboard   **Laptop**

Demonstrate the mother's controlling nature and competitive mindset by limiting the player's skateboard usage time and bombarding them with messages from the mother.

Cloakroom

Trophies   **Books**   **Tickets**   **Gown**

Use these items to present the image of an independent and accomplished woman.

Kitchen

Spider mother and her baby

Use the spider mother to represent mothers and the little spiders to move the players emotionally.

INTERFACE AND CONTROL

● Control

Click

Interact with objects

W
A S D

Movement controls

Spacebar

Jump

● UI design

Button

START
Start the game

X
Close

Skip
Skip the animation

Back

Tooltip

Wardrobe
Hover tittle of item

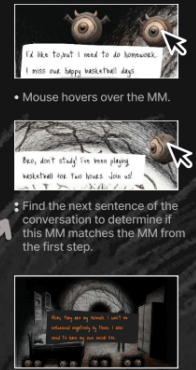Info navigation
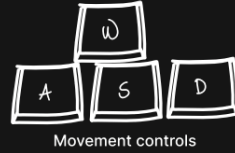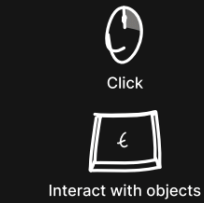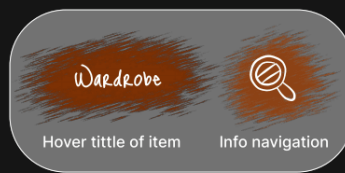
GAME GALLERY

● Opening animation

I introduced Tom's daily life through this opening animation, **showing Emma's controlling role** through her monitoring behavior, which Tom may be unaware of or too afraid to express anger about.
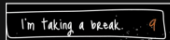
● Chapter 1

Explore the bedroom and discover that Emma is secretly monitoring Tom's social life. The player must correctly **pair the MMs** in the specific conversation, distinguished by different colors, and place them into black boxes. This also symbolizes the child's **protest against social surveillance**.

• Mouse hovers over the MM.

❖ Find the next sentence of the conversation to determine if this MM matches the MM from the first step.

❖ This screen will appear once all matches are successfully paired
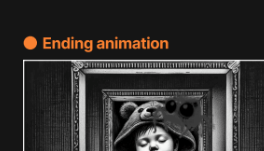
● Chapter 2

Complete an online chat with their mother within a limited time and find a four-digit password hidden in the **chat bubbles**, whose content reveals the Emma's tendency for **comparison and sense of superiority**.

• Find the skateboard.

• Interact with the number corresponding to the option on the keyboard

• Pay attention to the interaction timing. Mom doesn't allow Tom to play with the skateboard, so make sure not to get caught by her while pressing.

● Chapter 3

Explore the wardrobe to **uncover Emma's past**. By finding the young mother's dress and repairing the middle-aged mother's model, the player obtains a key to proceed to the next chapter.

● Chapter 4

Bind the large spider with spider webs to beat it, reminding people that **a mother's love can also bind her.**

● Ending animation

I created an animated bad ending for the game, where everything seems to be **getting better**, but ultimately it **returns to square one**. This represents the **repetition** of negative patterns in a parent-child relationship, indicating that the issues are not easily resolved and continue to recur despite efforts to break free.