Video Games as Dating Platforms: Exploring Digital Intimacies through a Chinese Online Dancing Video Game

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Abstract

In the relatively young field of new media studies, both video games and online dating platforms are identified as being important and popular genres of digital products, which are often discussed separately. This article argues that these two genres of digital products are not so much separate but entangled elements of the same processes of technological shifts in media industry, development of people's online leisure activities, and the convergence of digital genres. To provide empirical evidence, this article examines a Chinese dancing video game, QQ Dazzling Dance (QQ *Xuan Wu*), which creatively juxtaposes these two genres of participatory digital culture and recognizes the analytical and critical values in doing so.

Keywords

video games, online dating, media convergence, digital intimacies, sexuality

Introduction: Falling in Love in a Video Game

In the relatively young field of new media studies, both video games and online dating platforms are identified as important and popular digital products. They represent different forms of commercialized digital culture, attract consumers with different expectations, and are often discussed separately. This article starts with the premise that these two are not so much separate but entangled elements of the same technological shifts in media industry, namely the convergence of digital genres. To provide empirical evidence, I examine a Chinese dancing video game, QQ Dazzling Dance (QQ *Xuan Wu*).

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The investigation begins with the many online dating stories that I heard during my four-month internship in a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) in 2014. Located in one of the many industrial areas in Shenzhen City, Southeast China, this NGO mainly serves rural-to-urban migrant laborers.[1] The love story of a young heterosexual couple, Chen Xin and Five, caught my attention.[2] When I first encountered them, they looked much like any other young heterosexual couple working and living in this industrial area. After I became acquainted with them, I found that their relationship had originated online: they had met, fallen in love, and got married in virtual space, before finally meeting and consummating their relationship offline. Furthermore, I discovered that this couple actually met playing a Chinese online dancing video game, QQ Dazzling Dance, rather than via online dating platforms.

Later, between October 2015 and June 2016, I carried out more extensive ethnographic fieldwork over a nine-month period. During this time, I stayed in a factory manufacturing cellphone cameras and assembling cellphones. I got in touch with more gamers of QQ Dazzling Dance. All of them came from rural areas in Midwestern China and were aged between sixteen and thirty-five. Most of them worked in the same factory; others worked as security guards, deliverymen, salespersons, and clerks in nearby factories. I expanded the number of interviewees and conducted face-to-face ethnographic research with seventeen game players (nine men and eight women of different sexual orientations). I asked them to show me their avatars and tell me their in-game stories and I also invited them to talk about their general notions and experiences of love, gender, sex, and marriage. I also carried out long-term online ethnographic research into the game myself (November 2015 till the present date), focusing on QQ Dazzling Dance's online forums.[3] My own participant observation of the game brought the total number of acquaintances whose stories I have heard to approximately eighty-five.

The work schedule at the factory was tight. In the factory where I stayed, for example, workers worked between ten and eleven hours a day, for six days a week. No mobile phones were allowed during shifts. However, this did not stop workers from constantly staying online and consuming digital culture. In particular, these young workers frequented the Internet cafés nearby. The industrial areas in Southeastern China are known for the ubiquity of such Internet cafés, which provide quality facilities (Qiu 2013). For example, Zheng (nineteen, male, from Sichuan province) recalled,

> I come from the remote rural area in the West. I started gaming with my co-workers shortly after I came here under their influence. QQ Dazzling Dance is easy and addictive; once you learn to play the game, you get addicted easily. Back in the days when the game was most popular among us, a bunch of us ten or so workers often went to the Internet café together. We would go there immediately after dinner, as the place would be full if we go late. We often played late into the night and everyone would be drowsy at work the next day.

Gaming together was an important social activity among the workers. These workers came from different places and did not know each other previously. Li (twenty-three, female, from Anhui province) said,

I didn't go home for Chinese New Year a couple of years after I came out for work. I just couldn't stand being alone on Chinese New Year Eve. I spent five Chinese New Years in Internet cafés gaming with my co-workers. Tell you what—the players wished each other "Happy New Year" in the game, and the owner of the Internet café brought everyone hot milk tea!

Based upon my investigation, I came to learn that Chen Xin and Five's story is not unique. Many QQ Dazzling Dance gamers have experienced romantic feelings while playing the game and some have "successfully" translated these online romantic feelings into online encounters and "real" relationships. To further unpack the process of the "gamification" of dating and assess its implications for understanding intimacies in the digital age, this article asks, What are the exact affordances that enable the video game to serve the function of a dating platform? How do its gamers come to understand and negotiate the game's designs? What are the differences and similarities, between virtual and nonvirtual relationships and encounters?

Answers to these questions, as suggested by video game theorist Ian Bogost, should begin by dealing with the fundamental question, What is the nature of the game (Bogost 2015, x)? One of the most popular games in China, QQ Dazzling Dance was developed by Chinese infotech (IT) giant, Tencent Inc., in 2008; the game now ranks at number ten among all video games in China (measured in relation to the number of daily gamers), with 2.6 million people online simultaneously each day. The game itself is quite simple: the system gives orders and the player responds by using direction keys (Up, Down, Left, Right, etc.) to control their avatar's dance moves. During each round of a new game, the player(s) press the direction keys to match the rhythm of a pop song; the more closely their dance moves correspond with the music, the higher the score they receive. In the main player versus player (PVP) mode of the dance game, a type of multiplayer interactive game between two or more live participants, each player competes against each other.

On the home page of the official website for QQ Dazzling Dance, the game's manufacturer claims the game to be "the most romantic video game."[4] This study intends to ask, Why would a video game be advertised and used as an online dating platform? In the context of contemporary China, how does the overlap between two often separately discussed genres and conventions of digital products open up new ways of thinking about the political, cultural, economic, and private realms of people's romantic experience?

The concept of media convergence offers a means of thinking about these questions. It typically refers to the following three trends: (1) the merging of previously distinct media technologies and media forms resulting from digitization, computer networking, and the proliferation of mobile devices (Jenkins 2006); (2) the concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media (Jenkins 2006; McChesney 1999); and (3) media audiences' constant traveling across the borders of the virtual and the actual worlds to seek entertainment (Jenkins 2006; Jung 2010). However, the concept of "convergence," especially Henry Jenkins's account, has been widely critiqued. A concern is that the term is often used at such an overarching scale that it may obstruct

understandings of diverse phenomena and specific practices (Hay and Couldry 2011). Another critique is from Nick Couldry (2011), who points out that the account of convergence should be more culturally and geographically contextualized. Other useful critiques are from feminist media scholars, who consider convergence as being embedded within contemporary unequal gender relations (Driscoll and Gregg 2011; Ouellette and Wilson 2011). Building upon these critiques of media convergence, I will focus on the possible articulations between two digital products, namely video games and online dating platforms. I will also center my analysis of the game on its implications for gender relations in contemporary China.

Reading Video Games as Online Dating Platforms: Texts and Sites

As the field of video game studies matures, different approaches to analyzing video games, game play, and players have emerged. Psychological studies of video games and their tendency to pathologize video gamers have been critiqued because they often carry little inside understanding of video game culture (Goldberg and Larsson 2015). It is also suggested that video games should not only be treated as products of technology, but also as products of culture (Goldberg and Larsson 2015). Similarly, proponents of Cultural Studies have been particularly interested in advancing an understanding of video game culture as a new kind of popular culture associated with distinct styles, behaviors, interests, and implications for ethnicity, gender, and race relations (Bogost 2015; Cover 2015, 2016; Shaw 2010). They have asked questions such as, Who plays? What do they play? How do they play? And how is video game culture separate from or related to a constructed mainstream culture (Shaw 2010)? Believing that the worth of a video game lies in its gamers' experience, anthropologists have focused on providing ethnographic accounts of people's in-game social lives (Boellstorff 2008).

However, the existing literature on video games fails to explain why a digital game is viewed as an environment in which romantic encounters can be digitally played out. More important questions include what kinds of sociocultural forces write the script of romantic love, and how do male and female avatars in the game know how to perform their "masculine" and "feminine" roles (Butler 1988)? How do players conform to and/or negotiate the game's romantic script? Do digital games challenge patriarchal ideologies or embrace values of gender equality (Evans and Janish 2015)? Can they provide a wider variety of choices of gender and romantic relationships than exist in reality (McDonald 2015)?

To answer these questions, we need to take on board critical approaches in the field of gender and sexuality studies, focusing on the interplay between intimacy and digital dating. Of the possible ways to consider intimate lives in the digital age, one strand of thought views digital platforms as "*texts*." This viewpoint considers how such digital products as websites create specific content and aesthetic forms to attract users (Miller 2000). Many studies that have used this approach conclude that digital platforms respond to and reinforce preexisting normative, exclusive, or discriminatory ideologies. For instance, Sharif Mowlabocus (2010a) uses this approach in his research into

the gay dating website, Gaydar.com, and finds that the core feature of the website is a search engine with a range of filters. These filters are designed based on factors such as sexual fetishes, body type, age, and location.

Another strand of thought approaches digital dating platforms as *sites*. The focus of this approach is on examining people's everyday and habitual engagement with digital dating media, seeing them as significant areas for the exercise and negotiation of "new" rules for intimacy. For example, Ilana Gershon (2011) delineates how new media has affected the intricacies of relationships and their dissolution. In the Facebook era, Gershon observes, when one can change his or her relationship status from the prelisted choices of "in a relationship" to "single" before telling his or her friends, the way one breaks up, and the media through which one chooses to distribute this information, matter very much and require serious social management (Gershon 2011). Another example comes from the work of Jamie Hakim (2016), which examines the phenomenon of the increasing number of young British men who share images of their worked-out bodies on social media platforms. Emphasizing the economic context, the study concludes that sharing such body images has become a way by which some individuals stage a sense of value in relation to the precarious structures of feeling produced by neoliberal marketization (Hakim 2016).

Kane Race's studies, however, combine the above-mentioned approaches, considering digital platforms as both texts and sites (Race 2015b, a). In his work, Race not only examines digital dating platforms as texts, but also pays attention to how certain online hookup devices (mainly the Grindr app) function as sites, asking how party culture in the gay community has played into new ways in which gay males arrange sex and establish new forms of intimacy in the digital age. My analysis is inspired by Race's approach to studying dating platforms as both texts and sites. However, one major limitation in his work is an exclusive concentration on the "well-defined" genre of digital products: hookup and dating apps, such as Grindr. Another important genre of digital products, digital games, is largely invisible in the discussion of digital intimacies. This article draws attention to the fact that other genres of digital product, such as online games, can be equally (if not more) capable of generating romantic and sexual encounters, and also demonstrates the analytical necessity and value of reading a digital game such as QQ Dazzling Dance as an "infrastructure of the sexual and romantic encounter" (Race 2015a, 254).

Cultural Origins: The Birth of QQ Dazzling Dance

Before narrowing down to a detailed analysis of the inner world of QQ Dazzling Dance (namely its avatar designs, game modes, marriage, and divorce rituals), I would like to offer a brief history of the game, which was created in 2008, almost three decades after China's economic reform and opening-up project. The reforms transformed China from a Soviet-style, centrally planned economy into a rapidly developing Asian power, with many aspects of its economy open to global capitalism. Within this context, a booming IT industry with numerous privately owned commercial websites and applications emerged.

As noted by Matthew Chew (2016), the years 2006–2009 represent a significant turning point in the Chinese online game industry. From 1995 to 2001, following the establishment of China's Internet infrastructure, Chinese online games were mostly noncommercial, and developed by amateurs. Between 2002 and 2005, a further opening-up of the country's economy provided increasingly open (but not unlimited) access to imported commercial games from more developed and open media economies. The years between 2006 and 2009 marked a significant turning point. During that period, a strong, new, resilient, and uniquely local business model emerged, allowing room for native online gamers to design their own games to a more creative and complex standard. Since then, Chinese online games have become domestically dominant, and have had a profound impact on global online game designs. It was also during these important transitional years that one such local commercial game, QQ Dazzling Dance, was born.

Understanding QQ Dazzling Dance as an infrastructure of romantic encounter also leads to a pertinent situation in today's China in which anxiety about being single dominates public discussions and sociological analysis. As documented by Leta Hong Fincher (2014), today's China is marked by a moral panic over singleness. The widespread discourse of "leftover women," for instance, devalues unmarried women in their mid to late twenties because of their so-called "leftover" status. In much of the public discussion, the "problem" of the single woman resides in her failure to live up to the norms of heterosexual partnership and motherhood. The culture of stigmatized singleness also extends to men, considering the severe gender imbalance resulting from the previous one-child policy (Jin et al. 2015). Responding to and reinforcing the panic over singleness, television dating shows have experienced a resurgence in recent years. The most watched Chinese dating show is *If You Are the One*, which emphasizes that being single is both an individual and a social problem (Li 2015).

On the other side of the coin, Chinese society is seeing a rise in people's pursuit of romantic pleasure in relationships. In the past twenty years, popular music (Q. Wang 2007), television series (Bai 2016), and movies (Dai and Barlow 2002) have been increasingly associated with romantic love, sex, emotion, and related consumerist desire. Under these circumstances, online dating platforms, which promise to fulfill people's needs for finding husbands/wives or casual sex have proliferated (Liu 2016). These platforms include various online forums, matchmaking websites, and mobile hookup applications (Liu 2016). In traditional Chinese culture, the role of facilitating people's romantic encounters used to be undertaken by social forums, such as balls, parties, or arranged dates (*xiang qin*), while mediation services were provided by an older generation of communication media that included handwritten letters and telephone calls. With the advent of digitalization, Internet-based instant messengers have gradually assumed the role of generating and mediating people's romantic interactions. At the same time, the users of new media technologies have gradually come to view themselves as being part of a particular community in which digital platforms play a central role in intimate relationships.

It was within this specific social context that QQ Dazzling Dance, a video game creatively imitating the genres of online dating platforms, emerged. I will now move on to an analysis of the *text* of QQ Dazzling Dance centered on the following

Figure 1. The six pieces of clothing and accessories worn by the avatar (above) were bought by a female gamer and highlight how sartorial distinctiveness is key to players' online identity.

questions: What are the exact affordances that enable the video game to serve the function of a dating platform? And what are the specific functions, environments, and designs (i.e., the programming and texts of the game) that invite gamers to use it as an online dating platform?

Reading QQ Dazzling Dance as Text: Heteronormative Sexual Scripting

Every player picks an avatar (either female or male) before the game commences. Once chosen, the gender of the avatar cannot be changed. The game is free to play, but earns revenue by selling virtual items such as digital clothes and accessories for the player's avatar. For instance, during my fieldwork, I met a young girl, whose avatar had six pieces of clothing and accessories: a type of curly long hairstyle called "Flora of the Troubled Times," a tiara called "Tenderness," a mace called "Blood-thirsty Dawn Cane," a pair of brown leopard print shoes, an elegant miniskirt, and a dress called "Wild Dance of Butterflies." The whole costume cost her 226 yuan (approximately US$33), almost the same as a normal outfit in reality (see Figure 1).

Dressing avatars in a fashionable and tasteful manner and conforming to the ideal feminine and masculine role of the game is important in QQ Dazzling Dance. "If your

avatar is ugly, no one wants to play with you." This was the first piece of advice given to me by the participant who taught me how to play QQ Dazzling Dance. And this advice proved to be important. In the game's online forum, there were posts teaching male avatars to dress fashionably.[5] In 2012, an online beauty competition among female avatars was held.[6] In total, sixty-four female avatars participated. The common aesthetic elements of these female avatars included: slim figure, flat stomach, lean legs, carefully dyed and curled waist-length hair, and intricate lace skirts that may expose the extremely white skin of their bodies. The event attracted the attention of a number of players who offered comments and voted for the "hottest avatar."

If the images of male and female avatars indicate the only types of bodies sanctioned for heterosexual romance, the various game modes and in-game marriage rituals and procedures further highlight the fact that QQ Dazzling Dance is designed according to the heteronormative sexual script emphasizing male-female monogamous partnership and (game system-recognized) heterosexual marriage.

Besides the regular PVP mode in which players compete with each other, QQ Dazzling Dance provides many game modes that can generate random interactions, contingent connections, and romantic feelings among its players, such as,

> *Romantic Mode*: for 1 male and 1 female. The male player partners with the female player. When the game begins, it is "Boy's Time" when the male is the main player while the female assists him in fulfilling the tasks. This is followed by "Girl's Time" when the female plays with the support of the male.

Similar game modes include *Dancing Party Mode* (for one male and one female), *Date Mode* (for three males and three females), and *Free Mode* (in this mode, the two players can use specific dancing steps and make their avatars kiss each other in the dance).

QQ Dazzling Dance also offers its players the option of "marriage": *only avatars of the opposite sex can get married*. For their avatars to get married, players need to go through a series of digital rituals. First, each of the two players needs to buy a ring at the game's shopping mall. There are more than sixty kinds of digital rings in the shopping mall, with price ranging from US$9 to US$20. Other players can also attend the wedding to witness the ceremony and extend their best wishes (see Figure 2). After getting married, the two avatars can enjoy the *exclusive privileges of married couples*. For instance, a married couple can play in the Couple Mode in which the two players will also get a score called Love Value. Accordingly, QQ Dazzling Dance also has rules on divorce. In the game, only couples that have established a relationship (marriage) for at least seven days can get a divorce.

William Simon and John Gagnon's (2003) theory of the sexual script is useful here. Simon and Gagnon (2003) identify the heteronormative sexual script as a social force glorifying the belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders with "natural" roles in life. It also celebrates male-female monogamous partnerships and state-recognized heterosexual marriages. It is not hard to tell that QQ Dazzling Dance is a game constituted and produced within the heteronormative framework. And it is

Figure 2. A typical wedding in QQ Dazzling Dance, allowing other guest avatars to enter the wedding scene and leave messages in the bottom left-hand rolling message board.

through this heteronormative framework of cultural representation, discourse, and language that a video game, which can be used as an infrastructure of romantic encounter, is constructed.

However, even within the heteronormative sexual script, there can be diverse gendered constructs of masculinities and femininities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The kind of masculinities in the game adheres to what Geng Song and Tracy Lee (2010) have found in men's lifestyle magazines in contemporary China. They argue,

> As an emerging form of popular culture, they [lifestyle magazines] have also begun to exert an increasingly significant influence on what it means to be a man in today's China. The forms of masculinity constructed through *pinwei* [taste] exemplify the commercialization of culture in contemporary China. Through *pinwei* [taste], Chinese lifestyle magazines attempt to equate the consumption of luxury items and women with the embodiment of cultural capital. In so doing, they promote forms of masculinity that are distinguishable from both the Confucian and Maoist masculinities of earlier eras. (Song and Lee 2010, 177)

Furthermore, the highly eroticized bodies of female avatars can be understood as "exaggerated adherence to a stereotypical feminine gender role" (Murnen and Byrne 1991, 479). The fingerprints of the dominant normative femininity emphasizing cuteness (*kawaii*) in Asian popular culture can also be detected (Iseri 2015).

Reading QQ Dazzling Dance as a Site

I turn now to reading QQ Dazzling Dance as a *site*, focusing on how the many players of the game engage and interact with its "infrastructures" on a day-to-day basis. The following documentation and analysis is based on face-to-face and online ethnographic research I conducted with the gamers. I roughly and deductively divide the ways in which players experience QQ Dazzling Dance into the following scenarios[7]:

- *"I simply play this game"*: A few of the gamers acknowledge their right to marry avatars of the opposite sex and earn extra points ("Love Value") by doing so, but they have not married anyone. Some of them explained that this is because "it costs money." A gay man complained that because he played with a male avatar and his virtual partner also played with a male avatar, their marriage was not allowed by the system.
- *"That's only part of the game"*: Some people admitted that they have experienced more than one in-game marriage (and divorce), but these were only carried out as part of the game to gain "Love Value," and no romantic feelings evolved.
- *"What we have is true love"*: This was said by only a handful of couples, such as Chen Xin and Five, who successfully translated their online (virtual) encounters into stable, long-term, fixed relationships in "reality." This scenario is also experienced by gay and lesbian couples who meet in the game, a phenomenon that will be further analyzed in the following section.
- *"I don't know whether it can be counted as love or not"*: This view was shared by the majority of the gamers, who had romantic encounters and experienced in-game marriages and divorces. Most of the participants had not considered how to define their virtual relationships or whether their in-game marriages could be counted as "love" until I raised the question. In reality, most of them never met the online person(s) they "married" due to the significant physical distance separating them, though a few did manage to do so. They reported that this kind of relationship was somewhat specious and ambiguous, something that resembles, but does not exactly equal "love"; but they claimed that heartfelt affection and real sexual drive did exist. They also called each other "husband" or "wife" during online chatting even though these virtual relationships did not tend to last long. One female player whom I interviewed told me that she had once met a guy in QQ Dazzling Dance and gone on to have one-night stands with him. Upon discovering that the man had a girlfriend later on, the participant decided to end their relationship and refused to consider their encounter as "true love."

Exploring the Complexity of Digital Intimacies

As mentioned earlier, most QQ Dazzling Dance gamers who frequented the Internet cafés in the industrial area of Shenzhen were rural migrant laborers from different places.[8] In the agricultural communities where they originally came from, social

circles are mainly made up of members of their extended families and familiar acquaintances. Rural-to-urban migration provided them with an opportunity to encounter a large number of strangers. Because of the unique dormitory labor regime in the industrial area in Southern China, within which laborers are housed in employer-controlled industrial dormitories within or close to production facilities, workers normally live in dormitories accommodating around six to ten people each (Pun 2012). A relationship between strangers usually starts with mutual suspicion and distancing. During my fieldwork, many informants told me that they were on guard against each other when they first arrived. A nineteen-year-old male worker said,

> When I first stepped into the dormitory, the first thing on my mind was all my roommates were strangers and I needed to keep an eye on my valuables. I slept with my cellphone and wallet under my pillow for the first night. Thank goodness, they were still there the next morning.

Young workers often joined each other at Internet cafés to play digital games. Playing digital games together, especially games that require teamwork and facilitate romantic encounters, such as QQ Dazzling Dance, constitutes an important interaction for this particular group of people. A worker described it as such,

> No one knew the real names of others at the start. We called each other names according to their physical appearance or their in-game avatars. If you are tall, you become "Tall guy" [*Gao Lao*]; if you are fat, you become "Fat-ass" [*Pang Zi*]; if you wear spectacles, you become "Glasses" [*Yanjing Zai*]. If your avatar in the game always wears blue, you become "Blue" [*Lan Lao*]. Girls who play well are called "Queens" [*Nv Wang*] and guys who played well are called "Masters" [*Da Ren*].

Playing the Date Mode (for three males and three females) of QQ Dazzling Dance always proved to be a quick and efficient way for single females and males to hook up with one another. Spreading by word of mouth, QQ Dazzling Dance became famous among the workers as a dating platform, attracting more players, and I often witnessed young couples playing it together in Internet cafés. However, not every couple who met in the game ended up happily ever after. For example, Nie (twenty-five, female, from Guangxi) got to know her ex-boyfriend, a fellow auto factory worker, while playing QQ Dazzling Dance. Recalling him, Nie complained,

> He was very fond of video games, on which he spent a lot of time and money. Whenever he was out of money, he would ask me for money, promising to pay back once he got his wage. But he never got enough money, and sometimes just refused to repay me. Finally, I could no longer stand it.

A Spectrum of In-game Genders and Sexualities

Within the game, then, QQ Dazzling Dance players have experimented with a diversified, plural, and unsettled spectrum of romantic and sexual practices (including

refraining from them). The vast spectrum of possibilities can be further expanded and complicated by also taking queer gamers into account. It is not difficult to identify the game designers' firm heteronormative stance regarding marriage and divorce settings. However, my participant observations of the game confirm claims made by previous studies that in spite of the strict heteronormative codes of in-game marriage, young queer gamers still find creative ways of practicing "mobility, flexibility and the spirit of adventure," such as swapping the gender of their in-game avatars (Wu et al. 2007, 85).

In QQ Dazzling Dance, male avatars are sometimes played by lesbian players. They post "coming-out" and marriage-seeking advertisements on the news board, such as, "I am a T [butch lesbian], seeking a wife." There are also many screenshots of romantic interactions between two same-sex avatars circulating in the game's online forum (see Figure 3). Blog posts about romantic relationships between two gay players that emerged online and translated into "reality" can also be found.[9]

The heterosexual participants in my interviews all agreed that it is very "normal" to see these same-sex marriage-seeking advertisements and intimate photos circulating within the game, implying that the players' community is relatively Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT)-friendly.

Player-avatar Relations

Another level of complexity arises from player-avatar relations. Each gamer can have more than one game account. Drawing from the interviews that I conducted, the success of a player in QQ Dazzling Dance is often evaluated by two criteria: the skillfulness of playing the dancing game and the visual attractiveness of the avatar. The latter circulates in and around the game and forms a culture within which players learn to make serious efforts to manage the beauty of their avatars (remember this was the first lesson that I was taught!). In some circumstances, such as in the beauty competition, avatars even compete against one another to be sexier, more desirable, and—ultimately—better. Meanwhile, the avatar becomes the object of an erotic gaze. Avatars are examined by the standards set by conventional norms, which promote specific fashion styles and the sexualized coding of masculinity and femininity.

This has created, shaped, and cultivated a discursive space within which players experience digital intimacies. In QQ Dazzling Dance, to those who do not expect anything more than the virtual (the gaming), the pleasure of game play is gained from avatar-avatar interactions. That is to say, the concept of "intimacy," which usually refers to the "chemistry" and relationships between "real" human beings, should be expanded to include avatar-avatar relationships in the digital world. Furthermore, a small portion of the gamers (such as Chen Xin and Five) treated avatar-avatar "chemistry" as a stage of digital "foreplay" (Cupples and Thompson 2010). The avatar-avatar interactions often take place before gamers' face-to-face dating and would be eventually translated to "real" intimacies. And for the majority of the gamers, the differences or similarities between virtual and nonvirtual relationships are simply *not that important*. "I don't know whether it [they] can be counted as love or not," was what I was told repetitively by these gamers.

Figure 3. A widely distributed screenshot of two male avatars kissing, evoking public attention, and suggesting homosexual interactions between same-sex avatars (players) are not absent in the game.

"Men Should Pay": The Gender Politics of In-game Marriage

According to the system rules of QQ Dazzling Dance, either party in a couple can propose marriage, book a wedding venue, and purchase a "wedding ring" in preparation for marriage. However, my observation finds that it is almost a norm that the male player takes charge of these rituals solely.

The pervasiveness of the heteronormative standard for defining who should pay for a heterosexual wedding can also be seen in a male player's complaint. During a conversation with me, he discussed how much money he had spent on a woman in an effort to maintain their relationship:

> In the game, I need to top up for her. When there were new costumes, I would buy the ones she preferred. She has two accounts, and each has four to five sets of clothes; all were bought by me. When she needed to update her weapons and accessories, I would top up for her so that she could afford them. In reality, she even refused to top up her own mobile phone. I paid for all her phone bills.

His story also indicates that the convention that men should pay the bills not only exists in the game, but also extends to real-life offline relationships.

Among many others, the following two dating (marriage-seeking) advertisements circulating in the game's online forum also indicate the pervasiveness of the rule that "men should pay."[10] The first one was allegedly written by a female player.

> My avatar is Butterfly's Love (Level 97). I'm 16 years old and I'm a student. I'm looking for a player at the level of 100 or so, and aged 16 to 19. I don't care whether you'd like to do all the preparations for the wedding. As long as you're sincere, we can start being friends, and I'm willing to change my alias for you and enter the same dance group as you. If you are interested, please follow my QQ account: ***. By the way, wealthy guys are preferred!

The following advertisement was allegedly written by a male player:

> A handsome guy playing QQ Dazzling Dance is seeking marriage and willing to do all the preparations! Ladies~ This handsome guy has never been married and has only one requirement: she should be practical. He's definitely wealthy, good-looking and tall~ Any girl who is interested please leave your contact information. The rings are a token of his sincerity!

Of course, it is impossible to determine a player's biological sex simply from an online marriage-seeking advertisement. But considering that gender swapping is a relatively marginal practice, and the fact that advertisements show that players who use male avatars in the game are expected to pay for weddings, regardless of their players' biological sex, we can still observe a certain rigidity in regard to the rule "men should pay."

Changes in gender relations are central to the historical transitions of China's alteration from a communist country to a fast-developing capitalist economy in Southeast Asia. During the revolutionary socialist era (1949–1978), the Marxism-driven state encouraged women to enter the labor force and set out a national policy to demolish the gendered division of labor (Bai 2016; Z. Wang 2005). Under the state policy of equal remuneration, women were also encouraged not to be overprotected: they were responsible for their own spending, as well as their own life.

Nevertheless, since market reform, this Marxist-feminist vision has been discursively constructed as an overtly radical project that "repressed human nature" by erasing gendered difference and impeding people's ability to express their "natural" sexual desires (Rofel 2007). At the same time, endorsing the belief that an unconfined free market should be able to better deliver gender equality, post-socialism promises that it can *re-naturalize* people's gender and sexual relations through capitalist production relations (Rofel 1999, 2007). Against this backdrop, in the contemporary governing

schemes, the state further withdraws from the cause of gender equality (e.g., no longer encourages employment of women or provides state-funded childcare), while the market becomes the key force in adjusting gender relations in the fields of employment, education, culture, public health care, and social welfare. Currently, it is widely believed that too great an influx of women into higher education and the labor force would create substantial societal instability and that women should gladly embrace their "traditional" roles as mothers and wives.

Meanwhile, the contemporary market economy also proposes a stark new standard for masculinity: it is believed that wealthy men embody an ideal masculinity in today's China (Louie 2002; Song and Hird 2014). It is against this historical background that the traditional belief that "men should pay, while women receive" has been re-normalized as "common sense" in people's online-offline romantic relationships. When we reflect on the case of QQ Dazzling Dance, we see that the dating rule (offline) and game players' digital culture (online) are both integral to gender relations in contemporary China. "Men should pay" is an embodied and mediated response to tensions between women's demand for compensation from men in the private domain on one hand, and men's willingness to pay this price in exchange for huge privileges in the public domain in relation to education, employment, and social welfare on the other.

Unsettling Genres of Digital Products/Platforms

A successful Chinese dancing video game, QQ Dazzling Dance, has been advertised by its producers and experienced by its gamers as a dating platform when virtual romance is becoming "the ordinary, the everyday and ongoing" (Mason 2016, 824–25). I believe the juxtaposition of these digital products (namely video games and online dating platforms) is not an isolated, marginal case, nor is it unique to China. In the digital age, almost every digital platform (for example, social media platforms, video watching and sharing websites, online games, digital maps, and dating platforms) is incorporating new ways to enrich and diversify its users' experience. One effective way for these platforms to achieve this goal is to borrow and absorb established cultural and aesthetic conventions from other genres. This article also confirms Jenkins's observation that, "Convergence is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process" (Jenkins 2004, 37). This is because the gamers of QQ Dazzling Dance have carried over habits, such as writing dating posts, cultivated from online dating platforms, into digital gaming experience.

A study of the gaming-dating experience of the gamers of QQ Dazzling Dance, then, demonstrates that the "gamification" of dating can be best understood in relation to a fully theorized concept of "digital intimacies." Race's studies are particularly relevant here (Race 2015b, a). Attending to digital platforms as both texts and sites, Race applies the dichotomy introduced by Bruno Latour involving *intermediaries* (objects that simply transport meanings without transformation) and *mediators* (objects that transform or in some way alter their input; Latour 2005). Race first emphasizes that digital hookup devices are *mediators* because with unique aesthetic codes and newly introduced filter-based dating conventions, these platforms not only are media transporting preexisting forms of

intimacy, they also generate new forms of sexual experience and affective bonds (Race 2015a). QQ Dazzling Dance, then, is such a *mediator* as it is capable of conditioning and generating new ways in which game players experience romantic feelings and establish new forms of intimacy. My study shows that the digital intimacies generated by such a video game are complex in four respects.

First, outside of the game, the condition of rural-to-urban labor migration accompanied by senses of loneliness and precaution has made social activities such as gaming together in Internet cafés important among the working-class diaspora. Second, inside of the game, gender and sexuality exist on spectrums and are more fluid and inclusive than the heteronormative rules and restrictions of the game would indicate. That is because on one hand, the virtual world of the game provides queer gamers a safe place to anonymously disclose their sexualities and to articulate homosexual desire; on the other hand, gamers are given the option to play avatars that are like them in basic ways, as well as the chance to experiment with sexuality (McDonald 2015).

Third, complexity arises from player-avatar relations. A number of preexisting studies of digital intimacies reveal that the offline, physical, real sphere and the online, digital, virtual sphere of people's lives cannot be seen as discrete and that they, in fact, overlap (Campbell 2004; Horst and Miller 2012; Miller and Slater 2000; Mowlabocus 2010). It has been argued that it is unhelpful to use such terms as "online" and "real life" to demarcate digital and nondigital environments and to suggest that digital life is "less real or meaningful than experiences offline" (Campbell 2004, 20). However, my study demonstrates that the demarcation between the real and the digital does exist and does provide a space within which gamers can deconstruct the "seriousness" of in-game subjectivities (embedded in avatars) and in-game marriages. For instance, some gamers simply enjoy avatar-avatar intimacies, while others see avatar-avatar intimacies as the "foreplay" before face-to-face dating. The following conditions, then, further add complexity to the intimacies forged in this game: the physical distance between players, the fact that gamers can choose an avatar of a gender different than their own, and the fact that they *can* refuse to marry and gain the extra points awarded for dancing with marriage partners.

Last, as suggested by Michel Foucault (1986, 32), sex and romantic love are not produced "apart from or against power, but in the very space and as the means of its exercise." Foucault's assertion can also be applied to digital intimacies. On one hand, the normative idea among gamers that men pay for women demonstrates that the consumption of such an online video game is deeply embedded in the complex power relations of post-socialist China. On the other hand, the year of QQ Dazzling Dance's inception, 2009, and its slogan "the most romantic video game," also indicate the necessity of understanding the game by locating it at the intersection of several economic and cultural trends: the ripening of China's local video game industry; a nation-wide panic over singleness and social pressure to partner; and the digitalization of romantic relationships among Chinese youth. In sum, this article shows that digital intimacies are constantly entangling and relating to changes in digital technologies, media industries, and sociocultural context.

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Notes

1. From 2000 onward, an estimated 250 million Chinese people left their villages to live and work in urban areas (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2014).
2. All quotes are translated by the author. All names are pseudonyms.
3. Online observations were conducted in the official online forum of QQ Dazzling Dance http://x5.gamebbs.qq.com/forum.php (accessed April 4, 2017) and an online forum built by its players http://tieba.baidu.com/f?ie=utf-8&kw=qq%E7%82%AB%E8%88%9E&fr= search&red_tag=m1110071076 (accessed April 4, 2017).
4. http://x5.qq.com/cdk/ (accessed October 8, 2016).
5. "Tips with images on how to dress up male avatars in QQ Dazzling Dance" (2015) was posted on April 23, 2015 http://x5.178.com/201504/223775222505.html (accessed October 8, 2016).
6. An online beauty competition among female avatars was held on February 23, 2012 http://x5.uuu9.com/201202/523430.shtml (accessed October 8, 2016).
7. This article cannot provide an exact scenario count since many of the gamers interviewed have more than one in-game marriage and are unable to provide precise numbers.
8. This article is unable to provide the demographic statistics of all players of QQ Dazzling Dance, nor has the company Tencent Inc. surveyed the background information of its customers. However, it is reasonable to infer that the majority of its players come from the low-income working class, from the fact that QQ Dazzling Dance falls in the low-cost/free category in China's game industry.
9. A blog post titled "Male-Male Love, Sparkling Gayness" ("男男相爱 基情四射") was posted by Little Bear (小熊) on March 21, 2012 http://x5.tgbus.com/bagua/201203/957318.shtml (accessed October 8, 2016).
10. Many similar user-generated dating and in-game marriage-seeking advertisements can be found on the QQ Dazzling Dance online forum http://tieba.baidu.com/f?kw=qq%E7%82%AB%E8%88%9E&ie=utf-8 (accessed October 11, 2016).

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