摘要

随着信息技术和社会经济的发展，网络游戏越来越深刻地影响着人们的生活。女性社会地位的提升和生活水平的提高使得以"模拟恋爱"为主要卖点的乙女游戏市场迅速发展壮大。乙女游戏的游戏内容主要是通过文字、画面和声音来和虚拟男性角色"谈恋爱"，游戏中包含了许多语言和非语言的符号元素。然而，目前社会语言学学者对中国乙女类的认识仍然较少，与之前将电子游戏视为符号潜力的研究一致，本研究以两部最受欢迎的中国乙女游戏《恋与制作人》和《光与夜之恋》作为研究对象，考察两部游戏如何利用英语来建构属于都市中产阶级的完美浪漫故事。

本研究将批评社会语言学中的"语言渴望" (Piller, 2002; Piller & Takahashi, 2006, 2010) 作为理论框架，将近距离游玩（Chang，2010）和多模态话语分析（Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009）作为电子游戏数据分析方法，发现《恋与制作人》与《光与夜之恋》两部国产乙女游戏使用英语以及西式的符号来建构中产阶级浪漫，并将游戏角色设定为是新经济自由主义下的多语精英。英语成为角色构建浪漫关系的重要资本：虚拟角色被设计为精通多种语言、拥有海外职业的精英，采用英语诗歌和戏剧与玩家展开浪漫剧情。在游戏的画面设计上，游戏中则充满了用英语和西式元素打造的浪漫景观，将"浪漫"与"西式"结合在一起。在人物性格上，游戏主角们会使用企业家话语来展现新经济自由主义下的外语学习者所具备的自立能力和自我负责的品质（De Costa, 2020; Li，2021），他们通过超语实践来确立自己作为双语个体和全球公民的自我身份。本研究认为，虽然诸如《恋与制作人》和《光与夜之恋》的国产乙女游戏是面向女性玩家、为女性提供恋爱体验的游戏，但它依然再造了"男强女弱"的性别等级制，并且宣扬了以英语和西方文化为导向的意识形态。

本文通过研究游戏内部的符号学表征，为现有的语言和游戏研究作出了贡献。通过探究恋爱游戏中以英语和西方文化建构浪漫的方式，本研究希望能够为中国乙女游戏制作者如何在新全球化时代创新中国文化传播、打造更加本土化的恋爱游戏提供新的思考。

关键字：电子游戏；符号；浪漫；语言渴望

Chapter One Introduction

This chapter first illustrates the emerging scholarship focusing on video game studies. Followed by the description of booming video game industry in China, this chapter highlights the significance of conducting semiotic studies of English-mediated affect in video games. This chapter ends up with an overview of the structure of the whole thesis.

1.1 Research Background

With the continuous development of science and technology, an increasing number of population across the globe can have free access to cyberspace. Video game becomes a channel for people to live a virtual and surreal life. According to the 2023 *Chinese Gaming Industry Report*, in 2023, the actual sales revenue of the domestic gaming market reached 300 billion yuan, a year-on-year increase of 13.95%; the user base reached 668 million people, a year-on-year increase of 0.61%, reaching a historical high point. Within the vast Chinese gaming industry, the influence of female users cannot be underestimated. Accounting for nearly half of the game players in China, based on 2019 *Chinese Gaming Industry Report*, female users in the Chinese gaming market contributed 526.8 billion for the practical sales revenue, with a stable growth rate. An increasing number of female users are beginning to spend on video games they enjoy. It is precisely to attract this substantial young female users that otome games have emerged. However, currently, there is limited understanding domestically regarding female-oriented games, particularly otome games.

Studies on Chinese video games has been already burgeoning. With its high economic benefits and large player scale, Chinese video game industry is a research focus worthy of attention in fields of economics, sociology or communication studies. Video games have known been proved as products that can impact greatly on education (González & Blanco-Izquierdo, 2012; Arena & Schwartz, 2014; Gresalfi & Barnes, 2016; Ogneviuk, Maletska, Vinnikova & Zavadskyi, 2022), interpersonal and intercultural communication (Garcia-Fernandez & Medeiros, 2019; Fisher, 2021), cultural, and economic growth (Dauncey,

2012; Jørgensen & Mortensen, 2022). Currently, the attention to otome games remains primarily within the field of communication studies (Liu, 2019; Zhang, 2022; Lai & Liu, 2023), with a greater focus on exploring the differences in user experience between female-oriented games and other game genres or their influence on different gender groups. This leaves a notable void in sociolinguistic research concerning the utilization of linguistic and non-linguistic elements in constructing virtual romance in Chinese female-oriented games such as otome games.

1.2 Significance of the Study

According to Howarth (2023), young people aged between 18 and 34 constitute the largest proportion of video game players. Due to the number of gamers and the age demographics within gaming communities, it is necessary to investigate the representations presented in games that may have ideological impressions, considering many previous studies show that video games can be a channel reinforcing or challenging normative ideologies of representing the world (Garcia, 2017; Gee, 2014).

Video game field is situated and constituted by a contested range of activities and identities implicated in interrelated economic, cultural, and social forces (Keogh, 2019). Within the context of the new era of globalization, video games, as an emerging medium, should also contribute to the establishment of a new global communication order that reflects the concept of a *Global Community of Shared Future* (Xue & Miao, 2023).

While there have been analyses of semiotic representations in popular video games such as *Honor of Kings* and *Genshin Impact* (Li & Hao, 2024; Guo, 2023), research regarding the semiotic representations in Chinese otome games is relatively scarce. Therefore, two games chosen by this study as research sites, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, are all representative works of Chinese otome games. As the games aiming to provide virtual romance for young females, both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* encompass semiotic assemblages. Linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic elements are adopted to constructed distinctive and novel middle-class romance, establishing identities as multilingual elites and global citizens. It is worthwhile to examine how English represented in Chinese otome video games and how English is depicted

as a desirable capital in constructing romance which is multilingual and cosmopolitan. The ideological factors hidden behind may also provide some insights for future players, young scholars and game producers.

The research aims to encourage greater engagement from young scholars in examining the intersections of language, gender, and class within the context of video games. Additionally, recognizing video games as a burgeoning force in shaping soft power on a global scale underscores the importance of further investigations into linguistic and gender representations within video games. Such inquiries stand to not only contribute to the advancement of the Chinese gaming industry but also to deepen our understanding of the broader socio-cultural implications embedded within video game narratives.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

The thesis offers an empirical study to explore English-mediated affect, i.e. romantic feelings in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, aiming to investigate into how English is utilized to construct an ideal romance for contemporary Chinese young female players. There are six chapters in this thesis.

The thesis comprises six chapters. Chapter one serves as an introduction to the study, offering an overview that primarily delineates the research background, outlines the significance of the research, and finally provides the overall structure of the thesis.

Chapter two begins with an examination of a critical sociopolitical perspective on language, aiming to comprehend the ideological mediation of affect through the capitalization of English in representations. Subsequently, the chapter underscores the significance of conducting video game studies by contextualizing Chinese video games within both the local and global market landscapes.

Chapter three employs a critical sociolinguistic framework to examine the mediation of language and affect within ideological contexts. Beginning with a review of pertinent sociolinguistic research both internationally and within China, the chapter concentrates on exploring the ways in which English and affect are influenced by diverse social, economic, cultural, and political factors.

Chapter four describes the research design of the study. Firstly, the data collection procedure is illustrated by introducing the game of choice, and the data collection process. With the aim of exploring how English is utilized to construct romance and the ideological factor hidden behind, a qualitative analysis of in-game representation is conducted via two methodological paradigms: close-playing (Chang, 2010), and multimodal discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009). The chapter is closed with the limitation of this research design.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of language-mediated affect, chapter five examines the semiotic representations of romance mediated through English in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. Four key themes emerge from the utilization of linguistic and non-linguistic resources. Both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* depict the romantic stories through a combination of linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic elements. By viewing English as a desirable capital, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* insert English literature, artistic works and western-oriented characteristics into the design of characters, plots and scenes to construct romance that is distinctive from that of ordinary Chinese people.

In chapter six, a brief summary of the major findings is given. Then, it provides some reflections and implications for current semiotic studies in sociolinguistics, and ends up the suggestions for future game studies.

Chapter Two Literature Review

In this chapter, a critical sociopolitical perspective of language is firstly reviewed to understand how English is capitalized and how affect is ideologically mediated in English representations. Then, the chapter introduces the importance of doing video game studies by contextualizing Chinese video games, especially otome games in relation to the local and global market.. Based on the review of previous studies on video games, the study proposes the necessity of seeing video games as semiotic potential impacting on players ideologically.

2.1 Critical Sociopolitical Studies of English

Previous studies on second language acquisition predominantly concentrated on the instrumentality of English. English is taken as a natural, neutral and beneficial language (Kachru, 1986; Platt et al, 1984). Some researchers of SLA believe that English learning may be driven by various "motivations" which force English learners to acquire immediate achievement and individual development (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gao et al., 2007; Gao, 2018). A subsequent paradigm shift in academia has brought about the emergence of the social-cultural turn.

One of the significant achievements within the field of sociolinguistics lies in the demonstration that the concept of "language", when observed in real usage situations, constitutes a repertoire which is characterized by cultural sensitivity and is an intricately ordered complex encompassing genres, styles, registers, inclusive of numerous hybrid forms, and manifesting in a diverse array of manifestations, both substantial and subtle (Blommaert, 2007). The forces of globalization compel us to consider multilingualism and multiculturalism as norms rather than exceptions. Moreover, the examination of the phenomenology of non-nativeness in language usage becomes imperative, highlighting its crucial connections with social, political, and ideological processes characteristic of Late Modernity (Blommaert, 2005; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; Collins & Slembrouck, 2005; Coupland, 2003; Heller, 2003). There is an inclination to reconsider the role of language in society and the meanings underlying the usage of it.

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Critical Sociopolitical studies of languages push forward the examining on English language. As Ndebele (1987) remarks, the 'very concept of an international or world language was an invention of Western imperialism' (1987:3-4). Some scholars tend to examine World English as embodied capital based on Bourdieu's notion of capital (Park & Wee, 2012; Sakyiwah, 2016; Sah & Li, 2018; Li, 2020). Pennycook (2003) holds that neutrality of English may hide and cover the political and social relations, raising that "Sorely lacking from the predominant paradigm of investigation into English as an international language is a broad range of social, historical, cultural and political relationships" (2017, p. 12). Today with discursive and semiotic constructions, English has now become a language with rich indexicality, including economic, political and social value (Park & Wee, 2012). The global pursuit of English and all the tensions surrounding it are shaped by a pervasive power rooted in a complex conceptualization of value, not just in the economic sense, but semiotic and cultural sense as well. In other words, global English is not just a result of the confluence of macro forces, but is shaped and built through people's own practice (Park &Wee, 2012). Critical Sociopolitical studies of languages drive the examination of English as embodied capital, emphasizing its multifaceted value beyond mere economic significance, but also encompassing political and social dimensions, thereby shaping the global pursuit of English and its tensions through discursive and semiotic constructions.

Moreover, with the rise of emotion-based studies, an emotion-centric critical sociopolitical approach in the learning and teaching of English has emerged. Unlike the cognitive psychological understanding of emotion, critical sociolinguistics posits that emotions are constructed by social relationships and practices. English, along with its associated social practices such as learning, teaching, and job-seeking is seen as intervening in emotions and can provoke certain feelings and emotions. Piller and Takahashi (2010), through their study on immigrants working as sex workers in predominantly white countries, have identified the intersectionality of English, race, and gender. They also find that social media platforms can sexualize the process of learning English and intercultural communication to stimulate consumer consumption and subscriptions. Games, as a form of social media capable of conveying societal meanings through various modes, can also invoke players' emotions

through language choices related to English. Based on studies related to the intersection of English, gender and class, this study aims to investigate how Chinese otome games use the insertion of English to construct romance for female while simultaneously positioning English as a global language used by the middle class, which can further impact players' language usage and ideologies surrounding English.

2.2 Video Games as Semiotic Potential

In doing semiotic analysis of video games, video games are a highly multimodal medium, capable of communicating information through virtually all semiotic modes (Hawreliak, 2021). Video game developers have the flexibility to utilize almost all semiotic modes (Hawreliak, 2018) when constructing representations, offering a broader range of expressive possibilities.

By putting semiotic elements in specific time and space, the underlying social structure and ideologies can be revealed, as Pennycook's (2017) notes, a 'range of linguistic, artefactual, historical and spatial resources [that] are brought together in particular moments of time and space' can be understood as 'semiotic assemblages' (P.278). The semiotic resources in video games such as written texts, colors, sounds, images as well as plot-design constitute expressive semiotic modes for generating social meanings and projecting value systems (Ensslin & Balteiro, 2019). For example, items appearing within the game, whether they are clothing, food, language, or products consumed by characters, all have the potential to become what Agha (2011) refers to as an index of a certain identity, a product that is linked with socially recognizable identities and situations, which in turn allows for the accretion of the product's indexical meaning in the real world. In line with previous scholars that locate semiotic resources at a broader level of discourses (Bateman & Wildfeuer, 2014; Hawreliak, 2018; Wildfeuer & Stamenković, 2022), this study sees Chinese video games as semiotic potential through representational practices embedded in social and sexual structure.

Following previous studies' looking at in-game representations based on the content analysis of different social categories such as culture, race, language (Li& Hao, 2024; Guo, 2023; Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020), this study aims to investigate into adult romance

constructed through English language and non-linguistic elements in Chinese otome games, which is also called dating stimulators for young women.

2.3 Contextualizing Chinese Otome Games

Otome games, also known as "maiden games or "dating simulators for young women", are a genre of interactive visual novel games primarily targeted towards a female audience (Wen & Zhou, 2018; Kim, 2009). These games originated in Japan and typically feature a female protagonist who interacts with a variety of male characters, each with their own unique personalities and storylines. The otome games utilize visual novel-style storytelling, employing a combination of text, dialogue, and character artwork. They often feature voice acting, background music, and sound effects to enhance the immersion and emotional impact. As one kind of games firstly appearing in Japan, the entering of otome games into China and the later development of original Chinese otome games is believed to be connected with the increasing number of female gamers in China and their significant purchasing power(Li, 2022).

The development of this demographic group of Chinese female gamers is linked to the historical context of the continuous improvement of women's status and the growing economic capacity of women in China: During the New Culture Movement of the 1910s in China, the modernization endeavor commenced challenging traditional family structures, liberating women from rigid household obligations (Glosser, 2003). By 1910, the number of women receiving formal education gradually increased in modern China, and during the socialist construction period, the state emphasized gender equality, allowing women to participate in societal practices, no matter working or gaming, on par with men (Liu, 2020).

In recent years, with the continuous increase in the number of employed women nationwide and the steady rise in average wages across the country (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024), the economic strength of women in China has significantly improved. The rising national income has contributed to the emergence of consumer cultures (Lai & Liu, 2023), more and more women are focusing on realizing their own life values and have higher aspirations for both material and spiritual aspects of life (Li, 2022). Consequently, more

women are willing to spend on leisure activities such as gaming, reflecting this shift in priorities. According to the report by the Game Committee of the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association, the number of female gamers in China had already reached 300 million in 2019, accounting for 46.2% of the total gaming user base (2019 China Gaming Industry Report). The substantial number of female players is profoundly influencing the structure of the Chinese gaming industry.

With the increasing population of female gamers in China, Chinese otome games also have its own progress. During the early 2000s, unauthorized adaptations of otome games started to permeate into the Chinese market from Japan (Yang & Xu, 2017). However, the requirements of Japanese otome games such as using Japanese handheld consoles or read native Japanese throughout the games (Li, 2022; Kim, 2009; Yang & Xu, 2017), it is quite hard for most Chinese gamers. It was not until the 2010s that Chinese game developers managed to create indigenous otome games (Lai & Liu, 2023). Nevertheless, the early popular otome games are web-based games, primarily found on the "Orange Light" platform developed by Beijing Six-interest Network Technology Co., Ltd. After Orange Light games contribute to the development of the Chinese otome game market, the otome game *Mr. Love 恋与制作人* launched by Papergame in November 2017 rapidly expands this market (Liu, 2020). According to Gamma Data's Female Gaming Report released in 2018, *Mr. Love* generated over 200 million yuan in revenue across all platforms in its first month online. Subsequently, major game developers such as Tencent, miHoYo, and NetEase enter the market and begin to produce counterpart of *Mr. Love*. Since the publication and popularity of *Mr. Love* in 2017, there has been an increase in Chinese otome games in China, including games such as *Dreamscape Albireo 梦间集天鹅座*, *Light and Night 光与夜之恋*, *Tears of Themis 未定事件簿*, *Love and Deepspace 恋与深空*, among others. In recent years of the development of Chinese otome games, many games have been taken offline due to their inability to attract players. However, the otome game market remains resilient. During the Spring Festival holiday period in February 2024 alone, six Chinese otome games generated revenues exceeding 10 million yuan, indicating the enduring popularity of otome games among players as well as the purchasing power of female gamers.

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Throughout its development, Chinese otome games have undergone changes and transformations in the shaping of characters and the arrangement of plots. Like other forms of MAG cultures, Chinese otome culture "is always a dynamic and negotiated one, dealing with complex and interconnected conversations among multiple participants, values, norms, and performances" (Yin, 2021, p. 461). For example, in Chinese otome games, the portrayal of ideal men has undergone transformations (Zhou, 2021). Initially, exemplified by the 2012 game *Tale of Express Xi 熹妃传*, otome games often depict feudal imperial courts as their narrative backdrop after the TV series *Empresses in the Palace 甄嬛传* goes viral in China (Bai, 2022). Players typically assumed the role of concubines within the emperor's harem, starting from the lowest ranks and competing for the emperor's favor, ultimately ascending to the position of empress. The portrayal of the emperor in these narratives often mirrored the traditional depiction found in historical dramas: suspicious, arrogant, lacking in respect for women, viewing women as possessions, and primarily driven by possessiveness towards the female protagonist whose happiness mainly relies on the emperor's giving (Bai, 2022).

However, with the rise of feminism and the continuous improvement of women's social status in the modern era, the depiction of the "ideal man" in otome games has undergone some changes (Elliot, 2015). Being wealthy and handsome, the new-type male characters in Chinese otome games subverts the traditional notion of masculinity (Liu, 2020). According to Liu's study (2020), the appealing qualities of male non-player characters (NPCs) in these games seem to align with Elliott's (2015) observation of a new sensitive form of masculinity emerging in the West, which could potentially support the advancement of global feminism. The shaping of ideal male images has evolved into a highly complex amalgamation, incorporating elements such as commerce, capital, love, and the workplace (Zhou, 2021).

The aim of this study is to explore whether male characters in Chinese otome games, who have undergone a transformation in their roles, have completely broken away from traditional norms of Chinese masculinity. Furthermore, this research seeks to analyze the essence of the ideal romance constructed in contemporary Chinese otome games through the adoption of English and Western-oriented characteristics.

Chapter Three Theoretical framework

This chapter adopts a critical sociolinguistic perspective on how language and affect are mediated in ideological relations. Followed by a review of relevant sociolinguistic studies conducted abroad and in China, this chapter focuses on how English and affect are mediated in various social, economic, cultural and political factors.

3.1 Language, Affect and Ideology

Many previous studies (Canagarajah, 2013; Makoni & Pennycook, 2005; Pennycook, 2005, 2020; Li & Hao, 2024) have demonstrated that language representations are not ideologically neutral but mediated in various social relations. As one of the emerging topics in sociolinguistics, affect plays an important role in shaping the meanings of language learning and of language representations (Pavlenko, 2005, 2013; Piller, 2002; Piller & Takahashi, 2006).

As one of the first sociolinguistic scholars who have published widely on affect and language, Pavlenko (2005) addresses the importance of "affective turn" in doing language studies. Since then, affect or emotion has been conceptualized in various language-related disciplines including language acquisition (Aragao, 2011; Garrett & Young, 2009), classroom dynamics (Benesch, 2012) discursive representations (Piller & Takahashi, 2006) and socio-historically constructed and shared, contextually variable feature of social interactions (Butler, 2017).

Among the emerging studies on language and affect, what is relevant to our study is the ideological representations of language and affect (Piller, 2002, Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Takahashi, 2013). Different from second language acquisition studies, critical sociolinguists conceptualize 'motivation' as 'affect'. For example, Piller (2002) conceptualizes the individual motivation to acquire and utilize an additional language as "language desire", which underscores "language desire" as a multifaceted construct that extends beyond internalized factors to encompass external influences on language learners (Piller & Takahashi, 2006). Their studies offer a new perspective which situates affect within context-specific

interactions, delineating the intricate connections between public societal discourses, ideologies, and historical geopolitical dynamics. Viewing video games as semiotic potential that adopt linguistic and non-linguistic elements throughout gaming processes (Garcia, 2017; Gee, 2014; Agha, 2011), "language desire" and "language learning" discourses in video games can be examined. The relevant in-game discourses may be able to reveal social structures, power dynamics, and subjectivity, impacting on players.

Apart from sociopolitical forces, another ideological factor shapes the affect of language speakers/learners is related with the market-driven discourse. In the era of neoliberalism, language itself becomes commodity and language learning is also commodified (Heller, 2010). Even individuals within the neoliberal framework have to strive to enhance their market value and competitiveness in the global market in pursuit of personal success and integration (De Costa, 2020). With the ethos of self-entrepreneurship and high degree of international mobility, English becomes a key to success and is utilized to enhance one's personal capital, with one's original language repertoire other than English, as it is noted by Kubota (2011), neoliberal ideology views hybridity as a desirable, if not progressive, outcome for individuals who are multilingual or belong to postcolonial contexts. There is an expectation that those who possess a diverse repertoire of languages, competencies, skills, and identities stand a better chance of thriving in the diverse and unpredictable global economy.

While such perspectives are understandable, given the significant power of English as global linguistic and cultural capital, English-mediated desire also contributes to complicity with neoliberal agendas. Individuals internalize dispositions aimed at serving the interests of the market and accumulating profit. Consequently, despite no guarantee that proficiency in English will necessarily improve or alter individuals' life circumstances, desire perpetuates English's global dominance and fuels the worldwide English Language Teaching (ELT) industry (Cameron, 2012; Park, 2012; Piller, Takahashi & Watanabe, 2010).

Following the rise of multilingualism in academia, numerous studies have been conducted on the topic of language-mediated affect (Rawal & De Costa, 2019; Kubota, 2011). Many sociolinguistic scholars (Li & He, 2023; Cho, 2015; Li, 2021) have discovered that the learning of many languages is closely related to affect and social structures and "small"

language learners are also encompassed into neoliberal market. Li and He (2023) have written about the affect of Korean language learners. Their research reveals that, in the neoliberal era, many Chinese students also engage in Korean language learning for self-empowerment, viewing it as an investment. Moreover, Korean language learning can influence learners' affect: Korean language learners may fulfill their dreams of becoming cosmopolitan and achieving the "Korean dream" through language acquisition, while also experiencing emotions such as precarity due to their engagement in Korean language learning. In a similar vein, international students learning Mandarin also generates affect-related experiences. Li (2021) has discovered that foreign languages capable of mediating affect are not limited to English. With the rise of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the economic development of Asian countries, accompanied by their increasing international status, Chinese language learning has the potential to empower language learners. Learners' desire for proficiency in Chinese, as well as entrepreneurial feelings and other affective aspects, are closely linked to social structural factors. It is the elevation of China's international status, the expansion of the Chinese market, and other social factors that have led to an increase in demand for Chinese language skills, prompting Chinese language learners to adopt entrepreneurial approaches to gain proficiency in Chinese.

Aligned with the studies reviewed above, this thesis will unpack how English has been ideologically embedded in different contexts with a particular focus on affect-related representations as indicated in the following section.

3.2 English-mediated Affect

As a global lingua franca, English has been represented as both desire and commodity worldwide (Heller, 2010; Piller, 2002; Piller & Takahashi, 2006). In the neoliberal economy, English itself becomes an object of desire. Language pedagogies treat English as a form of positive investment (Norton, 2000), thus a desirable resource because it facilitates commodification of oneself; English is associated with consumption (Kubota, 2011), even with romance (Takahashi, 2013), and is therefore treated, following Ahmed (2010), as an object of happiness.

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English language learning, as an object of desire within the neoliberal economy, has the capacity to mediate feelings and emotions, influencing how a person situates himself or herself. Individuals with proficiency in English may exhibit confidence and hope for the future, believing that English proficiency can provide advantages in the job market and opportunities for social mobility. Social actors are encouraged to pursue continuous self-development to enhance individual entrepreneurship, often displaying a strong fixation on English. Conversely, learners with average English proficiency may experience negative emotions due to their unsatisfactory language skills, such as feelings of precarity and shame (Zhang, 2023;Liyanage & Canagarajah, 2019). Lo and Kim (2012) highlight that the inability to speak English is not only perceived as humorous but also a source of national embarrassment.

Similar feelings mediated in English have been reported with Korean English learners. Cho (2015) finds that many Korean parents nurture their children's English learning aspirations with the desire to make them "global person" (697). Cho discovered that these parents perceive their social status as "aliens" when comparing themselves to local residents who are considered superior English users, leading to considerable anxiety among Korean Australian residents due to their current English proficiency levels. The linguistic beliefs of participants were often influenced by negative associations with English, including daily struggles, an inferiority complex, and fear of judgment.

Apart from English learning experiences that foreground the role of affect, mass media such as magazines and advertisements also convey the affective dimensions of English and the ideologies it represents through discourses. For example, Pennycook's research (2020) found that many English learning camps in the Philippines use English to write advertisements and name their institutions with terms such as "success". English is often marketed in relation to a particular set of images of sexual desire - along with images that tie English to travel, a White consumer lifestyle, and aspirational goals for learning English (Gray, 2010, 2012). Piller and Takahashi's research (2006) on Japanese women's desire for English reveals that this desire is embedded within broader discourses concerning both Japanese women and the English language itself. Their longing for English proficiency is

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intertwined with various aspects of their lives, as Piller and Takahashi's study found that many Japanese women's magazines and other media often link English learning with lifestyle choices. English is portrayed as embodying a glamorous lifestyle, offering the opportunity for women to reinvent and empower themselves, serving as an indispensable tool for combating chauvinism in Japan. Magazines, books, advertisements, and other media describe English as being bright, proper, and desirable. Publications related to English often exude a cosmopolitan quality, and Japanese women who are proficient in English are seen as possessing the characteristics of a global citizen.

Piller and Takahashi's studies (2006, 2010, 2013) on English learning experiences of women from Asian countries also reveal that the participants' longing for English proficiency is constructed through mass media's building a sense of "romance" and "overseas ideal lifestyle", with English playing a significant role. In order to attract young Japanese female to take English lessons, the English learning material from institutions is greatly romanticized (Piller & Takahashi, 2006, 2010; Takahashi, 2013). The studies provide examples of descriptions of white male teachers in Japanese women's magazines. The texts offer ample personal information about the teachers' personal lives rather than their educational backgrounds or teaching careers, aiming to imply that "with the help of charming white male teachers, female students' English proficiency will improve more rapidly. Besides, advertisements from various mass media outlets make Japanese women associate English learning with romance and marital happiness, viewing fluency in English as a means to cultivate successful intimate relationships. English, besides its role in finding Prince Charming, as Piller and Takahashi (2013) also find, is portrayed within the airline industry as a pathway to a glamorous lifestyle: the captivating fictional portrayals of flight attendants in Japan have led many Japanese women to perceive a career as a flight attendant as an ideal profession for themselves. The emergence of career guides such as 語学を生かして、世界で働く [*Career overseas by using language skills*] (Itakura, 2006) and 英語でリッチ！ [*Get rich with English!*] (Sasaki, 2006) in Japan combines English language proficiency, overseas employment opportunities, and an idealized lifestyle. These publications foster the belief among many Japanese women that by learning English and obtaining employment overseas,

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they can attain their desired lifestyle. Consequently, this strategy is employed to entice young Japanese women into the demanding field of flight attending (Piller & Takahashi, 2013).

Through Piller and Takahashi's studies (2006, 2010, 2013), it can be reported that English is packaged as intertwined with both gender as well as western elite lifestyle, through representation in societal discourses, the desire and longing for English can be constructed. English emerges as a powerful tool for constructing a gendered identity and gaining access to the romanticized and glamorous West. Surrounded by various discourses portraying English as desirable and powerful, most informants report having had "akogare" (desire and longing) for the English language and Western culture since childhood. Mass media constructs a bundle of desires - for a Western emancipated lifestyle, for a Western prince charming, and for mastery of English - all of which intertwine and influence each other.

Following Piller and Takahashi' study on conceptualizing English-mediated representations, this thesis focuses on Chinese otome games that are female-oriented and English mediated. The study aims to analyze, through examining the semiotic elements in Chinese otome games, how English is romanticized in otome games and how the occasions where the male and female protagonists use English convey specific ideologies, such as the glamour of using English and having a Western lifestyle, or using English as a representation of cosmopolitanism.

Chapter Four Methodology

This chapter outlines the overall research design of the study. First of all, a social semiotic approach is adopted in this study. Two Chinese otome games, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are chosen as the research site. Then the research design is presented with the description of research object, data collection methods and data analysis methods. This chapter ends with research positionality.

The aim of this study is to investigate how English is ideologically mediated in Chinese female-oriented video games. Three research questions are to be answered:

(1) How is English represented in Chinese otome video games?

(2) How is romance embedded in English-related representations?

(3) What are the ideological factors that mediate such representations?

4.1 Selection of Data Source

Mr. Love(恋与制作人), developed by Papergames, and *Light and Night(光与夜之恋)*, developed by Tencent's Aurora Studio, are selected as data source for this study because of the following reasons.

First of all, these two games stems are representative Chinese otome games for their popularity and satisfactory revenue.

Mr. Love garnered extensive popularity upon its release and has maintained a sustained buzz on social media, making it one of the longest-running domestic online otome games. Since its launch on the App Store in December 2017, it has reached the top spot on the iOS free games ranking. During the first month of server launch, *Mr. Love* achieved monthly revenue ranging from 200 million to 300 million RMB, with daily peak revenue reaching around 20 million RMB (Lu & Zheng, 2018). On January 12, 2018, a report by the market research firm Jiguang Big Data (2018) stated that, as of January 7, 2018, *Mr. Love*, which had been online for less than a month, had already reached 7 million installations.

Figure 4.1.1 Amount of Installations of Mr. Love after its launching

《恋与制作人》让佛系青年重返红尘

戴桃疆
2018-01-03 16:33 来源：澎湃新闻·异次元 >

[Translation: *Mr. Love* makes Buddha-like youngsters back to "the world of mortals"]

和四个"二次元"偶像谈恋爱，手游《恋与制作人》何以一夜爆红？

解放日报·上观新闻   2018-01-09 10:46:51

[Translation: Having romantic relationship with four MAG(short for 'Manga, Anime and Games') idols: How does *Mr. Love* go viral?]

Figure 4.1.2 News on mass media on *Mr. Love* when it becomes a hit after launching

Moreover, according to Jiguang Data (2018), the daily active user (DAU) count of *Mr.*

Love has also shown rapid growth, reaching 2.02 million. The growth curve of DAU in *Mr. Love* remains remarkably consistent with the installation growth curve. In terms of user demographics, over 94.2% of players are female, with a high proportion hailing from first and second-tier cities (Ma, 2018).
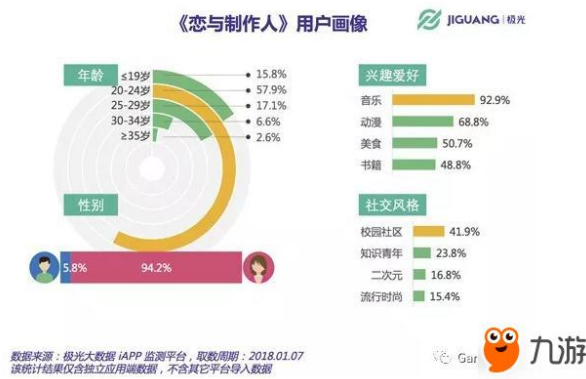

Figure 4.1.3 Users' Portrayal of *Mr. Love* from Jiguang Data

In 2024, *Mr. Love* celebrates its seventh year since its official release. As of February 2024, the official Weibo account of *Mr. Love* has amassed 2.294 million followers. The hashtag #Mr. Love# on Weibo has garnered over 24.8 billion reads, with fans reaching 2.57 million. The international expansion of *Mr. Love* has also proceeded smoothly: in 2018, the game launched Korean and Taiwanese versions, followed by English and Japanese versions in 2019.

Published later than *Mr. Love*, though, after its launching in 2021, *Light and Night* emerged as a dark horse and claimed the top spot in the Chinese mobile otome game revenue chart in 2023, with total revenue exceeding 800 million RMB (Qimai Data, 2023). In comparison, *Mr. Love* ranked third with revenue of approximately 200 million RMB (Qimai Data, 2023).

During the writing of this thesis, the official Weibo account of *Light and Night* has amassed 2.78 million followers, with the hashtag on Weibo accumulating over 30 billion reads and fans reaching 4.21 million, ranking eighth on the gaming charts of Weibo.

Figure 4.1.4 Weibo data of Light and Night hashtag

The male protagonists within the game have also garnered widespread adoration, with the highest-ranked male protagonist, Qi Sili, accumulating 6.6 billion reads on Weibo, securing the top position on the game character ranking due to a weekly increase in Weibo interactions of 800,000. The remaining male protagonists in *Light and Night* also rank fourth, sixth, seventh, and tenth on the game characters' ranking list. Following its public launching, *Light and Night* quickly expanded its international presence, opening Japanese servers in 2022 and Taiwan servers in 2023.

With the data listed above, it can be said that both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are exemplary titles in the realm of domestic otome games in China. While the former represents a "predecessor" among the Chinese otome games, the latter emerged as a rising star with

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revenue over billion yuan.

The second reason is that both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are suitable choices for research due to their story design and the number of main characters. The background settings in these games are situated in a modern city of China rather than purely fantastical or fictional cities and countries. Some game settings coincide with the real world, for example, many male protagonists study abroad in capitalist countries such as France and England, showcasing their societal elite status and proficiency in multiple languages. Sometimes, the games also feature real-life books and artworks, such as Homer's epic *Iliad*, Shakespeare's lyrical series *Sealed with a Kiss*, and Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie (The Birth of Tragedy)*, among others. For this study, game backgrounds closely resembling the real world are more conducive to analyzing the ideological and cultural connotations reflected in their plot settings. Additionally, both games feature a significant number of male protagonists (lovers for players). Each game includes five male protagonists, which, compared to other Chinese otome games that may only have three to four male protagonists, provides a richer source of research data with a total of ten male protagonists in the two games.

Thirdly, both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* feature a plethora of plotlines and elements related to constructed romance through language. Unlike other otome games that combine adventure or non-romantic themes, such as *For All Time (时空中的绘旅人)* by Netease and *Tears of Themis(未定事件簿)*by miHOYO, the content of *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* leans more towards pure romantic simulation. As romance simulation games targeting young women, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* incorporate numerous linguistic and non-linguistic elements of romanticization bordering on erotica. In order to make such erotization proper and "reasonable", upon opening the game, *Mr. Love* prompts, "This game is suitable for users aged 16 and above", accompanied by an age rating symbol of "16+". Similarly, in 2021, *Light and Night* announced that the game is suitable for players aged 18 and above, prohibiting minors under the age of 18 from accessing the game, despite many minors using adult identification information for player verification. As games suitable for users aged 16 and 18, respectively, both games can include various romantic, sexual, and adult romance-related elements in their scripts, visuals, and sounds, stimulating players' consumption. With the

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expansion of the game's content, the in-game activities (held mostly each two to three months) introduce new graded card images that require payment. These card grades range from R (Rare), SR (Super Rare), SSR (Superior Super Rare), to SP (Special). Higher-level card images feature more exquisite artwork, more ambiguous interactions between male and female protagonists, and stronger sexual implications, including scenes depicting embraces, kisses, and even sexual encounters between characters. Some researchers have pointed out that otome games like *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are designed to provide players with immersive sensory experiences in romantic simulation games (Cao, 2019).

4.2 Background Information of Main Characters

As justified above, two Chinese video games were selected in this study. To better understand how female players get engaged in these two video games, it is necessary to describe the basic information of main characters. The main theme is to have romantic relationship with the nine male characters. This investigation involves an examination of the characters' physical appearances, character attributes, and narrative backgrounds. Concurrently, it necessitates an analysis of plot texts, visuals, and audio components associated with the central storyline of the games. Below a brief personal profile of characters in both games is given.

Table 4.2.1 Main characters of *Mr. Love*

	Age	Occupation	Personal profile	Picture
Protagonist 玩家	21	Studio Owner	a good-looking girl who owns a studio inherited from her father	

Li Zeyan 李泽言	28	CEO	the protagonist's superior raised in France as multiple languages user	
Xu Mo 许墨	26	Neuroscientist	young genius Ph.D. supervisor studying neuroscience abroad for years	
Zhou Qiluo 周棋洛	22	Idol/ Artist	young celebrity raised abroad with music talent; a genius hacker working in secrecy	
Bai Qi 白起	24	SWAT	protagonist's childhood friend and a outstanding SWAT	

| Ling Xiao 凌肖 (new character) | 20 | Postgraduate student (to be updated in game) | Bassist in a band (to be updated in game) | |

Table 4.2.2 Main characters of *Light and Night*

	Age	Occupation	Personal Profile	Picture
Protagonist 玩家	23	designer	a designer from a business family	
Zha Lisu 查理苏	28	Plastic surgeon	the protagonist's ex-fiancé who is also the successor of one of the most wealthy families in the world; a mixed race	

			raised abroad	
Lu Chen 陆沉	26	CEO	the protagonist's top superior; the successor of a wealthy family living abroad for years	
Xia Mingxing 夏鸣星	21	Musical Actor	the protagonist's childhood friend; the successor of an old family	
Qi Sili 齐司礼	unknown	Designer	the protagonist's superior; one of the best designers in the world	

Xiao Yi 萧逸	23	Racing driver	the protagonist's cooperative partner; Champion of the World Racing Champion-ships	

Notes: The pictures are only some of the characters' skin. With the holding of different in-game activities, all characters may have different clothing and accessories acquired through purchasing. The pictures selected here are those that clearly depict the appearance of the characters.

To sum up, the female protagonists in these two video games originate from relatively affluent backgrounds, at least reaching a comfortable standard of living. While the personal backgrounds of the male protagonists vary, a majority of the ten male characters hold prominent positions in society, generally surpassing the social status of the female protagonists. Notably, two male protagonists are portrayed as CEOs of large corporations, and two are heirs to illustrious family legacies. The male protagonists are consistently depicted as individuals of mixed heritage, with six of them having experiences of living and studying abroad. It can be asserted that both male and female protagonists in the games belong to the middle class or upper class. It is predictable that their romantic relationships may reflect a lifestyle indicative of the middle class or above.

4.3 Data Analyzing Methods

Two data analyzing methods were used in this study: close-playing and multimodal discourse analysis.

4.3.1 Close-playing

First, aligned with the previous studies that focus on the representation of video games

(Li& Hao, 2023; Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020), a "close-playing" method was adopted. The close-playing method is like a close-reading of a literary text; it is a term coined by Edmond Chang (2010). He holds that video games is to be regarded as an accumulation of form, function, meaning and action. It involves players attentively engaging with a game, contemplating the reasoning behind design choices, and approaching it in a mindful and critically aware manner. Much like close-reading, close-playing entails analyzing specific elements of a game, such as a character's attire or the structure of rewards, to uncover potential interpretations, themes, or formal characteristics. As Henry Jenkins (2000) argues, "We should instead look at games as an emerging art form — one that does not simply simulate violence but increasingly offers new ways to understand violence — and talk about how to strike a balance between this form of expression and social responsibility" (p. 120). This approach often necessitates replaying sections of the game, taking notes during gameplay, and considering the influence of cultural factors on the game, such as how it addresses societal norms.

An ideal close-playing protocol not only uncovers possible meanings within a particular game but also provides insights into the broader cultural, social, and economic contexts in which the game was created and experienced. By analyzing characters, settings, actions, and events shown or made reference to, close-playing proves valuable for semiotic analysis by meticulously examining individual components within a game and how they contribute to wider systems of meaning, both within the game itself and in society. As the type of video games that is abundant with romance-related representations and constructed linguistic and non-linguistic discourses, this study aims to use in-game examples selected through close-playing, revealing how romance is embedded in English-related representations and how English constructs upper-class lifestyle.

In this study close-playing is adopted as data-collecting method. In order to accumulate necessary content, the game videos (over 100 hours) has to be watched to generate approximately 60,000 words of relevant field notes, including the description of the characters, selected relevant lines in the games, contextual information as well as the non-linguistic semiotic resources. Close attention was paid to the semiotic assemblages of characters,

in-game English usage and roman-related representations in relation to the relevant ideological norms.

Following the previous studies on representational practices of video games (Hawreliak & Lemieux, 2020; Li & Hao, 2023), this study took on inductive approach for data analysis. First, all game content need to be played, including reading through the plots, as well as related promotional videos and images. All content related to 'English' (including statements actually made in English within the game) and 'English/ Western culture' are collected. Then, identify and extract segments pertaining to 'romance' from these two categories, analyzing their connections with broader socio-political and sexual discourses.

4.3.2 Multi-modal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal analysis presents several facets (Jewitt, 2009), including social semiotic, discourse analysis, and interactional analysis. A multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) approach as MMDA allows us to analyze specific signification practices within an artefact or text, as well as considering extra-textual factors that influence meaning making (Hawreliak & Lemiux, 2020). Multimodal discourse analysis is an interdisciplinary approach that examines the communication of meaning through multiple modes of representation, such as language, images, gestures, sounds, and spatial arrangements (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Jewitt, 2009).

Multimodality asserts that 'language' is just one among the many resources for making meaning. That implies that the modal resources available in a culture need to be seen as one coherent, integral field, of, nevertheless distinct, resources for making meaning (Kress, 2011 p. 28). In order to convey comprehensive meaning or connotations, several semiotic modes are adopted in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined - they may for instance reinforce each other ('say the same thing in different ways'), fulfill complementary roles. Such process is defined as 'multimodality' by Kress and Van Leeuwen in 2001 and they recognize that communication extends beyond words and incorporates various modes that interact and complement each other (Van Leeuwen, 2015).

Multimodality explores how the combination of these semiotic modes within a single

artifact collaboratively constructs meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Within a multimodal framework, each mode functions as part of an "ensemble" that not only contributes to the overall meaning of the artifact but also influences the meaning of other modes within that ensemble (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Seeing "ensemble" as part of the integral makes multimodal approach advantageous to be adopted in this study as a data analysis method, as according to Gee (2014), video games are "inherently multimodal" and individual video game contains various modes such as speech, moving images, still images, text, music, sound effects, and haptics (tactile feedback), which can all together contribute to a presentation of meanings. Video game developers have the flexibility to utilize almost all semiotic modes (Hawreliak, 2018) when constructing representations, offering a broader range of expressive possibilities. In this study, Multi-modal Analysis is employed to analyze the semiotic modes present in the games *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. These modes encompass visual elements, music, character voiceovers, and narrative text. The analysis aims to identify the underlying ideologies or the intended purposes behind the game creators' design choices. The integration of multi-modal discourse analysis with close-playing methodology facilitates a comprehensive examination of the gameplay content.

4.4 Research Limitations

Similar to many of my peers who have been raised in a digital age, I have been playing video games for over 15 years. While playing games, I have purchased products related to the games. Specifically, I have been an active player of *Mr. Love* since its Open Beta Testing phase commenced in 2017, demonstrating a substantial duration of engagement. After *Light and Night* was launched in 2021, I was attracted by its images and voice-overs so I played it in 2022 for several months. While engaging in video games, I have also experienced many discrepancies between the virtual world and the reality. My emotional struggle has been also confirmed by my female peers who also find themselves constantly struggling with different worlds. To unpack how the virtual world shapes our mindset towards our daily life, I turned to choose this topic based on my years of close-playing experiences. Given the changing nature

of video games and the ongoing development of the video designs, it would be impossible to cover all of the features. This study is only based on the data collected from 2021 to 2023 from two of the most widely circulated video games targeting female players in China.

Chapter Five Findings and Discussions

Drawing from the theoretical framework of language-mediated affect, this chapter examines the semiotic representations of romance in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. Four relevant themes are captured based on the deployment of linguistic and non-linguistic resources. Both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* display the romance and western elite lifestyle constructed by linguistic and non-linguistic semiotics.

5.1 Idealized Lovers as an English Learning Resource

In *Light and Night* and *Mr. Love*, the male characters sometimes function as an English learning resource for protagonists (the players). The male characters are portrayed as English experts who are able to answer all of the English questions raised by the protagonist (the female player). The latter, under most of the circumstances, play a passive role by receiving English learning tips from their male lovers. For example, the game *Light and Night* narrates how the female player turns to one of her male lovers for English language etymology as indicated by the following excerpt.

主角（玩家）：陆沉，你了解词源学吗？

陆沉：词源？还算有所了解。初学英文的时候，看过类似的书籍。

主角：你每次说"有所了解"的事情，其实都是"了如指掌"，对不对？

陆沉：没想到会留给你这样的印象。只是语言渊源流变，即使是伏案数载的学者也很难完全掌握。不过，能和你有共同的话题，我很高兴。和你有关的话题，我不会觉得幼稚。

主角：in 表否定，difference 是"不同"，照道理 indifference 应该是"相似""无异"的意思。但是，indifference 却被译作"漠不关心"。我本来无法理解，直到我读到"爱的对立面不是憎恨而是冷漠"。

陆沉：The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. 没有爱的地方，任何事物都没有"不同"。

主角：嗯对的，这应该就是"漠不关心"的来源。也让我明白，怀着爱意才能看到更多彩的世界！（陆沉周年活动短信：词源释义）

Protagonist (the player): Do you know anything about etymology?

Lu Chen: Etymology? Kinda know something about it. When I learn English, I read books like this one.

Protagonist (the player): Whenever you say you know something, you mean you know it like the back of your hand, don't you?

Lu: I didn't realize you'd be left with such an impression. It's just that the language is so varied that even a scholar who has been working for years can't fully grasp it.

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However, I'm glad to have something in common with you. I don't feel childish when it comes to topics related to you.
Protagonist (the player): "In-" is negative, '-difference' is different. By definition 'indifference' should mean "similar", "not different". But indifference is translated as "a lack of interest", which I couldn't understand until I read "The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference"(written in Chinese).
Lu: The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference. (voice in English)
Protagonist (the player): Ah yes, that would be the source of "indifference". It also makes me realize that I can only see a more colorful world with love and care!
(Except 1 from Lu Chen's message during the in-game anniversary: interpretation of words)
Notes: Both the games *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* utilize Chinese. However, due to the requirement of writing this master thesis in English, excerpts will be provided with English translations. Excerpts in the games where the main characters engage in direct conversations in English will be highlighted with underscores.

In excerpt 1, in order to maintain Lu Chen's character design as an elite who have been abroad for years and showcase his charm, it is worth noting that the sentence "The opposite of love is not hatred but indifference" said by Lu Chen is actually spoken by his Chinese dubbing actor who has tried quite hard to pronounce each word correctly. The except 1 indicates that both male character and female character see English as desirable capital for building up their romantic relationship. The male and female protagonists can convey their emotions and sentiments by exchanging English words related to communication and emotional topics.

However, it can be seen clearly that their English communication is not neutral but carries social hierarchy in that the male character is perfectly competent to discuss English language knowledge with the protagonist, and he plays a role of knowledge giver, the protagonist an audience and receiver.

Coincidentally, in *Mr. Love* as well, there is a scene where the male protagonist reads poetry to the female protagonist before bedtime, and the female protagonist reciprocates by asking the male protagonist about the meaning of an English poem, as indicated in excerpt 2.

李泽言：喜欢这首诗？My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun.
李泽言：这是你的书，你不该比我更了解它的含义吗？它的意思是，"笨蛋有时候

Li Zeyan: Do you like this poem? My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red; If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun.
Li Zeyan: This is your book. Don't you know more about its meaning than I do? It means, though you are not perfect, maybe you have flaws but you little goose can still send my pulse racing. (Excerpt 2 from Li Zeyan's ASMR: Be with you)

In excerpt 2, Li Zeyan reads Shakespearean love poems to the female protagonist, intending to signify his feelings for her akin to those expressed by the poet. However, the female protagonist fails to grasp the essence of the poems, prompting Li Zeyan to question, "This is your book; Don't you know more about its meaning than I do?" Subsequently, Li Zeyan elucidates the meaning conveyed by the poems to the female protagonist. Here, reading English poetry becomes the manifestation of a romantic gesture. However, it also constructs an image of the female protagonist as lacking in both English proficiency and literary comprehension compared to the male protagonist. In this excerpt, she does not have the opportunity to demonstrate her linguistic abilities or knowledge base in front of the male protagonist.

In the above excerpt 1 and 2, both Lu Chen and Li Zeyan are the executives of international financial corporations and they have long been abroad growing up and studying. They are not only experts in their own field but also proficient in English. Through reciting and explaining English words and love poems, they not only display their bilingual abilities but also convey their feelings to the female lead, enhancing their relationship with the protagonists. To sum up, Lu's and Li's capacity in English has been represented as resource to construct romance and to showcase their charm.

Apart from talking about knowledge related with English and English culture in their private conversation, English literature and artistic works is also resource to create their romance as indicated in the excerpt 3.

主角：最近朋友约了我去看莎士比亚的戏剧，看完后就很感兴趣。
陆沉：我上大学的时候也偶尔会去看，说不定我们可以互相讨论一下。
主角：在莎士比亚的戏剧中，你觉得最浪漫的台词是什么？
陆沉：Reason becomes the marshal to mywill, and leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook

Protagonist (the player): A friend recently asked me to go see a Shakespeare play and we were intrigued.

Lu Chen: I used to go see Shakespeare plays occasionally when I was in college. Maybe we can discuss these plays with each other.

Protagonist (the player): What do you think is the most romantic line in a Shakespeare play?

Lu Chen: "Reason becomes the marshal to my will, and leads me to your eyes, where I o'erlook love's stories written in love's richest book". Maybe it's not the most romantic, but it's the one that speaks to me the most.

Protagonist (the player): Then what do you think is the best scene in a Shakespeare play?

Lu Chen: The one in Hamlet, when Hamlet says "I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself as a king of infinite space". (Except 3 from Lu Chen's in-game messages: His Love Prattle)

Excerpt 3 illustrates how *Light and Night* employs the use of English language and literary works to construct adult romance.

In this excerpt, the male and female protagonists engage in activities such as watching Shakespearean plays as a form of leisure or pastime, positioning themselves as individuals capable of understanding English culture and literature. Their dialogue regarding Shakespearean plays becomes a way for the female and male protagonists to deepen their understanding of each other. The male protagonist can utilize lines from the plays to express his inner thoughts, allowing players to perceive the growing love between the characters, though in this context, the female protagonist still remains in a position as a questioner, appearing to occupy a subordinate role by listening to her male partner's explanations.

Besides, rather than having the male and female protagonists discuss familiar Chinese folk love stories such as *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maid*（牛郎织女） or *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai*（梁山伯与祝英台）, *Light and Night* chooses to design scenes where the protagonists, as Chinese individuals, discuss "Shakespeare", using English as the medium to construct romance that is western, novel, and distinctive.

Aside from incorporating English literature or artistic works into the dialogues between

the main characters in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, various everyday items such as memos or greeting cards, which are commonly encountered in real life, are also introduced to enhance the sense of reality and romance. Within these items, English love poems or elements of Western popular culture are inserted, creating a trendy and romantic atmosphere.

As depicted in Figure 5.1.1, this is the greeting card presented by the male protagonist, Qi Sili, to the protagonist. Resembling a letter, it contains a plethora of textual information. The letter is divided into three sections, with the left containing the original text of John Keats' love poem *Bright Star*. John Keats is an English poet of the second generation of Romantic poets, along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. *Bright Star* is his love poem written to his beloved wife. Qi Sili uses this poem to express his love for the female protagonist, much like John Keats deeply loved his wife, Fanny Brawne. The middle section of the letter includes the title of *Bright Star* and the English name Jesse for Qi Sili. On the right side is the title of the game *Light and Night*.

In case the text of the letter is hard to recognize, the original text of *Bright Star* from the letter is provided as follows: *Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast, to feel for ever its soft fall and swell. Awake for ever in a sweet unrest. And watching, with eternal lids apart. Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite. The moving waters at their priestlike task.*

Figure 5.1.1 A Letter to the Protagonist from Qi Sili, a male protagonist in *Light and Night*

Besides, *Light and Night* not only integrates Western classical literature into romance construction but also incorporates contemporary Western popular elements. Figure 5.1.2 is a memo to the protagonist from Lu Chen in *Light and Night*. The memo combines both Chinese and English elements. In Chinese, it says 待会见 (See you later), while in English, it translates to "You are the moonlight of my life every night", taken from the lyrics of the song *Last Night on Earth* by the American punk rock band *Green Day*. Here，*Light and Night* adopt western popular music elements to construct the adult romance between protagonists, making it fancier for players of younger generations.

Figure 5.1.2 Lu Chen's memo to the female Protagonist

Another noteworthy example lies in the incorporation not only of Western classical literature and popular culture into romance construction but also of Chinese classical literature into the love story between the male and female protagonists. For instance, as depicted in excerpt 5, in *Mr. Love*, Xu Mo has a date with the female protagonist after a brief separation. By the time they meet each other, Xu Mo recites a passage from the *Book of Poetry 诗经* called *To Gather Vine 采葛* in a café. One line from this passage, *I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems longer than months three* "一日不见如三月兮" is a household sentence to many Chinese people, often used to express longing and missing. However, Xu Mo does not recite this line directly; *Mr. Love* utilizes the translation of *To Gather Vine* by the translator Xu Yuanchong (1993).

主角：想再发一条给他打气的短信时，却听见咖啡厅的角落传来一个熟悉的声音。
许墨： To gather vine goes she. I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems longer than months three. To gather reed goes she. I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems long

主角：循循道来的语气柔缓而沉稳，我没有回头只感觉心口蓦地跳动了一下，笑容不自觉地挂上嘴角（许墨 SSR 卡面剧情：融晴）

The Protagonist: As I contemplated sending another encouraging text to him, I heard a familiar voice coming from the corner of the café.

Xu Mo: <u>To gather vine goes she. I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems longer than months three. To gather reed goes she. I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems long as seasons three. To gather herbs goes she. I miss her whom I cannot see. One day seems longer than years three.</u>

The Protagonist：With a gentle and steady tone, he spoke in a soothing manner, and although I didn't turn around, I felt a sudden flutter in my chest. A smile involuntarily graced my lips. (Excerpt 4 from *Xu Mo's SSR card story: snow-melting warmth*)

This excerpt differs from the previous ones in which English literature is integrated into the romance. The main difference lies in the fact that it not only uses English to construct romance but also translates Chinese traditional poetry into English, which is then spoken by a Chinese male to another Chinese female. In *Mr. Love*, the male protagonist chooses not to recite the original text directly. Additionally, the female protagonist does not face any barriers in understanding his love talk; she comprehends the male protagonist's declaration and is moved by it, as if there were no language barriers in their use of English.

The bilingual communication without any linguistic barriers also occurs during conversations between the female protagonist and Ling Xiao in *Mr. Love*. As exemplified in excerpt 4 from *Mr. Love*, Ling Xiao, a postgraduate student majoring in archaeology, watches the Hollywood movie *Bonnie and Clyde* with the female protagonist during a date. While kissing the protagonist, he recites movie lines related to flirting and sex in a tender and flirting voice (dubbed by Chinese actor), thereby creating a sexy and seductive atmosphere. And the female protagonist seems to totally understand his words and is also aroused by Ling:

（旁白）一个吻印在了凌肖没有防备的唇，他的手指在键盘上猝不及防地按出一串凌乱的字符，搅碎了原本规整的论文。我侧坐在凌肖怀中，搂着他的脖子，指尖撩过他前额的发丝，有些得意地俯视着他眯起了眼睛。凌肖的喉结滚动了一下，嘴角翘起一个勾人的弧度。

凌肖：I might as well tell you right off. l ain't much of a lover boy. (凌肖情人节约会剧情：浪漫无罪)

A kiss landed on Ling Xiao's unguarded lips, causing his fingers to inadvertently press a

series of jumbled characters on the keyboard, shattering the once orderly thesis. I leaned against Ling Xiao's chest, embracing his neck, and ran my fingertips through the strands of hair on his forehead, looking down at him with a hint of satisfaction as he squinted his eyes. Ling Xiao's Adam's apple bobbed slightly, his lips curving into a seductive arc.
Ling Xiao: I might as well tell you right off. l ain't much of a lover boy. (Excerpt 5 from Valentine's date with Ling Xiao: Romantic Innocence)

Here, apart from utilizing English as a source of constructing romance and a relationship between "bilingual couples", the scene in excerpt 4 also resonated with what Piller and Takahashi (2006) in their study on Japanese female English learning experiences: "Hollywood movies have widely become new ELL 'textbooks', teaching not only English, but also providing guidance in matters of love and sex" (66). In addition to Hollywood movies, Chinese otome games as such *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, also serve as platforms for showcasing English language and culture. Moreover, the English dialogues used within these games function as a resource for expressing love and sexuality.

From the excerpts presented above, it is evident that in both *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, whether it is the male or female protagonist, they are portrayed as at least proficient in English. The male protagonists, with stronger English abilities, can even employ their linguistic proficiency to flirt and express their love to the female protagonist. The female protagonist, despite her English competency not good as the male, is able to understand her lovers. Whether it is reciting lines from plays or movies, or even translating Chinese classical literature, such behaviors demonstrate a high level of English proficiency. In *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, English is constructed as a desirable capital that is necessary for romantic relationships between protagonists. They are able to not only employ native love talks in China, but also cite literary materials from another culture, mostly English literature, to shape their romance.

However, one aspect that readers and players may overlook is that western culture in their conversation, whether it be English or Shakespearean drama or even the translated version of Chinese literature, actually has a certain distance from the ordinary people in China. Without training and learning in English and English culture, individuals whose native language is Chinese and who live in China will not have much understanding of *A*

Midsummer Night's Dream, let alone recite its original text casually in daily conversation. Perhaps it is to build up identities that is distinct from the masses in China that *Light and Night* chooses to have the male and female protagonists use English to talk about love. The English usage of characters creates what Bourdieu refers to as *distinction* (1979) between the characters from the mass people, constructing the characters being intellectual and bilingual and their romance, too, distinctive.

Furthermore, considering the personal profiles of male characters as a overseas returnee and the protagonist, too, as a overseas returnee working as a designer, the love story between them is actually a romance among "a small portion of intellectuals". According to the Seventh National Population Census Report (2021), the population of China with a university education (referring to junior college and above) has just exceeded 218 million, while the total number of people studying abroad from 1978 to 2019 was only 6.56 million (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2019). The love story between them is far away from common Chinese population and the display of their romance covers the difficulties and limited access that the mass people may suffer from on their way to acquire such romance. What do people have is only the sweetness of love.

To sum up, the characters in the games, including the protagonist, are all programmed as virtual people that have received higher education and are able to discuss contents such as poems, operas and any other art forms that are away from the mass. In their relationship, English is used to construct romance in an unfamiliar way for Chinese ordinary people so that to construct romance that doesn't belong to the general populace and distinguish such romance with romance of the traditional kind.

5.2 Western-oriented Characteristics of English-speaking Lovers

Male characters often possess linguistic and semiotic features that are closely aligned with Western aesthetics while simultaneously embodying a more Westernized and elite lifestyle. This is particularly relevant in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, although ostensibly Chinese characters, their romantic relationship more closely resembles to West-oriented consumption style. Numerous traits that evoke admiration from the average person are

intricately linked to the English language and Western culture. Such semiotic elements related with desirable characteristics are shown in these games by their lines, images, as well as narratives.

First of all, their appearance may be depicted as handsome in western aesthetics:

话音未落，他扬起下颌，耀眼的金色余辉镶嵌在他的轮廓，折出大卫雕像般完美的拐角。（查理苏 SSR 卡面剧情：时与玫瑰）

Before the words were out of his mouth, he raised his lower forehead, and a dazzling golden afterglow set into his silhouette, folding out the perfect jaw lines as the statue of David. (Excerpt 6 from Zha Lisu SSR card story: Time and Roses)

The positive portrayal of male outlook is quite Westernized in that the scripts choose "handsome like the statue of David", in which "David" is a masterpiece by Michelangelo. Instead of depicting Chinese males in a more traditional way, such as 剑眉星目 (dashing eyebrows and star-like eyes) or 玉树临风 (handsome and graceful as a jade tree in the wind), *Light and Night* chose to praise Zha Lisu's appearance as "the statue of *David*". The beauty of the David sculpture (seen in the image below) emanates from both its physical aesthetics and its cultural significance: First of all, Michelangelo's *David* has become one of the most recognized works of Renaissance sculpture; a symbol of strength and youthful beauty. The colossal size of the statue alone impressed Michelangelo's contemporaries. Giorgio Vasari, a painter of 16th century described it as a miracle that Michelangelo was able to make a dead person alive again. He listed all of the largest and most grand of the ancient statues that he had ever seen, concluding that *David* surpassed all ancient and modern statues, whether Greek or Latin, that have ever existed.

Figure 5.2.1 *David* by Michelangelo

The cultural significance of *David* lies in its portrayal of David as a great king in *the Bible*. He is depicted as an outstanding warrior, musician, and poet, as well as an ancestor of Jesus. He is known for his bravery, kindness, and illustrious achievements. Combining the aesthetic appeal of the sculpture itself with the qualities represented by *David*, the excerpt in *Light and Night* praising Zha Lisu in such a manner serves as a positive depiction, highlighting not only his remarkable appearance but also his noble lineage and societal stature. As such, the depiction of Chinese characters is associated with the promotion of western aesthetic standards as selling point for maintaining the romance in Chinese females-oriented games.

In addition to quoting from Western source, the ideal Chinese characters are constructed as someone mixing with European style. Such elite mixture can be easily traced in the appearance and heritage of many characters in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. For example, Zhou Qiluo in *Mr. Love* is portrayed as a mixed-race individual who is a celebrity in France, and continues his career in China. He sports golden hair, blue eyes, and in a certain plot he can also change his hair color into white—an unconventional feature compared to the typical black-haired, black-eyed male characters in otome games. His appearance may resonate with the popular impressions that Chinese people may have for a foreign young idol.

The image of Zhou Qiluo embodies a typical fusion of "Caucasian representation" and

"*little fresh meat*" （小鲜肉）in east Asia. On one hand, he is portrayed as a mixed-race individual within the setting. As described in the personal profile in Chapter 4, Zhou Qiluo is designed to be a mixed-race celebrity who debuted in France and embarked on a personal entertainment career. He is the only one in *Mr. Love* who possesses fair skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, exhibiting the hair and eye color characteristics typical of Caucasians. At the same time, as a MAG character, Zhou Qiluo also embodies certain traits of the appearance of little fresh meat, resembling KPOP stars (e.g. the KPOP star in figure 5.2.2) admired by young people: he has a slender physique compared to the other four male protagonists, and his appearance appears more youthful and possess some neutral beauty. His eyes are larger than those of other male characters, and his temperament is more childlike (e.g., his fondness for snacks such as potato chips), exhibiting a softer demeanor compared to the rugged masculinity. The appearance of *little fresh meat* and the gentle demeanor of men remain popular in China today, while traditional male images are gradually declining. Instead, new male image with softer qualities continue to emerge in film, television, and literary works (Han & Lu, 2022). Hong Kong scholar Song Geng (2014) suggests that the prevalent image of *little fresh meat* in East Asia is largely disseminated through the "KPOP fever" and Japanese MAG culture. Song holds that these Asian countries have long been immersed in cultures that prioritize collective values, social civility, and norms, thereby fostering a relatively gentle aesthetic culture.

To sum up, the appearance of Zhou Qiluo combines certain characteristics typical of Westerners and the qualities as Asian *little fresh meat*. He possesses a western appearance, western elite career as an international idol, mixing with Asian popular traits (slim, cute and soft) to increase his popularity.
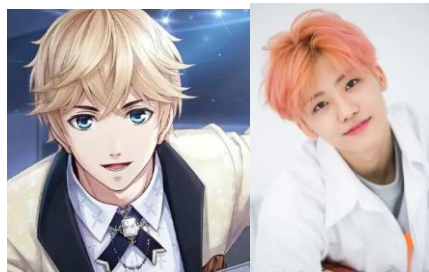
Figures 5.2.2 Zhou Qiluo and a KPOP star, Luo Zaimin, from NCT

In a similar way, many other male characters are also designed as "half western half Chinese" through the representation of their heritage, dressings, occupation as well as life experiences. Many of them in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are overseas returnees or migrants since childhood, spending years living abroad. Their Western-oriented characteristics are manifested in various aspects of their lives. For instance, in terms of their lineage, Zha Lisu is depicted as a mixed-race individual, with characters in the game directly referring to him as a "foreigner", despite his father is actually Chinese and his ability to communicate fluently with the female protagonist in Mandarin.

查理苏：昨天难得用了现金。小卖部大爷找不出零钱，硬是给我塞了一把糖。他说，查医生啊外国人都应该尝尝这个糖，味道绝对特别。（查理苏主线剧情）

Zha Lisu: Yesterday, while I paid the bill at the store, the shop owner couldn't find any change, so he insisted on giving me a handful of candy instead. He even said, "Dr. Zha, you should try this candy, foreign people should definitely taste it. It has a truly unique flavor". (Excerpt 7 from Zha Lisu's mainline story)

In terms of lifestyle habits, both Lu Chen in *Light and Night* and Li Zeyan in *Mr. Love* have lived in European countries since their teenage years, suggesting strong connections to European culture in their character backgrounds.

Lu Chen has lived in England since his teenage years, so many aspects of his appearance and personal habits in the game are linked to British culture. Firstly, he consistently wears suits (shirts, waistcoats, blazers) in the game, even in scenes where he is alone with the female protagonist at home, never opting for casual loungewear or T-shirts. A comparison of his attire in *Light and Night* with real-life clothing reveals meticulous attention to detail: the game

designers dress Lu Chen in different styles of suits based on the formality of the occasion (from left to right in the figure 5.2.3 below: plain lapel tuxedo for ordinary business occasions, peak lapel tuxedo for formal occasions, and shawl lapel tuxedo for balls and banquets), and they strictly design shirts and cuffs to match his personal style. According to calculations by users S_Mistur on Bilibili (2022), till the video uploaded in 2022, Lu Chen wears as many as 16 different shirts throughout the game, each meticulously designed to match the formality of the occasion. As shown in several figures (5.2.4 and 5.2.5) below, Lu Chen's clothing habits align with the rules of wearing suits in real-life England, greatly creating a sense of reality while effectively representing his Western-oriented characteristics. These details of clothing that echo the real world construct an image of a wealthy individual familiar with Western clothing customs, with Western-oriented characteristics suggesting his social status and economic capital, thus creating a virtual romance narrative of "dating with an English aristocrat".
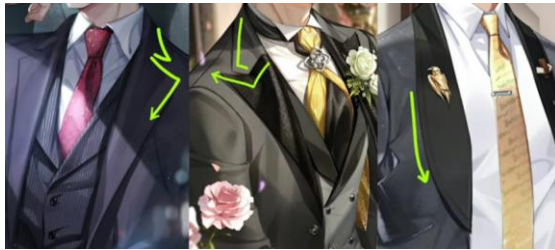

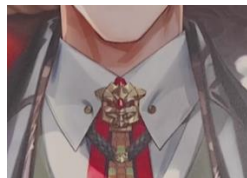Figure 5.2.3 Lu Chen's tuxedo on different occasions

Figure 5.2.4 Lu Chen's pinhole collar

Figure 5.2.5 Lu Chen's French Cuff

In addition to his meticulous attention to attire, Lu Chen also engages in activities such as watching equestrian competitions or going horseback riding with the protagonist. These scenes are crafted to portray Lu Chen as a "prince charming" and skilled equestrian, as exemplified in excerpt 8, where Lu Chen rides a horse with the protagonist and receives praise for his horse-riding skills from both the protagonist and the surrounding girls.

（旁白）他正骑着一匹白马，短发恣意地在风中飘扬。阳光和煦，洒落在他的发间，让他整个人更加熠熠发光。（当马想要挣脱缰绳）陆沉猛地扯紧了缰绳，将马的脖子拗了一个方向。一来二去之间，原本暴躁的马匹竟然已经听从了他的指挥。
主角：好厉害……
周围的女生：美好的事物是生活的必备调剂，只要远远看着就能让人身心愉悦。（陆沉 SSR 卡面剧情：白马童话）

The warm sunlight gently illuminates his hair, adding to his radiant presence.
(When the horse attempts to break free from the reins) Lu Chen swiftly tightens the reins and twists the horse's neck in a particular direction. In a matter of moments, the previously unruly horse obediently follows his command.
Protagonist: That's amazing...
Surrounding girls: Beautiful things are essential to life. Simply observing from afar brings joy to both body and soul. (Excerpt 8 from Lu Chen's SSR card story: Fairy tale of white horse)

From excerpt 8, it is evident that Lu Chen's character design mirrors that of Western nobility, from his attire habits to his hobbies, using Western-oriented characteristics to construct a Western and elite romance for players.

Additionally, as elaborated in the first part, in terms of knowledge and language abilities, the male protagonists are portrayed as knowledge givers while the protagonist assumes the

role of a knowledge receiver. Such hierarchy still exists in other skills, like horse-riding. Even in scenarios where the female protagonist can be designed to showcase her abilities, she is still written as an audience to the male protagonist. Her characterization in the plot is limited to simply "knowing how to ride a horse" rather than "good at it" as Lu Chen, allowing Lu to guide her like a teacher.

Although it cannot be generalized that the female protagonist lacks skills compared to the male characters in all aspects, excerpt 8 at least establishes a hierarchy regarding equestrian skills. From proficiency in attire and etiquette to expertise in equestrianism, Lu Chen's image as a "prince charming" and "Childe" is thus constructed.

A similar scenario is observed in *Mr. Love*. Li Zeyan, having lived in France since childhood as a wealthy scion, exhibits many traits and habits that resonate with western culture. As an individual growing up in France, he is a native-like French speaker and is also fully aware of clothing customs in Europe. Similar to the scenes where Lu Chen portrays the "prince charming" role in *Light and Night*, Li Zeyan assumes a role as a representative of "gentleman" in *Mr. Love,* as indicated in excerpt 9. In the scene described in excerpt 9, Li Zeyan takes the protagonist to Lyon, France, to attend a lecture. After the lecture, Li Zeyan invites the protagonist to take the sightseeing train in Lyon, despite the protagonist not being a native French speaker like him.

李泽言：这个火车站有环城观光车，现在正好还有最后一班。
李泽言背靠着晚霞，暮光在他身上增添几分温存。他将黑色的礼帽轻扣在胸前，像是老旧默片里走出的绅士，用藏在心底的柔情，邀请心爱的女子共舞。
李泽言：能否邀请你与我同乘？Mademoiselle。
他的五指穿过我的指缝，带着温柔却不容拒绝的力度。（李泽言 SSR 卡面剧情：绅士法则）

Li Zeyan: There's a sightseeing train around the city at this train station, and luckily, there's still the last one available.
Li Zeyan leaned against the sunset, the twilight adding a touch of tenderness to him. He lightly adjusted his black top hat on his chest, resembling a gentleman stepping out of an old silent film, inviting his beloved with hidden tenderness to dance.
Li Zeyan: May I invite you to ride with me? Mademoiselle.
His fingers interlaced with mine, exuding gentleness yet an undeniable persuasiveness.
(Excerpt 9 from Li Zeyan's SSR card story: Discipline of a Gentleman)

In the storyline, Li Zeyan is not only the CEO of the Huarui Corporation but also owns a

restaurant named Souvenir, where he excels in French cuisine. As indicated in excerpt 10, it can be seen that Li Zeyan is good at cooking French dishes.

鲜嫩的牛排，入口即化的黑松露烩鹅肝还有清甜的奶油甜汤，一顿饭下来，我差点忘了正事。（李泽言主线剧情）

The steak, melt-in-your-mouth black truffle-infused foie gras, and sweet creamy dessert soup provide such a delightful dining experience. (Excerpt 10 Li Zeyan's mainline story)

In terms of fashion style, Li Zeyan shares similarities with Lu Chen, both being enthusiasts of suits and formal wear. His various outfits are meticulously designed, often incorporating high-end suit accessories to accentuate his personal masculine charm. Many of his looks incorporate elements of Western clothing culture, aligning with his years in France, thus constructing his image as a "Western gentleman".
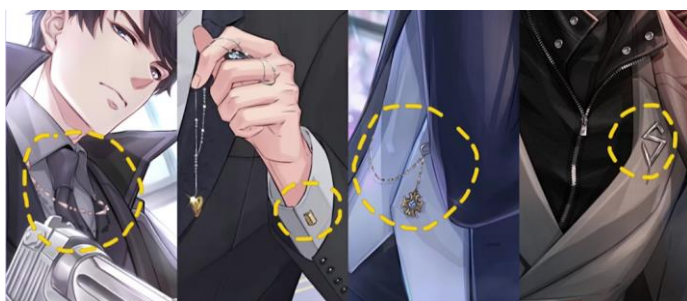

Figure 5.2.4 Li Zeyan's accessories on his tuxedo including collar pins, cufflinks, Albert watch chains and brooches

It can be noticed that the characters introduced above all have family backgrounds and personal lives are not very much traditional Chinese. They typically hail from backgrounds and life experiences akin to Western nobility or they would just be designed as a mixed-race, mostly Chinese mixed with white heritage. In *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, several male characters, such as Li, Lu and Zha, are depicted as immensely wealthy business elites, potentially having spent their childhood abroad with their parents or undergone extensive periods of studying abroad. Their personal profiles are filled with words such as "abroad",

"wealthy", "elegant", "gentlemen", etc to construct their image as an elite coming from a developed country with competency in foreign language (particularly English) and Western lifestyles.

An interesting fact is that in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, the personal information as a mixed-race and competency in English and other European languages are constructed as admirable and novel qualities. However, in reality, "hybrid" or "immigrant" sometimes are concepts have appeared in many cultures, and the exploration of "hybridity" and "immigration" in literary works is often for the purpose of investigating issues of identity and ethics (Chen, 2000; Chen, 2014), implying that it may not always lead to positive connotations. Sometimes, the concept of "hybridity" implies "non-standard" and "lacking aesthetic value" in extreme essentialist ideologies, such as black nationalism (Qi, 2021) and such quality might lead to the grassroots' struggles in life. "Immigrants", on the other hand, often appear as cultural "outsiders" (Yu & Zhang, 2006). The concept of "hybridity" and "migrants" appears in both western and Chinese literature as a rather heavy and controversial theme, for example, the renowned American modernist writer William Faulkner skillfully shaped biracial characters in his masterpiece *Light in August*, where he sought to answer the question of "what is my identity" throughout the entire work (Sheng, 2004). In Chinese literature and culture, there are also issues of identity crisis and discrimination stemming from "hybridity" and "immigration". Su Manshu, a Chinese-Japanese mixed-race writer and revolutionary, compared himself to the protagonist of his novel and referred to the main character as "断鸿零雁" (a disoriented swan), expressing the deep pain associated with his own identity (Shen, 2000 p.117).

It can be said that in many cultural discussions, "hybridity" or "immigration" carries a potentially conflicting connotation. However, in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, being biracial instead becomes a personal symbol and characteristic of the characters themselves: Due to their upper-class background, they are able to disregard the various sufferings stemming from social inequalities, class distinctions, racial discrimination, and poverty. Instead, their mixed-race and immigrant identities have become their selling points. They naturally possess biracial lifestyles and language habits associated with another culture due to being immersed

in both cultural environments from birth, while also being able to shape their own style based on their heritage. They can adjust their self-identity effortlessly, and the lifestyle and hobbies, which will be further detailed later, of those "biracial/immigrant boyfriends" become half Chinese and half Western due to their diverse backgrounds. Their competency in different languages becomes a personal feature and a fashion statement, signaling that their life experiences are different from ordinary individuals, making mixed-race characters in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* cosmopolitan and global (Cho, 2015). The role of English in this context is an integral part of shaping their identity.

Moreover, an interesting point is that in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, biracial and immigrant male characters are generally not portrayed as coming from countries with less prominent international status, but rather from powerful capitalist countries such as France, the United States, or the United Kingdom. The official explanation for the question of "why choosing established capitalist countries as their other country" is currently unavailable. However, it must be acknowledged that the male protagonists' elevated social status and possession of capital in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* delineate a hierarchical structure not only among classes but also among nations and countries. The presence of their another part of significant "powerful nation" heritage seems to foreshadow their social standing. Otherwise, why wouldn't there be a male protagonist from an unknown small area who falls in love with the female protagonist?

5.3 The Romantic Landscapes with English

English is often displayed in city landscapes in the games. These English-related semiotic elements are represented in official images, shops, menus, and food offerings, such as drinks and snacks, suggesting their lives' close connection with English as well as English culture. The figures of 5.3.1, 5.3.2 and 5.3.3 below are merely a few examples of romantic landscapes featuring English settings found in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. Figure 5.3.1 depicts a scene illustrating the male and female protagonists spend a vacation on a beach with sailboat named "Wilderness Killer" in English, suggesting that somewhere abroad.

Figure 5.3.1 The yacht named *Wilderness Killer*

The figure 5.3.2 is from the promotional video for the summer in-game activity in *Light and Night*. It is an image featuring a candy jar adorned with a heart-shaped sticker bearing the word "Kiss" instead of the Chinese equivalent "吻" or "爱". Also, the words are printed in lilac, presented as cute and sexy.

Figure 5.3.2 The candy jar with a sticker *Kiss*

Figure 5.3.3, extracted from the promotional video of *Mr. Love*, presents an intriguing portrayal. In this video, all male protagonists assume the role of male attendants in a café, with the female protagonist (the player) being their served customer. As depicted in the picture, one male protagonist addresses the player in Chinese, stating, "You are the lucky customer chosen by Little Bear!" However, the menu they present features coffee drink names such as "Espresso", "Cappuccino", "Mocha", and the title "coffee drinks", all written in

English. Interestingly, their prices are denoted using the Chinese "¥" symbol. English in this context appears to suggest a connection between the male and female protagonists' bilingual and cosmopolitan lifestyles, yet it also seems to function merely as a "performance", serving for aesthetic decoration.

Figure 5.3.3 The menu in a coffee house with drinks named in English

Additionally, English is also embedded in Western and cosmopolitan consumption styles. All of the male characters, as shown in the personal profile in chapter four，are working in transnational financial corporation, entertainment production corporation, music theatre, etc.. Their lives and leisure are all around English and English culture, implying the glamor of using English. In many otome games like *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, the destination where the male character and the protagonist are having a date, many of the time, is not in China but somewhere across the world. Excerpt 11 - Excerpt 13 collectively demonstrate how the lives of the male and female protagonists have shaped a middle-class, cosmopolitan lifestyle. They are frequently depicted vacationing or traveling abroad, with their filming activities taking place in locations such as California and their holidays set in Western European towns. In Excerpt 13, *Light and Night* even promotes a "tourism advertisement" for the English town of Castle Combe, as articulated by the male protagonist, Lu Chen. They have no financial worries and can freely travel to any corner of the world.

主角：可以告诉我我们要去哪里了吗？

周棋洛：是 Santa Monica. 它被誉为加州海岸的耀眼珍珠，所以……我一直想跟我的那颗耀眼珍珠一起去。（周棋洛 SSR 卡面剧情：洛城之约）

The Protagonist: Can you tell me now where we're going?

Zhou Qiluo: To Santa Monica. It's known as the dazzling pearl of the California coast, so... I've always wanted to go there with my own dazzling pearl. (Excerpt 11: Zhou Qiluo's SSR card story: dating in California)

金色跑车缓缓驶出旅馆，林荫道上，三两行人穿街过巷。时间尚早，这座悠闲的西欧小镇才刚刚从酣睡中醒来。今天是我和查理苏来小镇度假的第三天。（查理苏限定卡面剧情：心动波谱）

The golden sports car slowly pulled out of the hotel, passing through the tree-lined avenue, with a few pedestrians strolling through the streets and alleys. It was still early, and this leisurely Western European town was just beginning to awaken from its deep slumber. Today marks the third day of Zha Lisu and my vacation in this town. (Excerpt 12: Zha Lisu's Limited Card Story: Spectrum of Love)

陆沉：现在是库姆堡一年中最美的时候。库姆堡一直藏身在英国的小峡谷中，很多年前，我还在伦敦求学的时候，一次偶然的机会，在库姆堡的一家二手书店小住了一段时间。在这里生活的那段时间，我很少出门散步。但现在，我感觉似乎有点不一样了，现在，你在我的身边。（陆沉 SR 卡面剧情：阅尽晨昏）

Lu Chen: Now is the most beautiful time of the year in Castle Combe. Castle Combe has always been nestled in a small valley in England. Many years ago, when I was still studying in London, I had the chance to live in a second-hand bookstore in Castle Combe. During the time I lived here, I rarely went out for walks. But now, it seems like something has changed, because you are with me now. (Excerpt 13: Lu Chen's SR card story: Living through day and night)

English together with Western cultural elements, also function as elements of "fashion", "novelty", or "distinctiveness", permeates the lives of game characters. Consider the character Zhou Qiluo in *Mr. Love*. He is designed as a singer. He passionately embraces rock music, aspiring to become a rock star and famous idol. Apart from presenting a gentle and adorable demeanor in front of the female protagonist, he exhibits a passionate enthusiasm when it comes to art. He aspires to create innovative music, and this character is strongly linked with "fashion" and "rebellion". In order to showcase his pioneering artistic style, English serves as a representation of his life attitude, embodying the "fashionable" and "rebellious" qualities.

Figure 5.3.4 Tattoo of Zhou Qiluo

His tattoos, scripted in English, feature the word "Nirvana", connoting both the concept of enlightenment and the name of the renowned rock band *Nirvana*. In this context, English seamlessly blends with elements of "fashion", "rebellion", and "trend", enriching the character's portrayal.

5.4 Elite Multilingualism: Entrepreneurial Discourses and Translanguaging for Self-positioning

Another phenomenon in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* is the portrayal of elite multilingualism. Elite languages, such as English, are viewed as the legitimized language that can increase individual competitiveness (Piller and Cho 2013; van der Walt 2013), accepted as source of authority and an index of academic excellence and global accountability (Phillipson 2008; Piller 2016b, 2019). For example, English and Chinese are considered as elite multilingualism (Li et al., 2020). In contrast to elite multilingualism, grassroots multilingualism often refers to the combination of languages or varieties that do not carry legitimate capital in a context (Han, 2013; Li & Zhang, 2020). In this study, English-mediated elite multilingualism refers to English plus elite forms of multilingualism (French, Italian in this study). Certain languages are viewed as possessing the necessary capital that is needed to succeed in contemporary society and is constructed through assigned market value.

As indicated in excerpt 14, the protagonist, in order to obtain the opportunity for job-related training, she had to master French fluently, hence she devoted a considerable

amount of time to studying.

主角：浪费时间发牢骚还不如趁着有限的时间背单词。

接下来的半个月里，陪伴我最长时间的就是身边那本法语书。只要有空闲，我就会拿起书来学习，或者上网看教法语的视频。空闲时间看的电影或电视剧也被我换成法语的，只要有时间，我就会争分夺秒地学习法语。我还特地招了一位法国人做我的助理，她是我们公司最闲的员工，每天只要用法语跟我聊天就有薪水拿。经过我一个月的刻苦训练，在成功熬出了熊猫眼的同时，我的法语也突飞猛进。

李泽言：你的法语水平仅够日常交流，离精通还差得远，但是……（对他的秘书）这次的活动，就交给她来完成吧——对了，给她安排一个翻译陪同。（李泽言 SR 卡面剧情：买）

The protagonist: I should stop complaining. Let's memorize vocabulary as many as possible.

(Narration) Over the next two weeks, the French book by my side becomes my longest companion. Whenever I have free time, I pick up the book to study or watch French instructional videos online. I replace movies or TV shows with French ones during leisure time, striving to make the most of every moment to learn French. I even hired a French assistant, who happens to be the least busy employee in our company, to chat with me in French every day in exchange for a salary. After a month of diligent training, while successfully overcoming the panda eyes, my French skills also improved significantly.

The Protagonist: Even if I ultimately fail to seize this opportunity, I am determined to study seriously. I am not one to give up halfway.

Li Zeyan: Your French proficiency is only sufficient for daily communication, far from mastery... (to his secretary) Let her handle this event—oh, and arrange for a translator to accompany her. (Excerpt 14 from Li Zeyan's SR card story: I'll take it.)

In excerpt 14, French is considered as a necessary language that the protagonist has to master in a short time. The female protagonist exhibits a state of striving to learn and progress, a trait that is also evident in their language acquisition endeavors, which conform to the study of De Costa (2020) which raised the theory of linguistic entrepreneurship. Under the burgeoning influence of neoliberalism (Block et al. 2013; Holborow 2015; Piller and Cho 2013), several ideological trends have converged to reframe language learning as a project of entrepreneurial self-development. The protagonist displays the quality of self-reliance and resilience to acquire this opportunity without any questioning the reasonableness of the requirement that she must work very hard on her language skills to obtain this professional training opportunity.

Nevertheless, this example also highlights the idea that multilingualism is not evenly distributed across all social groups. Instead, it is often associated with privilege, education, and access to resources. She shows great entrepreneurial qualities while striving for this chance to France. However, it can be also noticed that her eventual acquisition of this opportunity is not entirely satisfactory: firstly, she has sufficient economic capital to hire a native speaker from France to teach her French. Despite portraying her as solely responsible for her efforts, she possesses advantages that many language learners do not: ample learning resources and economic capital. Such portrayal covers the suffering of common language learners; Secondly, Li Zeyan offers her this opportunity only for "her devoted effort" and he does not fully recognize her language proficiency, which makes this story of fair treatment at work packaged as "the diligent girl reaping rewards" and "excellent man taking care of his girlfriend". The excerpt 14 constructs a sexual hierarchy and "romance" here becomes an umbrella term of "taking a shortcut in workplace".

Apart from legitimizing certain western European languages as job necessities and adopting entrepreneurial discourses, otome games such as *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* also contains translanguaging. According to Han (2018), the core of translanguaging lies at bilingual speakers' use of their entire semiotic repertoires. Using and mixing English in daily conversation is also a way to construct a positive bilingual identity for oneself. Such a bilingual identity can take the form of the language user or global citizen. In Light and Night, the protagonist and Zha Lisu, use Chinese mixed with English to position themselves as multilingual individuals and set up a creative way of speech.

查理苏：走过保安室听到门卫大爷说我讲话中文夹英文。
主角：How come？可怜的 Charlie，看来是大爷还不够了解你。
查理苏：但我也只是对大爷说，晚上别把化验室锁上。有个报告明早 due，化验室的借用表已经 approve 了。难道很过分吗？
主角：Charlie，你听起来 really 过分！大爷根本听不懂啊.....（查理苏短信：说 English）

Zha Lisu: Walking past the security room, I heard the doorman say I speak "half English half Mandarin".
Protagonist: How come? Oh, poor Charlie.
Zha Lisu: I just asked him not to lock the laboratory at night. There's a report due tomorrow morning, and the lab loan form has been APPROVED. Is that outrageous?
Protagonist: Charlie, that is really ourtrageous! He could not understand you at all!

Zha Lisu: <u>To be honest,</u> I am not outrageous at all. <u>(Excerpt 15 from Zha Lisu's message:</u> Speak <u>English</u>)

In excerpt 15, the process of translanguaging involves mixing Chinese and English. Upon observing excerpt 15, it becomes evident that characters such as Zha Lisu, who is depicted as a mixed-race individual, as well as the female protagonist as an overseas returnees, employ English in a manner consistent with native speakers. Expressions like "due", "how come", and "to be honest" adhere to native-speaker language conventions, to a certain extent ensuring grammatical authenticity and constructing a bilingual individual's self-identity. However, the instance such as "really outrageous" (originally "really 过分") represents a creative adoption of translanguaging. This construction creates a form of Chinglish understandable to Chinese speakers. Through this seemingly "unusual" code-mixing, the protagonist achieves a humorous or mocking effect to comment on Zha's use of Chinese mixed with English towards an elderly Chinese man who cannot understand his meaning.

5.5 Summary

This chapter mainly examines how English and English-related culture help construct romance and elite lifestyles of characters in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*.

In *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, English is constructed as a desirable capital for building up their romantic relationship, which conforms to Piller and Takahashi's study (2006) on English language desire. English language desire is discursively constructed. English language and culture, as contemporary "powerful" entities, can influence the societal operation as well as the individual lifestyle. The workings of power include the inculcation of desires that lead individuals to modify their own bodies and personalities (Piller & Takahashi, 2006).

In *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, English serves as a highly significant element: English proficiency is capitalized as a desirable capability that both the male and female protagonists can express their love effectively through English. Although the female protagonist's English

proficiency in the storyline appears inferior to that of the male protagonists, both male and female protagonists who are adept in English have promising career prospects within the game. They have the opportunity to work and vacation freely in various countries as global citizens, utilizing their economic capital, while also enjoying literature and art in western countries. This constructs a highly global and elite romance, leaving players feeling that such romance is beautiful, dreamy, desirable, and achievable if players themselves can proficiently master English and strive to emulate the male and female protagonists.

Moreover, with the insertion of entrepreneurial discourses, this dream seems attainable. The in-game portrayal makes such success achievable only through personal efforts. However, as elucidated above, the entrepreneurial discourses actually masks the various difficulties encountered in attaining such a lifestyle. The social injustices that may exist when striving for a better personal life, due to differences in class and social status, are glossed over in the *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*. The male and female protagonists, belonging to the middle class, possess resources that many ordinary individuals cannot access throughout their lives, allowing them to enjoy this rarefied lifestyle. Although players of Chinese otome games such as *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* are ordinary individuals, mostly students, the romance depicted in the game is not one that ordinary young people can possess, nor is the lifestyle of the characters one that ordinary people can replicate. *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* primarily construct a lifestyle belonging to bilingual elites of the middle class, reproducing a hierarchy centered around English and Western culture and erasing the social inequalities grassroots individuals may face.

In addition, the praise and depiction of English and Western culture in *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* construct a hierarchy of culture and language: minority cultures and languages have almost no presence in the game. Most male protagonists graduate from prestigious universities in Western countries and after graduation, they are able to return to China as social elites, using English and their knowledge to continue their career as well as have romantic relationship with the female protagonist. In terms of language and culture understanding, both of these games demonstrate a elevation of English and Western culture.

In terms of gender relations, both games also exhibit a traditional gender hierarchy

which means the male holds the dominant position whereas the female holds the subordinate. Though female players are voluntarily engaged into this game, which conforms to Gill's (2007) statement that the presence of this notion of choice and agency in chick literature. In chick literature, there is a shift from mass culture depicting women as sexual objects to popular women's culture addressing women as sexual subjects. As sexual subjects, women get engaged into voluntarily self-objectification and willing participation in hetero-normative sexual norms and commodity culture. The male characters play the role of givers in terms of knowledge, while the female protagonist is merely a receiver. She does not have the opportunity to showcase her abilities in front of her lover or to teach him like he does to her. She often serves as the audience to admire and praise her lover and the male protagonist is always the one she has to pursue. Chinese otome games such as *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night*, although marketed as games for female players, actually perpetuate traditional gender hierarchy of male dominance and female submissiveness.

Chapter Six Conclusion

In this chapter, a brief summary of the major findings is given first. Then, it provides some reflections and implications of this thesis. This chapter concludes with a few suggestions for future studies.

6.1 Summary of Major Findings

This research aims to examine the ideological mediation of English within Chinese female-oriented video games. By incorporating semiotic and linguistic resources into the analysis, the results reveal that, in order to construct a fashionable and distinctive romance, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* utilize English and Western-oriented semiotics in four aspects to construct ideal middle-class romance between characters who are designed as multilingual elite under neoliberal discourses.

Firstly, male protagonists are designed as idealized lovers serving as English learning resources: they engage in discussions of English vocabulary or recite famous English poems and dramatic excerpts to express affection. In this context, to showcase the male protagonist's charm, the female protagonist often assumes a subordinate position to accept the male protagonist's declarations of love, reproducing a hierarchy of female as a receiver whereas male as a giver. Secondly, male protagonists often have numerous connections with Western culture: they are either mixed-race individuals from western countries or intellectuals who have long resided overseas. They not only possess multilingual abilities but also resemble elites from the Western world in various aspects such as lifestyle, habits or occupations, serving as a lens to help the female protagonist (the player) understand Western culture. Their lives epitomize the glamour of using English and living an elite lifestyle. Additionally, *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* feature many romantic landscapes with English and Western-oriented semiotic elements. In the game's visuals, various English-related semiotic elements are present in attire, streets, shops, and menus, suggesting a close connection between their lives and English as well as English culture. Finally, certain stories within *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* promote elite multilingualism. The status of certain languages are

elevated and characters have to employ entrepreneurial discourses to showcase self-reliance in the language learning process. The male and female protagonists in the game also utilize translanguaging (a mix of Chinese and English) to establish their self-identities as bilingual individuals and global citizens.

Though contesting traditional norms of male masculinity, Chinese otome games such as *Mr. Love* and *Light and Night* still reproduce the gender norm of male dominance and female submissiveness, underpinned by Anglophone-oriented and neoliberal ideologies.

6.2 Implication of the Study

As a cultural artifact, renowned video games can reflect reality and convey certain ideologies. Chinese otome games, targeting young female and stimulating emotional consumption, create a virtual world of ideal fantasies of lives, romance and marriages for young women. As Wen and Zhou (2018) stated, otome games create a daydream for women by offering immersive romantic experiences. However, as revealed in studies, these fantasies for young women seem to perpetuate notions of male dominance and female submissiveness, constructing a lifestyle exclusive to the middle class and elite, and even disseminating Anglophone-oriented and neoliberal ideologies mediated by English. Chinese otome games continue to be saturated with the glamour of Hollywood movies, fashion, and elite lifestyles in shaping romance.

This research aims to complement existing studies of Chinese otome games in sociolinguistics. Additionally, it hopes to initiate further exploration into video games and various other digital social media platforms within the realm of sociolinguistics. Researchers may explore discourses on various social media platforms to unveil the ideologies hidden in semiotic elements.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Study

This study aims to analyze the English-mediated affect present in Chinese otome games. However, affect mediated by languages may also manifest in various other forms of mass

media, such as advertisements, short videos on TikTok, WeChat Moments, Weibo, emojis, etc. Meanwhile, with the rise of multilingualism, not only English but also other languages, including previously considered "peripheral" languages, may contribute to the mediation of affect.

Currently, there is a large influx of overseas otome games into China, and there are significant differences in the discourses surrounding adult romance inserted into Chinese and foreign otome games. Moreover, in 2023, a romance game targeting males gained popularity in China, highlighting the importance of noting the differences in game production for different gender demographics in the realm of romance games. Also, in terms of themes of video game studies, there are many topics in sociolinguistics that can be further explored, as the concept of language and class, language and race, language and country can be reflected in the power and values involved in video games.

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