

Alvan Lai

Professor Karina Popp

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Political Easter Eggs and Procedural Rhetoric: How Hidden Intertextuality Transformed the Ideological Landscape of *Devotion*

Procedural rhetoric, coined by the game designer Ian Bogost, refers to the authoring practice of “using processes persuasively” (125): authors convey their ideologies through a dynamic model of rules instead of static textual or visual representations. Video games, with their emphasis on procedurality—that is, the computational value that “creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms” (122)—are thus distinguished from other media by their use of procedural rhetoric. The Taiwanese horror game, *Devotion* (Huanyuan 還願), delves into the discourse of family dysfunction and religious fanaticism using procedural rhetoric. While analyzing those imperative messages expressed via procedural ity, I argue that *Devotion*’s embedded Easter eggs, as intertextual representations carrying political meanings, outpower and transform what players perceive from the game’s procedural rhetoric.

Devotion is a psychological horror video game developed by the Taiwanese studio Red Candle Games, released for Windows and MacOS on February 19, 2019. Set in Taiwan in the 1980s, the game focuses on the story of a nuclear family, where the player controls the father, Du Feng-yu, to explore his illusional memories of their family apartment through traveling across the same space at different times during the 1980s. By solving puzzles and collecting items, the player eventually reveals the truth: attempting to cure his daughter Mei-shin’s

illness, Du accidentally murders her due to his fanatic belief in a cult that claims the omnipotence of a folk deity called Cigu Guanyin. Throughout the game, the player is forced to investigate *their* sins in the terrible place as Du Feng-yu, enduring unavoidable scary scenes and jump scares.

In this case, the major way *Devotion* uses procedural rhetoric to convey ideologies is by limiting the player's agency and thereby making them feel powerless in the uncanny environment. When playing as Du Feng-yu, the player can neither jump nor dash with slow walking speed. Despite possessing a lighter, the use of it is banned in many scenes. During exploration, the player also encounters jump scares and gets stalked by Li-fang, Du's ex-wife who becomes a ghostly figure accusing him of killing their daughter in Du's imagination. However, the player is unable to interact with her via their control and can merely escape while being chased. Additionally, near the end, the player must control Du to *devote* himself to Cigu Guanyin by castrating their eye and tongue. As much as the player refuses to witness the gore, they are forced to drag the mouse to control the castrator's movement.

The same powerlessness persists when the player switches to Mei-shin's perspective, experiencing her trauma when situated under tremendous family pressure. In one interactive scene, Mei-shin sits in front of her desk, unable to focus when her parents are quarreling. With eyes composed of messy strokes emerging on the screen, the player must press space to collide two glass marbles constantly, which is how Mei-shin calms herself, whereas the player can do nothing else to change the situation. Forced to do things they are not willing to do and with immobility imposed by rules, the player becomes increasingly powerless when processing the game. Hsiao Hsing-Chun in his 2020 analysis of the cultural phenomenon aroused by *Devotion* concludes that *Devotion* creates a re-imagined space resembling

Taiwanese society, through which its sociopolitical problems are revealed, including gendered family structures, conventional Eastern parent-child relations, mental disturbance, social crimes, and religious fanaticism (27-31). By engaging players with the persisting powerlessness of Du Feng-yu and Mei-shin when faced with the blended miniature of socio-political issues, *Devotion* demonstrates the destructive effects of these issues, therefore persuading players into their ideologies,

Despite the powerful ideologies conveyed through *Devotion*'s procedural rhetoric, the discovery of two political Easter eggs changed the reception of the game. *Devotion* was initially popularly received especially in mainland China, when plentiful videos were uploaded on Bilibili, one of China's major video-game-sharing websites, accompanied by many Chinese players referencing *Devotion* as "the pride of domestically produced games" ("Hidden 'Baozi' and 'Winnie'). However, two days after its release, a Taoist charm embedded in-game as an Easter egg—that is, a hidden element implemented in digital media that possesses a certain message—was discovered to be containing cursive Chinese writings of "Xi Jinping Winnie the Pooh" (*Xi Jinping Xiaoxiong Weini* 习近平小熊維尼) and "Ni ma ba qi" (呢嘛叭嚩), which resembles "Your mom is an idiot" in Taiwanese dialect (Wu 54).

Although Red Candle Games officially claimed that the art assets were implemented accidentally with no intention of insulting anyone, players later found that headlines of a newspaper pasted in a game scene included messages of a criminal named Baozi, another nickname used to address Xi, being imprisoned and sentenced for assaulting school children.

Both Baozi and Winnie the Pooh were regarded as typical, often insulting, nicknames mocking Xi (Wu 54), which are keywords under censorship in China. The conveyed messages were considered by not only Chinese authorities but also many Chinese players to have

crossed the line, as they regard the president as representing the national image. Despite the messages being “darkly humorous jokes” from the perspectives of Taiwanese players (55), *Devotion* was then identified by Chinese players as a “Taiwanese independence game” (“Game Surges”) that broke their fantasies of a domestically developed high-quality video game. As a response to the controversies, *Devotion* was removed from the video game platform Steam on February 26, 2019, and the name became a censored keyword on Chinese social media since then. The embedded Easter eggs, though hardly discoverable in the game, caused a massive uproar.

The political messages—mockeries of President Xi—conveyed through the Easter eggs, which function as intertextual representations, seem separate from ideologies carried through *Devotion*’s procedural rhetoric yet transcend them in impact. Zdenko Mago applies the theory of transtextuality, which refers to how a text is situated in relation to other texts (Genett, *The Architect* 81), to classify Easter eggs in video games (49). Whereas the theory contains different types of transtextual relations, the political Easter eggs in *Devotion* indicate the most common one, intertextuality, which refers to the cooccurrence of two texts with one text embodied in the other (Genett, *Paratexts* 18). In *Devotion*, the Easter eggs are intertextual in that they directly embody political texts outside the game world by referencing the mocking nicknames of Xi. Given the intertextuality, the players, when interpretively reading the representations, can then relate to real-life politics and translate the designers’ political stances, as intertextual representations represent the designers’ cultural backgrounds and values in political discourses (Çakırtaş 165-166). Having interpreted the messages through their lens, the players then apply the perceived ideologies to the entire game.

As players interpret the Easter eggs intertextually and apply their interpretations to *Devotion*, other relevant representations are also recontextualized as intertexts, thereby transforming how ideologies expressed through the game's procedural rhetoric are perceived. After the discovery of the political easter eggs, it was found that in *Devotion*'s offline warm-up ARG (Alternative reality game) another cult in the background story is called Lu Xin She (陸心社), which can be translated alternatively as "mainland heart league" based on its literal meaning. Meanwhile, the name of the cult leader Lu Gong Ming (陸恭銘) resembles the pronunciation of "mainland citizens" in Mandarin (Zhu). In contrast, the name of the protagonist's daughter Mei-shin, while normally interpreted as "beautiful heart," can be understood as "American heart" given the multiple meanings possessed by the Chinese character Mei (美) ("Hidden 'Baozi' and 'Winnie'"). As Braxton Solderman argues, a game cannot be interpreted merely through player actions and its procedurality, as the embedded representations also carry significant weight (28). In this case, the range of relevant representations extends beyond the game itself, as players perceive connections between the game and the AVG, regardless of the designers' intentions. Consequently, what the game's procedural rhetoric conveys is taken as political, with the cult and the oppressive environment read as representing mainland China's national power and political despotism, while Mei-shin becomes a symbol of Taiwan's idealized yearning for America under threats from mainland China.

Some may question whether *Devotion*'s hidden elements truly qualify as Easter eggs, given that Easter eggs are supposedly intended to be discovered whereas in *Devotion* that seems not the case. Nonetheless, what ultimately matters is how people interpret their meanings and what they perceive as the designers' intentions, rather than what was originally

meant to be conveyed. In this case, the Easter eggs, seemingly negligible, have caused dramatic real-world political impacts, just as the in-game political representations were shaped by the designers' views of reality (Prundaru and Abrudan 40). Therefore, the intertextual Easter eggs in *Devotion* powerfully transform players' understanding of the ideologies conveyed through the game's procedural rhetoric, reframing the powerlessness experienced within the uncanny realm of cult and family trauma in a politically charged light.

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