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Of Horror Games and Temples: Religious Gamification in Contemporary Taiwan

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of Taiwanese horror videogame Devotion *(2019) and folk religious ritual* guanluoyin 觀落陰 *(descent into the netherworld) as a new window into the symbiotic evolution of religion and gaming technology. It traces the curious trend whereby Taiwanese gamers, after encountering* guanluoyin *while playing* Devotion*, went to offline, physical* guanluoyin *temples to 'play' the ritual for themselves, and playfully invoked* Devotion*'s intra-game religious narrative in their extra-game lives.* Devotion *thus activated a dynamic community of gamers who, hungry for horror, produced novel forms of engagement with the world(s) beyond their consoles. This anthropological study reconfigures the popular framework in existing scholarship of 'gaming as a religious experience', instead investigating 'religion as a gaming experience', and proposes the concept of 'religious gamification' to capture religion's re-imagination, marketing, and operation as a gaming experience by a surprising ensemble of social actors and institutions. By drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analyses of game design, temple advertisements, gaming chatrooms, a television show, songs, viral videos, and social media trends, this article explores the unexpected convergence and mutual articulation of Taiwan's gaming and religious cultures, and the wider implications thereof for understanding religion in our rapidly gaming-mediated world.*

Keywords: *Devotion*, *guanluoyin*, gaming, religious gamification, popular religion, popular culture, religious commodification, virtual reality, Taiwan

Only the play of the world permits us to think the essence of God.

— Jacques Derrida, 1978.[1]

以後想玩VR恐怖遊戲，不用去買VR眼鏡了，直接去神廟給幾十塊錢就能體驗了 XD

If you ever fancy playing a VR [virtual reality] horror game, don't bother buying a VR headset – just go straight to the temple, pay a few bucks, and you'll get the full experience XD.

— Taiwanese netizen 0105lim, 2019.[2]

[1] Derrida, 1978: 107.
[2] Commented on Wanggou, 2019. All Chinese translations in this article are my own. Transliterations are given using pinyin, except for names with pre-existing Wade-Giles romanisations.

Introduction

You awake in the darkness and look up to find the shrine of Cigu Guanyin 慈孤觀音, the evil goddess you worship. You look down to discover a red blindfold in your hands. With no control over your actions, you put it on, and soon find yourself journeying through hell. As you recite incantations and obey the orders of your spirit medium, Master Hueh 何老師, you pass the ghosts of sinners who groan as they are crushed by rocks, some drowning in the fiery pits below, others swarming towards you. At the end of your path, you enter your Tree of Life (*Benmingshu* 本命樹), which leads you into the Palace of your Primordial Soul (*Yuanchengong* 元辰宮). Spectres of your alternate self and possessed daughter torment you as you walk towards the sanctuary of Cigu Guanyin, where you must make three agonising sacrifices. First, you take a vajra-tipped spoon and slowly scoop out your eye. Second, you use a hook to remove your tongue. Third, you impale scissors into your palm to spill your blood. Choking and weeping, you then present these offerings by prostrating yourself on the stone platform and kowtowing, each time slamming your forehead harder and harder onto the ground until all your vision goes black. Suddenly, you regain consciousness at the shrine, only then to pick up a scrap of paper revealing that you have just completed a folk religious ritual called *guanlingshu* 觀靈術 (spirit-seeing rite) – more popularly known as *guanluoyin* 觀落陰 (descent into the netherworld) – with information about how it is performed in temples.

This scene was the climax of the 2019 single-player, first-person psychological horror computer game *Devotion* (*Huanyuan* 還願; literally 'redeeming a vow') by Taiwanese indie developer Red Candle Games (赤燭遊戲; hereafter RCG).[3] Following the success of RCG's 2017 début *Detention* (*Fanxiao* 返校; see Wu, 2021), *Devotion* was a sensation both in Taiwan and globally, selling a million copies within one week of its launch.[4] Set in 1980s Taipei, players take on the character of Du Fengyu 杜豐于, a father who is lured into the cult of Cigu Guanyin out of desperation to save his daughter Mei-shin 美心 from her mysterious ailment.[5] There are no points to score, battles to fight, competitions with other players or non-player characters, nor decisions that players can make to influence the game's outcomes. Rather, all players follow this same avatar through *Devotion*'s pre-determined narrative, piecing together personal items they find around Fengyu's flat, reading sutras, attending divinations, listening to telephone conversations, and uncovering his dark family history. Eventually, the cult deceives Fengyu into drowning Mei-shin in a bath of bloody snake wine. The story ends as players chase after her in heaven.

[3] Trailer available at: https://youtu.be/IbQlBGniUQQ (accessed 12.03.2022).

[4] Despite critical and public acclaim, *Devotion* was removed from the online gaming marketplace Steam one week after its release, due to scandalous in-game content that mocked Chinese President Xi Jinping. RCG independently re-released the game on its website in March 2021.

[5] According to local news reports following *Devotion*'s release (e.g. Taiwan dadaizhi, 2019), the fictional deity Cigu Guanyin is a manifestation of the little-known, potentially dangerous folk toilet goddess Zigu 紫姑 (see Kolb, 2006). Guanyin is the bodhisattva of compassion and the most common Buddhist figure in Asia (see Palmer *et al.*, 2019). 'Cigu' could be translated as 'mercy upon the orphaned'.

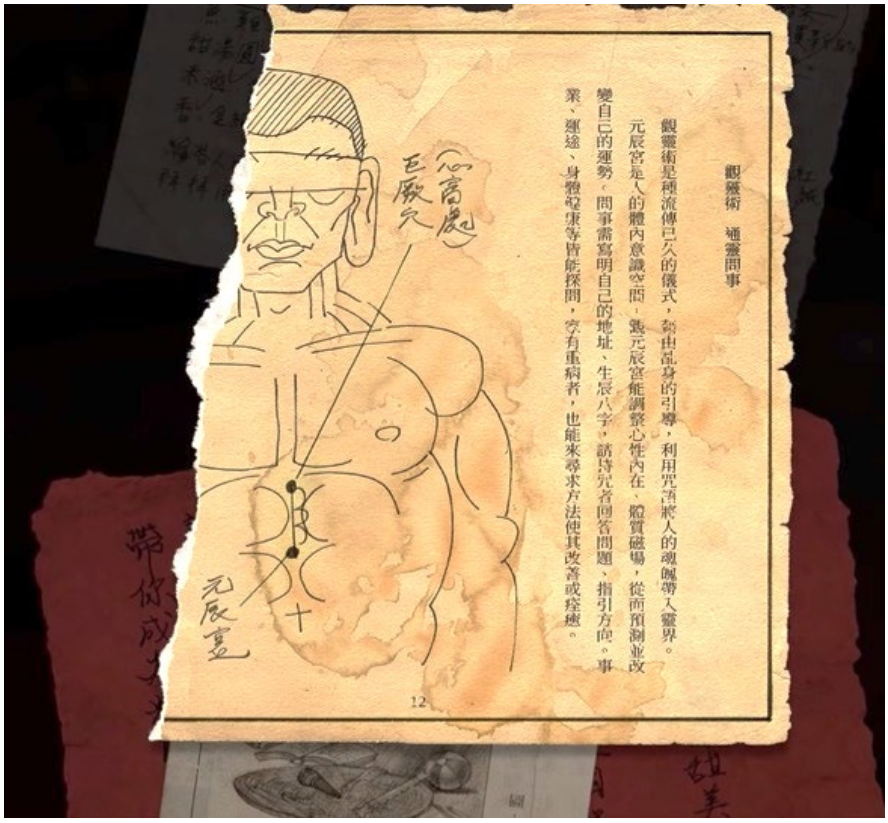

Figure 1: Following the sacrifice, a scrap of paper retrospectively introduces players to guanluoyin. *Screenshots from* Devotion *(Figures 1, 3-8) are used with RCG's permission*

Players were indeed horrified by their encounter with *guanluoyin*. However, as they logged off from *Devotion*, a curious '*guanluoyin* fever' began to develop in Taiwan's gaming circles. Having been largely unfamiliar with *guanluoyin* before *Devotion*'s release, many gamers took this scrap of paper as an invitation to play the ritual for themselves, with urban, offline *guanluoyin* temples as their play spaces.[6] Videos and livestreams of these attempts – commonly presented as 'challenges' (*tiaozhan* 挑戰) – went viral in Taiwanese cyberspace and even reached broadcast television. This phenomenon raises numerous questions. What were the motivations and implications of this 'gaming pilgrimage', whereby players expanded the virtual *Devotion* gameworld into their offline, extra-game lives?[7] How are religious spaces – both physical (temples) and metaphysical (the netherworld) – being re-imagined and experienced as play spaces? And, most broadly, what is at stake in the transfer of gaming mentalities and logics into offline, non-gaming domains?

In response to such questions, this paper challenges the still pervasive prejudice that games are passively consumed as low-brow entertainment by escapist individuals, and isolated from (or even harmful to) wider society. Rather, it will reveal how *Devotion* activated a

[6] To clarify, this paper's discussion of 'playing' religious rituals does not participate in the methodological and theoretical debates as to whether rituals *inherently* constitute acts of 'play' (e.g. Puett et al., 2008: 69-102) or leisure (Weller, 2019). *Devotion* fans were inspired to play *guanluoyin* in temples as if it were a game, primarily out of curiosity (rather than pre-existing faith or belief) as to whether they could descend into the netherworld for themselves.

[7] 'Gaming pilgrimage' recalls the Japanese phenomenon of 'anime sacred pilgrimages' (Japanese *anime seichi junrei* アニメ聖地巡礼; Okamoto, 2015).

dynamic community of gamers who, hungry for horror, produced novel forms of engagement with the world(s) beyond their consoles. With this case study, therefore, I will argue that constructions of religion within digital gameworlds can meaningfully shape the imagination, experience, and operation of religion beyond them, offline and on the ground.

Though widely practised in Taiwan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Lin, 2016: 159-161), it was *Devotion* that transformed *guanluoyin* from a little-known tradition into a hot topic and gave Taiwan's few surviving *guanluoyin* temples unprecedented media coverage.[8] *Guanluoyin* belongs to Taiwan's rich landscape of popular religion – that is, the ever-evolving religious beliefs and practices of the common people, irreducible to exclusivist categories such as 'Buddhism', 'Daoism', etc. (see Chau, 2006: 7-8). Unlike its fictional portrayal in *Devotion*, *guanluoyin* practice on the ground is by no means restricted to secret cults, nor does it involve any bodily mutilations or sacrifices. Rather, participants' intentions are essentially twofold. Firstly, in 'visiting the souls of the dead' (*tan wanghun* 探亡魂), participants enter into the spirit realm (*lingjie* 靈界) to be reunited with a late relative in the hope of saying goodbye after their abrupt passing, thereby resolving conflicts, asking questions unanswered during their lifetime, or rendering assistance to them.[9] Secondly, participants seek to visit the Palace of their Primordial Soul (*Yuanchengong* 元辰宮) – that is, their soul's dwelling in the spirit realm, the appearance, doors, and rooms of which reflect the current state of their life, including physical and mental health, career, fortune, and interpersonal relationships. By visiting the Palace of their Primordial Soul, the *guanluoyin* participant can foresee and better their fate, for example, by watering its plants and tidying its rooms. To initiate their netherworldly descent, the *guanluoyin* participant first bows, prays, and burns incense, then sits in a row of chairs amongst others, facing the altar. After removing their shoes, they apply a red blindfold containing a protective talisman, place their hands on their knees or together in prayer, and empty themselves of worldly attachments. By chanting and beating small, fish-shaped wooden drums, the temple ritualists attempt to compel one of the participant's three immortal souls (*hun* 魂) to depart their body and descend into the netherworld.[10] Should they sense the beginnings of a vision, the participant raises their hand, such that a ritualist stands by their side to guide the way. In real time, they describe their visions, simultaneously prompted and interpreted by the ritualist (one must not navigate the spirit realm unsupervised, lest one's soul be led astray by malevolent spirits and become unable to return to the body). Along the way, participants commonly see iridescent scenery, childhood memories, and divine figures.

[8] The information in this paragraph derives from my fieldwork at a *guanluoyin* temple in suburban Taipei (2021-22), upon which I expand later in this article. One of the temple officers told me that there remain as few as five *guanluoyin* temples in Taiwan, located in the northern cities of Taipei, Taoyuan, and New Taipei City. *Guanluoyin* practice today has largely escaped discussion in both Anglophone and Sinophone scholarship, exceptions being studies on its functions as an abortion ritual (Lin, 2016) and in the supernatural aesthetics of Taiwanese photography and videography (Liang, 2019). For *guanluoyin* during Taiwan's colonial period, see Huang, 2022.

[9] For the *guanluoyin* participants and ritualists I met, the 'netherworld' (*yinjian* 陰間) into which they descend is located within the all-encompassing 'spirit realm' (*lingjie* 靈界), hence my use of these terms interchangeably in this paper.

[10] For the Daoist doctrine of the three *hun* 魂 ('immortal souls') and seven *po* 魄 ('mortal forms'), see Harrell, 1979.

Figure 2: A small roadside guanluoyin *temple in suburban Taipei. Photographs by the author, used with permission*

Devotion's in-game *guanluoyin* narrative and the subsequent trend of Taiwanese gamers playing it for themselves in temples illustrate a phenomenon that I propose to term 'religious gamification' – a sociocultural and economic process whereby religion is re-imagined, designed, and marketed as a game to be played both within and beyond designated game spaces, and with numerous agendas and effects. The neologism 'gamification' – "the application of game systems…into non-game domains" – has enjoyed much academic interest, predominantly amongst sociologists of marketing, pedagogy, health, and labour, and is frequently characterised as a sinister, neoliberal force to be resisted (Woodcock & Johnson, 2017: 542). Chinese scholars have discussed, sometimes disparagingly and misleadingly, the gamification of cultural forms including cinema and internet fiction (see Inwood, 2014: 9-10,

21). Though the term has previously been mentioned in passing (Mukherjee, 2020), I am developing 'religious gamification' as a new theoretical concept (which I would formulate in Mandarin as *zongjiao youxihua* 宗教遊戲化), with the wider ambition of challenging constructed notions of 'proper' religious activity.

This article will present the *Devotion*-centred gamification of *guanluoyin* in four parts. The first situates this project within existing research on gaming and religion. The second examines *Devotion*'s design in the RCG studios, drawing on analytical tools from game studies (e.g. Nitsche, 2008; Işiğan, 2013; Isbister, 2016) to show how *Devotion*'s creators encouraged fans to 'play religion' as a game, even before the game was released. The third follows *guanluoyin*'s journey from *Devotion* into temples and wider popular culture. It engages content analysis of viral videos and a television show, alongside my interviews with Doy Chiang 江東昱 (RCG co-founder and producer of *Devotion*) and a celebrity *guanluoyin* player, to question how and why players felt compelled to 'replay' *guanluoyin* offline. The fourth investigates a *guanluoyin* temple's marketing strategies, paired with my fieldwork at another temple in Taipei, to demonstrate how they re-branded their services towards this new, play-oriented clientele. This leads into a brief analysis of the commercial reproduction of *guanluoyin*. Finally, I contemplate the wider implications of this unexpected interplay between the social lives of gaming and religion in Taiwan.

Playing/Gaming Religion

Before proceeding to *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* gameplay, it is worth critiquing the existing scholarship that intersects play, religion, and games. As both realise the human desire for transcendence of the spatio-temporal limits of the physical world and interaction with non-human presences, theorists have long proposed play as a theological paradigm for religion (e.g. Miller, 1970; van Harskamp *et al*., 2006; Droogers, 2014; Fink, 2016; Vondey, 2018). Play has particularly been conceptualised vis-à-vis religious rituals, as both operate in subjunctive 'as if' spaces, in which humans can safely suspend their sense of reality (Puett *et al.*, 2008: 69-102). Moving from theory to practice, scholars have re-approached these intersections in a literal sense by exploring the playing of analogue games as a religious practice, such as ceremonial games in indigenous South American mortuary rites (Corr, 2008), karmic didacticism in the ancient Indian dice game *Gyan Chaupar* (Mukherjee, 2020), and the "blur[red] boundaries between ritual and play" in seventeenth-century Chinese boardgame *Selection of Buddhas* (Xuanfo tu 選佛圖; McGuire, 2014: 18).

Over the last decade, these intersections have also inspired a surge in research on videogaming and religion (e.g. Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Heidbrink & Knoll, 2014; Grieve, Radde-Antweiler & Zeiler, 2015), a significant portion of which concerns to what extent the very act of gaming can give rise to, or even itself be, a 'religious experience' (e.g. Plate, 2010; Wagner, 2012; Leibovitz, 2014; Geraci, 2014; Banasik, 2019). These studies have identified commonalities between religion and gaming in order to prompt a rethinking of what religion *is*. For example, both defy biological reality (such as the possibility of resurrection and multiple lives), potentiate encounters with otherworldly beings, and involve matters of determinism, submission to a greater cosmic order despite uncertainty about its objective truth, and existence in a world conceived by 'intelligent design'. Consequently, some scholars have posited that religions within gameworlds are not any less 'real' than the religions outside of them (Tuckett

& Robertson, 2014). Even many religious bodies, such as the American Catholic ministry Word on Fire (2022), now advocate for gaming as a conduit towards spiritual cultivation.[11]

However, this article addresses three limitations in the current gaming and religion literature. Firstly, research to date has overwhelmingly studied games as they are created and played in the West, and Judeo-Christianity as the normative religion. Now that East Asia is becoming the global nucleus of gaming, we need more investigations into gaming and its diverse, native conceptualisations in East Asian societies. Positioned at the intersection of the Chinese and Japanese markets, Taiwan has a burgeoning gaming culture, even nicknamed by some as "the Mecca of gaming" (Kapasi, 2018). Taiwan has 14.5 million active gamers amongst its population of 23.5 million, and the world's tenth largest videogame and eSports industry, with an annual revenue forecast to exceed US$3.0bn by 2025 (PwC, 2021: 18). Taiwanese gamers' average play time surged by 31% to 12.4 hours a week between 2020-21 (Google for Games, 2021). This necessitates research into the implications of increasing time spent inside gameworlds for Taiwanese society at large.

Secondly, by reading games' religious content only as a narrative or aesthetic feature, existing works have risked separating intra-game worlds and characters from the offline, extra-game social actors, institutions, and forces that they shape. For instance, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge dismisses the possibility that religions in games could "really influence the average gamer" (Bainbridge, 2013: 185), and instead presumes that games, by supposedly satisfying humans' desires for fantasy, "play a role in the further erosion of faith" (Bainbridge, 2013: 24). As anthropologist Beth Singler (2020: 945) has argued, there is an interdisciplinary need to counter this pervasive "secularisation thesis", which posits that technological advancements serve to supplant 'real religion'. For game studies, this imperative demands a focus on players' interactions with religion *after* they log off from the games themselves.

Thirdly, by comparing the qualities and feelings of gaming with those of 'religious/spiritual experiences', scholars have privileged the abstract, ontological question of 'what *is* religion/spirituality?', leaving unexplored how games shape players' religious conceptions and practices beyond them, both online and offline. For example, cognitive anthropologist Ryan Hornbeck (2017) has analysed the "spiritual experiences" felt by atheist mainland Chinese gamers while playing the American fantasy videogame *World of Warcraft*. Hornbeck asks us to rethink religiosity by arguing that, as deliverance from their individualistic sociopolitical climate, *World of Warcraft* afforded Chinese gamers spiritual value and positive moral affect (i.e., opportunities to exercise compassion, altruism, stewardship, etc.). These findings, though intriguing, are implicitly predicated upon the dominant, operative assumption in game studies of 'religious/spiritual' as an identity that people *are and feel*, as opposed to 'religion/spirituality' as a fundamentally social practice that people *make and do* (see Chau, 2006). Consequently, my analysis of *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* moves beyond this conventional model of 'gaming as a religious experience' – using games to question what religion *is* – and instead towards an alternative that I call 'religion as a gaming experience', so as to question how games change the ways in which people (re)make and do religion, with a multiplicity of outcomes.

[11] Contrary to the pervasive dichotomy between games and 'real life', I would argue that virtual realities need not be regarded any less 'real' or 'actual' than physical, offline realities. Gamers' experiences of digital worlds are biochemically real, emotively real, monetarily real, energetically real, etc.. I am most grateful to Tom Mullaney for discussing these ideas with me.

From 'Playing House' to 'Playing Hell'

Many Taiwanese gamers' interaction with *Devotion*'s religious narrative began offline in urban public space, a month before *Devotion*'s release. As a publicity stunt, RCG organised an 'alternate reality game' (*linglei shijing youxi* 另類實境遊戲) – an unannounced, seemingly unorganised mass event, whereby RCG left various clues on social media that, pieced together, led a crowd of gamers to congregate outside a café in Taipei, tasked with locating an abducted woman. Accepting this mission, players initiated themselves into a (fictional) cult called the Luxin Assistance Dharma Assembly (*Luxin zhu fahui* 陸心助法會). Upon playing *Devotion*, they would later discover that this was the cult of Cigu Guanyin to which Master Hueh and Fengyu belonged. Staged by RCG personnel who acted as ritual leaders, players underwent a ceremony called the Heart-Mind Purification Rite (*qingxinfa* 清心法), which entailed saying prayers, performing mudras, painting sigils on their hands, and dipping karma-cleansing cards in blessed water. These self-proclaimed "brothers and sisters of Luxin" (*Luxin shixiongjiemen* 陸心師兄姐們) then orienteered around Taipei, solving puzzles, scanning QR codes, and decrypting files (for a Taiwanese player's first-hand account, see Hsu, 2020). Hailed by participants as the largest and best in Taiwanese history, the *Devotion* alternate reality game tantalised gamers with the sensation of playing religion as part of a game – possibilities that were further explored when they later logged onto *Devotion* and inhabited Fengyu's religious experiences as a horror game.

Devotion's narrative unfolds almost entirely within Fengyu's home, until the aforementioned climax, which takes place in hell. Both settings are permeated by supernatural forces. To simulate the sensation of spirit-realm encounters, *Devotion*'s designers employed four main spatial techniques. Firstly, motion: players' experiences of inhabiting, traversing, and transgressing various spaces within the game. In *Devotion*, however, it is stasis and confinement that serve to conjure players' feelings of awe and fear as they meet in-game spirits. A notable example is when players are trapped inside a lift, on the wall of which hangs a large, imposing painting of Cigu Guanyin (Figure 3). She is characterised by a bricolage of religious symbols, including four arms, ox horns, claws, lotus flowers and a dragon-engraved bell in her hands, and a pair of golden fish (Sanskrit *gaurmatsya*) on her forehead – one of the eight auspicious signs (*ashtamangala*) in religions including Buddhism and Hinduism. Players' prolonged inability to leave this claustrophobic space renders them vulnerable in their proximity to the goddess, despite her only ever appearing in portrait and statue forms. Conversely, players are frequently pressured to rush through spaces. To escape the restless ghosts crawling towards them in hell, Master Hueh repeatedly orders players: "Hurry through" (趕快走過去) and "do not stop" (不要停下來) (Figure 4). However, despite this imperative to move quickly for survival, players' walking speed is heavily constricted, provoking feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. Unlike the majority of mainstream videogames that aggrandise their players by granting them weapons and/or superpowers (Isbister, 2016: 120), these scenes exemplify *Devotion*'s fundamental game mechanic, whereby players' agency is restricted to simulate the feeling of being at the mercy of a higher power.

Figure 3: Cigu Guanyin in the lift

Figure 4: Tortured sinners

Secondly, perspective and proportion inject fear into players' experience of the in-game spirit realm. The designers' sustained use of a low-angle ('worm's eye') perspective acts to visualise players' subservience to Cigu Guanyin. For instance, players must gaze upwards to her statue on the shrine mentioned in this article's opening, and in the sacrifice scene, her figure towers above them, often too large to fit within the screen in her entirety (Figure 5). This repeated necessity to look up, both literally with the controller as well as reverentially, provokes players' sense of inferiority to her. Moreover, when players walk the sandbanks of hell – "the embodiment of Cigu Guanyin" (*Cigu Guanyin de huashen* 慈孤觀音的化身), in Master Hueh's words – they must ascend the Stairway to Heaven (*Tongtianti* 通天梯), which creates a similar effect (Figure 6).

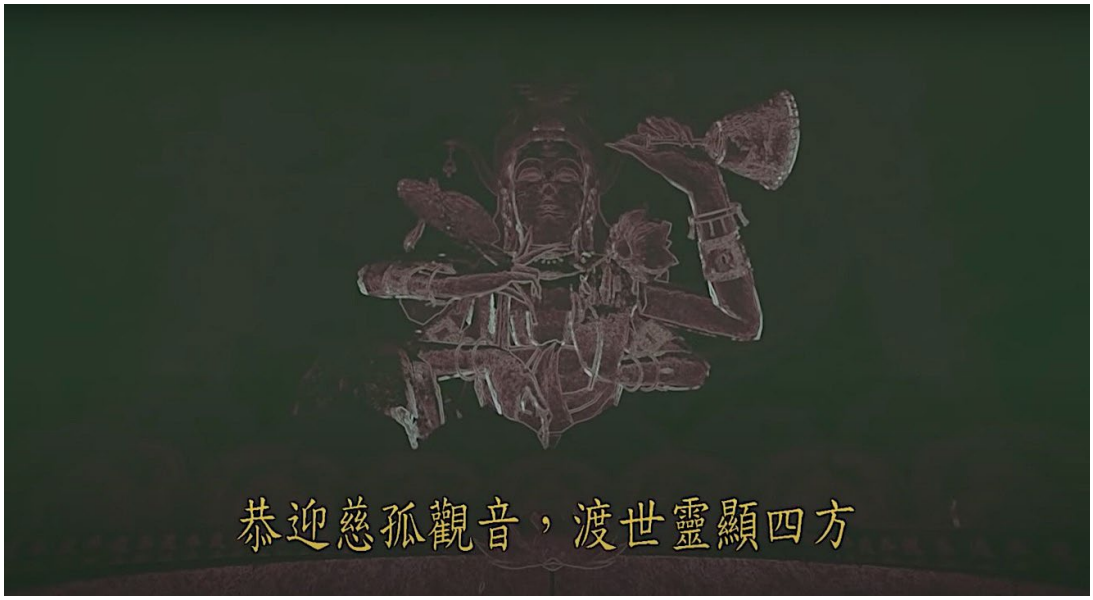

Figure 5: Cigu Guanyin's sanctuary

Figure 6: Stairway to Heaven in hell

Thirdly, light, darkness, and colour intensify players' chthonic voyage. In several scenes, such as when players apply the *guanluoyin* blindfold and commence their netherworld descent, the screen is almost completely black and out of focus, forcing players to navigate by following sounds, such as ritual bells, chants, and the cries of ghosts. Contrastingly, in the final scene, when players are transported into heaven after realising that they have killed Mei-shin, the colours are blindingly bright and oversaturated, and players float freely in a dimensionless, kaleidoscopic expanse of origami windmills and tulips, flying books, trees, and stars (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Chasing Mei-shin in paradise

Fourthly, *Devotion*'s spaces and dimensions are in a constant state of flux and displacement, throwing players disorientingly between the domestic (Fengyu's flat), textual (in one scene, players inhabit the 2D illustrations of a children's book), televisual/intra-digital (players piece much of the plot together by watching Mei-shin on television), and the spirit realm (afterlives, Palace of the Primordial Soul, sanctuary). Players' diegetic position in the narrative also morphs, conjuring the sensation of an out-of-body experience. For example, in one scene, players walk through a narrow cellar, with yellow lanterns hanging above them, talismans plastering the walls, and an enormous many-banded krait stretched along the ground. At the end of the path, players reach a boiling pool of snake wine and blood (Figure 8) and look up to watch themselves (Fengyu) push Mei-shin into the pool, indicating that their position in the narrative has suddenly shifted from first-person, intradiegetic protagonist to third-person, extradiegetic spectator.[12]

Figure 8: Bloody pool of snake wine

[12] 'Intradiegetic' refers to that which exists within the narrative action, as opposed to 'extradiegetic': external to the narrative.

The rapid, unpredictable shifts between these porous spatial layers throughout *Devotion*'s non-linear narrative, such that players are unable to flow through or feel fully immersed in one environment, time, dimension, or persona, are *Devotion*'s defining design feature – one I propose to term 'spatial entropy'.[13] Spatial entropy gives players the paralysing sense of being subject to a volatile cosmic order, hence rendering their eventual confrontation with Cigu Guanyin at the sacrifice all the more terrifying. Intriguingly, many Taiwanese gamers continued to experience these sensations even after logging off from the game. They took to online forums and posted screenshots of Fengyu's flat next to photographs of their own or grandparents' homes, noting that features such as the flooring, bathtubs, shrines, and doors appeared horrifically alike, consequently nicknaming the game "granny's house simulator" (*ama jia moniqi* 阿嬤家模擬器; cited in UDN Game, 2019). Due to the spirits that haunt *Devotion*'s otherwise familiar domestic setting, threads such as one entitled "Thanks to *Devotion*, I don't dare shower in my grandma's house anymore" (因為還願，我不敢在外婆家洗澡了; anon., 2019) multiplied in Taiwanese chatrooms. Thus, with the line between online and offline thoroughly warped, players began to re-frame their daily realities through the lens of the game – a fearful re-perception that paradoxically led some to continue playing *guanluoyin* beyond the game itself.

Game Over: Do you want to continue playing?

The interplay between closed eyes and vision is a curious motif in *Devotion*. When players walk through the corridor that leads from Fengyu's flat in 1980 back to the same flat in 1986, they see Chinese characters menacingly graffitied on the wall, reading: "Why won't you open your eyes?" (你為什麼不肯睜開眼?). In the *guanluoyin* scene, players must be blindfolded to see the netherworld. And as players chase Mei-shin in heaven, they hear a rock song with the lyric: "In this chaos of lights, I close my eyes to see" (紛亂的光線裏 我閉上眼去看).[14] Are the most vivid, even horrific visions seen not with our eyes, but, like Fengyu, with our spirit and mind?

Actively drawn in by the horrors of *Devotion* gameplay, Taiwanese gamers descended upon *guanluoyin* temples, applied blindfolds, and 'closed their eyes to see' their in-game experiences of *guanluoyin* come to life. Taiwanese internet celebrities' videos of '*guanluoyin*, as seen in *Devotion*' catalysed this trend. One such video, released a month after *Devotion*, was by Wanggou 王狗 ("King Dog"). At the beginning of his video entitled "Real-life Experiment: Doing the *Devotion Guanluoyin* Challenge" (真實考驗：挑戰「還願」觀落陰情節), Wanggou hypes up his audience by introducing *guanluoyin* as "super-hot" (*feichang de huohong* 非常地火紅). The video then alternates between clips of his own *guanluoyin* attempt at the Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence 桃園無極慈善堂 and corresponding snippets from *Devotion*'s *guanluoyin* scene (Figure 9). It ends with an interview with the temple's ritual master, in which Wanggou asks *guanluoyin*-related questions on behalf of the *Devotion* fanbase. He concludes his comparison of in-game and in-temple *guanluoyin*: "The whole process was *extremely similar* to the game, the only difference being that not everybody can see as clearly as Du Fengyu" (整個過程都跟遊戲上非常地相似，只是差在不是每個人都能像杜先生一樣那麼清楚地看到而已; Wanggou, 2019). Popular news media lauded Wanggou for this discovery (e.g. Taiwan darenxiu, 2019), and online fans responded

[13] For the concepts of flow, immersion, and presence in gaming theory, see Michailidis et al., 2018.
[14] Watch this scene at: https://youtu.be/3vU3TV7mRWQ (accessed 13.11.2021).

enthusiastically in the comments section, admiring his bravery, announcing their plans to play *guanluoyin* for themselves, requesting the prices and addresses of temples, and sharing who they have met or would like to meet in the spirit realm. As one comment reads:

> 其實我有妄想過觀落陰因為還願而流行，結果旅行社一直規劃觀落陰的行程，外國人來臺灣都想體驗觀落陰之類的.....
>
> Actually, I made a vain attempt at *guanluoyin*, too, since it's become popular thanks to *Devotion*. It turned out that the travel agency [*lüxingshe* 旅行社, i.e., temple] had the *guanluoyin* itinerary all mapped out from start to finish. Foreigners coming to Taiwan have all been wanting to experience stuff like *guanluoyin*.

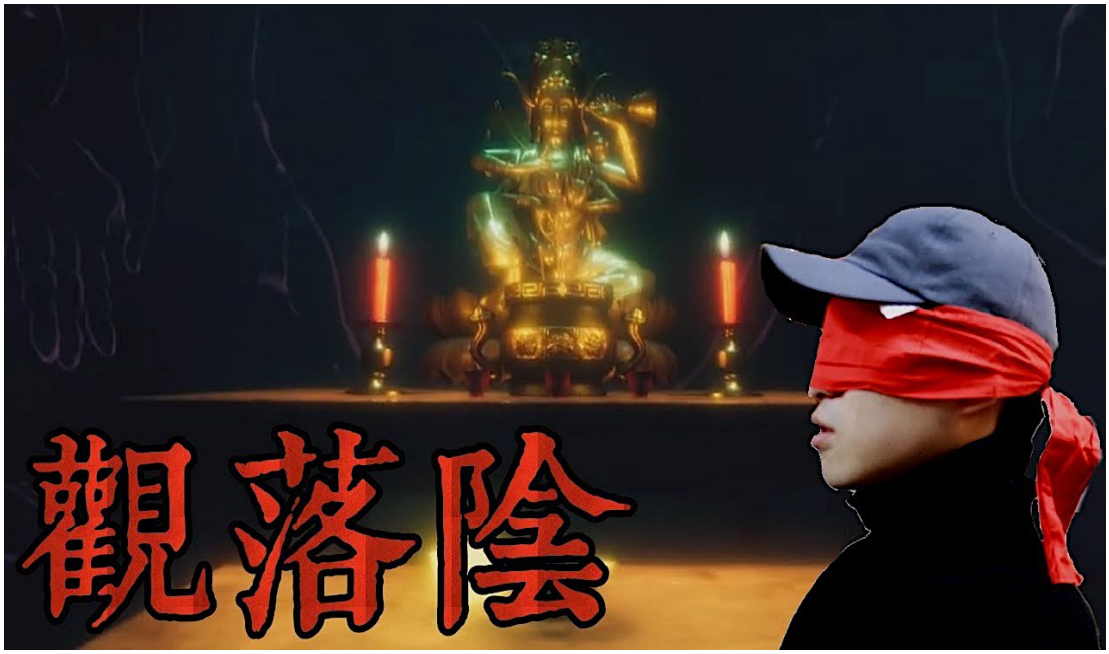

Figure 9: Thumbnails of "real-life Devotion*"* guanluoyin *gaming videos, with the in-game figures of Cigu Guanyin in the backgrounds (top: Wanggou, 2019; bottom: Aming, 2021)*

How could a site of religious practice become one of gaming fantasy? 'Coming back for more' and the urge to repeat in media consumption is well-researched. For example, Heather Inwood argues, by way of Baudrillard, that readers of Chinese internet literature are often left with "a sense of lack (*manque*) that can only be ameliorated through repeated consumption of the text" (Inwood, 2018: 214). Similarly, many gamers confessed on online forums that *Devotion* had induced their insomnia, causing them to become "addicted" (*chengyin* 成癮) and to replay the game, despite already knowing how the story ends. However, the trend of gamers extending their *guanluoyin* play offline demonstrates not simply "repeated consumption", as if the game were some static text, but rather a desire to transcend the digital confines of gaming spaces, to close the subjective distance between virtual avatar and human player, and, rather than embodying a worshipper in mimetic form, to inhabit their own spirit realms.[15]

In my interview with RCG co-founder and *Devotion* producer Doy Chiang, he suggested that "by adding the unexpected to the familiar" (熟悉加意外) and inviting (or forcing) them to interact with *guanluoyin* during gameplay, *Devotion* gave gamers "the opportunity to fall into the sweet spot of novelty and curiosity" (有機會落入新奇的甜蜜區內), eventually compelling some of them to seek out *guanluoyin* in temples for the sakes of "pure curiosity, *en masse* tests of courage, or understanding folk culture" (單純好奇、試膽大會、瞭解民俗).[16] He added: "If another of these reasons were because [*Devotion*'s] setting and story moved gamers' hearts, I think our team would be thrilled" (如果其中有一項是因為環境和故事激動人心，我想團隊會非常高興的).[17] The following two examples of *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play exemplify combinations of such motives.

In April 2021, hosts of the popular Taiwanese YouTube channel Mimosa Diaries (Hanxiucao riji 含羞草日記) headed to the Temple of Infinite Perfection and Benevolence 無極圓善堂 in Taipei and filmed their *guanluoyin* attempts for their viewers. They nicknamed *guanluoyin* "Taiwanese VR technology" (*Taiwan de VR jishu* 臺灣的 VR 技術), and selectively remixed the ritual into a multiplayer game to be played competitively (i.e., 'progressing through the levels' and 'winning' by successfully entering the netherworld) and performatively (as of July 2022, the video had over 420,000 hits, which would have generated healthy revenue for the channel). They compared spirit-realm visions to watching a computer screen, and when they burned incense and bowed to deity statues to mark the beginning of the ritual, they commented: "This is the equivalent of logging onto a VR game" (這就等於是 VR 登入遊戲的那種概念; Hanxiucao riji, 2021; Figure 10). Thus, they interacted with the ritual objects of *guanluoyin* as what play theorist Miguel Sicart might call "an ecology of playthings" (Sicart, 2014: 25), whereby gaming mentalities prompted the secular resignification of religious materials, and the appropriation of religious space as one for play and entertainment.

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[15] There is a similar distinction to be made between the online-to-offline, digital-to-physical movements of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* players and well-known phenomena such as fans of the viral Korean drama *Squid Game* (2021) who organised physical, murder-free re-enactments of the show, or cosplay conventions like Comic-Con. Whereas these cases are fan reproductions of fictional narratives originating from the media themselves, *Devotion* gamers' *guanluoyin* play was a gaming-induced revitalisation of a pre-existing religious tradition.

[16] 'Testing one's guts' (*shidan* 試膽) is a popular activity in Taiwanese gaming culture, inspired by the Japanese craze of *kimodameshi* 肝試し ('liver tests'), whereby players explore frightening locations such as abandoned cemeteries to push and exhibit their abilities to endure fear.

[17] Interview with Doy Chiang, online, 01.10.2021.

Figure 10: 'Logging on' to the spirit realm by burning incense. Screenshot from Mimosa Diaries' video (Hanxiucao riji, 2021), used with permission

A contrasting case is the 2020 television series *Jiang Play* (Jiangzi 匠紫), broadcast on channels including MTV Taiwan, in which Taiwanese and German celebrity hosts Hsieh Chin-ching 謝金晶 and Sascha Heusermann 賀少俠 played various 'challenges' all over Taiwan – from building a DIY shrine in a temple factory to performing 'exotic' rituals – to encourage viewers' play-oriented participation in Taiwanese religious culture. One episode was dedicated to their visit to a *guanluoyin* temple where, to some viewers' amusement, one of the featured ritualists was called Master Hueh, just like Fengyu's medium in *Devotion*. To promote their show on social media, the producers directly appealed to the *Devotion* fanbase by quoting the game's final and most famous line: "If there is a next life, are you still willing?" (若有來世，你還願意嗎？). This line comes from the song *Lady of the Pier* (Matou guniang 碼頭姑娘), sung in the game by Mei-shin, and is generally interpreted by players as Mei-shin asking Fengyu whether he would still be her father, despite having killed her.[18] From my observations, *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* gamers often quoted this line, eagerly asking "who's still willing?" (誰還願意, i.e., 'who fancies trying *guanluoyin* in a temple?') and announcing "I'm still willing!" (我還願意) in online forums. Tapping into this trend, *Jiang Play* uploaded a post reading: "*Jiang Play*, are you still willing?" (Figure 11):

[18] This lyric plays on 還 as a polyphonic character. Pronounced *huan*, 還 means 'return', such that 還願 *huanyuan* (*Devotion*'s original Mandarin title) means 'redeeming a vow'. However, pronounced *hai*, 還 means 'still/nonetheless', such that 還願 *haiyuan* means 'still willing'. Watch this scene at: https://youtu.be/GwPJ_a6pHrY (accessed 13.11.2021).

Figure 11: Jiang Play *advertisement adapting a line from* Devotion*. It features the same yellow font as* Devotion*'s in-game subtitles and Fengyu's hand holding a lighter in the bottom left-hand corner. The image is captioned with the hashtags: "#Didn'tPullOutOurTongues" (#沒有拔舌頭), "#Didn'tScoopOutOurEyes" (#沒有挖眼睛), "#DuMei-shin" (#杜美心), and "#CiguGuanyin" (#慈孤觀音). Instagram post (Jiangzi, 2020a), used with permission*

Figure 12: "*Shaoxia and Chin-ching take on the* guanluoyin *challenge*". *Screenshot from the television show (Jiangzi, 2020b), used with permission*

However, unlike the Mimosa Diaries gamers, who played *guanluoyin* in explicitly secular terms, *Jiang Play* foregrounded *guanluoyin*'s potential to generate transformative religious experiences, thereby piquing the interest of hundreds of thousands of viewers and of popular news media (e.g. Xiao, 2020). The cameras filmed Sascha as he narrated his visions of the Palace of his Primordial Soul and future wife while inside the netherworld, and Chin-ching as she reunited with her childhood pet dog, affirming her connection with her late father.

In my interview with him, Sascha emphasised: "Unlike Westerners like me, all the Taiwanese players I know went in[to *guanluoyin* temples] completely believing it is possible [to enter the spirit realm] – with no doubt that it *could* be true."[19] He noted that videogames are artificially designed, with an objective beginning and end, the implicit knowledge of which affords players a sense of security, however horrific the content may be (indeed, as previously shown, *Devotion* players have limited agency as they vicariously follow through the game's prescribed narrative). In contrast, for Sascha, the power of in-temple *guanluoyin* play lay in the elimination of this protective layer and "the possibility of a *true* religious experience" (Sascha, 2021), which he suspected was one possible reason as to why Taiwanese fans approached him on the street after the show to ask where they could play *guanluoyin* for themselves. Rather than remaining within the limits of the virtual, these players sought spirit-realm encounters for themselves in an unmediated form. Therefore, not merely the antithetical gimmick of 'serious religion', this case of "meaningful play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003: 29-37) suggests an intriguing liminality in the subjecthood of these temple visitors between '*guanluoyin* players' and '*guanluoyin* participants'. In other words, the identities of the *Devotion*-inspired ritual players were not necessarily clearly distinct from those who arrived with the more conventional motivations outlined in this article's introduction.

Another attraction of *guanluoyin* play was the intense multisensory experience it provides. Predominantly performed collectively, *guanluoyin* epitomises anthropologist Robert Weller's description of Taiwanese popular religion as "*hot and noisy* religion", as a literal translation of the term *re'nao* 熱鬧 ("red-hot sociality"): "Any successful large event in Taiwan, from a market to a ritual, provides plenty of heat and noise. It should be packed with people, chaotically boisterous, loud with different voices, and clashingly colourful" (Weller, 1994: 118).[20] Sascha commented that, unlike hypnoses or psychedelic trips, which synthetically induce mental images, one retains all one's consciousness and bodily senses throughout the *guanluoyin* process, including while inside the netherworld. Contrary to the inherent sensorial confines of videogames, he told me, "being blindfolded was thrilling" (Sascha, 2021).

No longer avatars within virtual settings, players were drawn to the temples as physical, sensing bodies. By drawing on my own *guanluoyin* experience at the temple featured in *Jiang Play*, upon the invitation of the temple boss, the following ethnographic vignette conveys some of the visual, sonic, vocal, olfactory, kinaesthetic, and other sensations definitive of *guanluoyin* in the second-person 'ethnographic present tense'.[21]

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[19] Interview with Sascha Heusermann, online, 27.09.2022.

[20] So intense are these stimulations that the temple featured in *Jiang Play* forbids those over sixty and/or with medical conditions from participating in *guanluoyin*. For "red-hot sociality" as the conceptual translation of *re'nao*, see Chau, 2008: 488.

[21] This narration of my fieldwork takes stylistic inspiration from Adam Yuet Chau's description of a Shaanbei temple festival (ibid.: 495-496). For a participant observation of *guanluoyin* as an abortion ritual, see Lin, 2016: 162-165.

> Imagine yourself blindfolded in a small, wooden chair. It is pitch-black. In front of you, deity icons and statues crowd the altar, beside which tower hundreds of bright golden beacon lamps (*guangmingdeng* 光明燈), which light the way for your journey into the netherworld. You are surrounded by around ten other participants, talismans, candles, inscriptions, calligraphy, instruction panels, colourful lanterns and banners, and more. The ritualists positioned around the temple open your path into the spirit realm by chanting and singing constantly. Meanwhile, they loudly drum the 'wooden fish' in their hands, some far away from you with a steady beat, others rapid and staccato, piercingly by your ear. You hear others' voices, music from the radio, the noise of traffic from outside. Incense smoke fills the air. Your blindfold presses hard against your eyes and forehead. Despite the whirring of fans, the air is hot and sweat drips down your face as you (if you have entered the spirit realm) focus hard on communicating your visions to the ritualists and obeying their instructions. You feel their breath on your face as they hurriedly ask you questions and interpret your visions, and the presence of others crowded around you. You bow reverentially, raise your hands by your chest in prayer, feel the droplets of blessed water splashed upon you, and have your forehead and shoulders frequently touched as blessing gestures throughout. Your heart is racing, and others around you, if not you yourself, may be mumbling, shaking, and crying, overcome by rapture, grief, awe, fear, even frustration and confusion (unlike logging into a videogame, descent into the netherworld is not guaranteed and can require several attempts). Added to these bodily sensations are your psychosensory sensations of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching your deceased loved ones, various spirits and deities, and the expansive landscapes inside the spirit realm.

The *re'nao*-ness of *guanluoyin* was engrossingly depicted in *Jiang Play*, hence encouraging viewers to play the ritual for themselves. After the show, the producers shared the location of the featured temple and instructions regarding the "essential equipment" (*jiben peibei* 基本配備) to bring along (Figure 13). While some netizens commented that they would be too scared to play *guanluoyin*, others enthusiastically shared their aspirations to, like the hosts, meet the spirits of their past and future. Thus, *Devotion* activated new desires for interaction with popular religion, enabling what American sociologist Wade Clark Roof has termed "spiritual omnivores", whereby popular media "create[s]…people hungry for new experiences…with the hope that some encounter or revelation lying ahead will bring greater meaning to them" (Roof, 1999: 69).

Figure 13: Jiang Play*'s instructions for playing* guanluoyin*, reading: "Essential* guanluoyin *equipment: 1) sincerity; 2) Four Pillars of Destiny; 3) socks; 4) priestess; 5) blindfold; 6) wooden fish; 7) talisman". Instagram post (Jiangzi, 2020c), used with permission*

Such spiritual omnivorousness led to the proliferation of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin*-inspired stories beyond what was originally conceived by the game's creators. A transmedia rhizome of new narratives germinated from individuals' experiences of *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* gameplay in the forms of fanfictions, blog posts, and podcasts, such as popular horror podcast *Talking Story* (Touting shiduoli 偷聽史多利). Inspired by *Devotion*, one episode narrated and discussed a *guanluoyin* tale, thereby encouraging listeners to join "netherworld group tours" (*yinjian lüxingtuan* 陰間旅行團) and check out their netherworldly "real estate" (*fangdichan* 房地產, i.e., Palace of the Primordial Soul; Touting shiduoli, 2021).

However, *Devotion*-centred religious gamification was not without controversy. *Devotion*'s in-game mantras – particularly "I humbly invoke Cigu Guanyin: save humanity and manifest your spirit throughout the world!" (恭迎慈孤觀音 渡世靈顯四方！) – circulated as buzzwords on Taiwanese social media, such as in Figure 14:

來 現在跟我一起唸：
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
~~我愛How哥，How哥No1~~
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/
恭迎慈孤觀音 \(•д•)/
渡世靈顯四方 \(•д•)/

Figure 14: Playful praise to Cigu Guanyin in Taiwanese gaming chatrooms (top: justin0622, 2019; bottom: Discord, 2022)

This trend provoked tensions within a week of *Devotion*'s release. Despite Cigu Guanyin supposedly being fictitious, various people online intervened to warn gamers that their reckless recitations had summoned evil spirits, due to the powers that dwell in incantatory language (*yanling* 言靈). On Taiwanese microblogging platform Plurk 噗浪, one user pleaded: "If you care for the safety of your friends and family, please stop worshipping these illegitimate gods #CiguGuanyin" (如果在乎朋友家人安全，請停止私神崇拜 #慈孤觀音) (Shuyu, 2019). Religious authorities, too, voiced their condemnation, notably prominent Buddhist Master Shih Chao-hwei 釋昭慧法師, who posted on Facebook: "Let this be a warning to those who misappropriate the bodhisattva's holy name to agitate the spirits of the netherworld!" (盜用菩薩聖號以招惹陰神者，宜應儆誡; cited in Ye, 2019). Thus, in what we could conceptualise as an oppositional force in the process of religious gamification, both civilian and official devotees resisted attempts by *Devotion* gamers to play fast and loose with the gods.

Playing Religion is a Serious Business

Thus far, this study has illustrated three iterations of religious gamification. Firstly, *guanluoyin* was transplanted from religious space and re-fashioned into a videogame. Secondly, popular media figures promoted *guanluoyin* as a physical gaming experience. Thirdly, gamers then re-localised and re-engaged with *guanluoyin* inside temples. But how did the temples themselves react and even contribute to this process?

Playing religion in Taiwan is a 'serious business', both figuratively and literally – that is, it is not only a phenomenon worthy of academic discussion, but also one with financial implications both for and beyond religious institutions. Scholarship's traditional overemphasis of the immaterial (i.e., cosmological, theological, etc.) aspects of religion has overshadowed discussions of how religious institutions, as fundamentally social institutions, have long operated by innovating entrepreneurial initiatives to attract clients and revenue, according to broader societal transformations (see Chau, 2016). A topical example is the ritual package of model Covid-19 vaccines, masks, and disinfectant as ancestral paper offerings in Malaysia (see Zhang, 2021). Of course, religious venues are not merely enterprises, nor are their activities merely products. However, Taiwanese gamers' desire for *guanluoyin* play brings to light the oft-neglected importance of 'religious commodification' – how religious institutions market their services for survival and development.

Devotion increased demand for *guanluoyin* in Taiwan's competitive ritual marketplace, as gamers became intrigued to play *guanluoyin* and encouraged others to follow suit. *Guanluoyin* temples did not, as one might reasonably expect, disassociate themselves from, but rather pragmatically endorsed their new, play-seeking visitors, and eagerly participated in and publicised the media coverage that featured them. They did not regard high-profile players such as those discussed in the previous section simply as regular participants, but rather gave them special treatment due to the potential economic and symbolic capital they might bring. The Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence advertised itself by "welcoming" (*huanying* 歡迎) and "thanking" (*gan'en* 感恩) Wanggou's *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* challenge on their Facebook page (Wuji cishantang, 2019a), and the separate temple with the same name in Taipei responded similarly to *Jiang Play*'s visit (Taibei Wuji cishantang, 2020a) and to that of Taiwanese entertainment platform ETtoday (Taibei Wuji cishantang, 2020b; Cujiangcao de chaonengli, 2020). Moreover, as its primary "commodifying tactic" (Kitiarsa,

2007), the former has attempted to appeal to the aesthetic palette of this emergent play-oriented clientele by adopting gaming imagery in its promotional materials (Figure 15):

Figure 15: Gaming imagery in the online branding of the Taoyuan Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence (2019-21). Images collated from the temple's website http://wugin.com/, used with permission

As suggested by the aforementioned Mimosa Diaries video and the comment by Taiwanese netizen 0105lim quoted in this article's second epigraph, the growing trend of *guanluoyin* play inspired gamers to parallel the blindfold of the *guanluoyin* ritual with the digital headsets worn to play VR games, as the applications of both proclaim to wield beyond-human powers that transport their wearers into another dimension. One of the top-rated comments on Wanggou's video reads: "We [Taiwanese] invented VR centuries ago; all today's VR technologies are merely plagiarism" (我們早就在幾百年前發明 VR，現在的 VR 都是抄襲的). In countless other *Devotion*/*guanluoyin* play-related forums, *guanluoyin* was variously expressed as the "folk version" (*minsuban* 民俗版), "Daoist version" (*daojiaoban* 道教版), "wireless version" (*wuxianban* 無線版), etc. of VR (e.g. Fankexue, 2020), and as one blogger ruminates: "One day, perhaps we won't have to take such great pains to perform *guanluoyin*; VR technology will enable everyone to see their deceased relatives and experience another world" (或許有一天，我們不必大費周章去觀落陰，也能用虛擬實境的技術，讓每個人都能看見過世的親人、體驗另一個世界) (cited in Lin, 2019). This popular trope of '*guanluoyin* as VR' suggests the shifting frames through which the spiritual is being re-conceptualised at large vis-à-vis gaming technologies. It is thus noteworthy that the Taoyuan temple actively tapped into this discourse by producing "virtual reality videos" (*xuni shijingpian* 虛擬實境篇), in which a narrator recounts previous clients' spirit-realm visions alongside animated visuals akin to those seen when wearing VR goggles (Wuji cishantang, 2019b, 2019c).

Similarly, the Taipei Temple of Infinite Charity and Benevolence 臺北無極慈善堂 has optimistically embraced features in popular media and collaborations with the gaming community. For instance, during one of my visits there, one ritualist enthusiastically informed me that his recitations and drumming at the temple were recorded and featured on the soundtrack for the 2020 *guanluoyin*-themed Taiwanese thriller film *49 Days* (*Jingmeng 49 tian* 驚夢 49 天). The temple management shared with me the struggles of raising funds for rent and maintenance, and protecting their ritual from extinction, given that as few as five *guanluoyin* temples survive in Taiwan today.[22] Consequently, they welcomed *guanluoyin*'s gamification in popular culture – despite such extreme misrepresentations as the graphic body horror in *Devotion* – and the subsequent influx of play-minded visitors. They did not pass judgements on these visits' intentions or outcomes, which spanned from entertaining pure curiosity to entering the spirit realm and having powerful experiences therein. Money aside, they told me, these visits serve to affirm their ritual's place in Taiwanese religious culture and the continued relevance of offline, folk religion in an increasingly technologised world. Thus, borrowing from anthropologist Adam Yuet Chau's (2021) work on temple tree-planting projects, we can conceptualise this interfacing as a case of "mutual capture", whereby gamers captured the activities and aesthetics of the temples to feed their hunger for *guanluoyin* play, while the temples captured the gamers to promote their ritual and boost their fame and funds.

Beyond the temples, growing demand amongst Taiwanese *Devotion* fans for *guanluoyin* play was swiftly capitalised upon with the invention of a new game: the *guanluoyin* escape room. A kind of participatory, live-action theatre, escape rooms are non-digital games whereby small teams are locked in a themed series of spaces and race against the clock to decipher clues to escape. Characterised by atmospheric lighting, special effects, and elaborate sets, they are popular amongst Taiwanese players seeking intimate encounters with horror. *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* became the flagship product of escape room company Miss GAME 密思小姐, publicised by Taiwanese YouTubers and on broadcast television alike, and "voted Taiwan's scariest escape room of 2020" (2020 年票選最恐怖的密室逃脫; U2M2, 2021). Players apply red blindfolds and are guided by bells into a haunted residence, replete with talismans, shrines, and divine iconography, in which they confront malicious spirits in search of their possessed daughter.

[22] This temple's standard *guanluoyin* fee is NT$300 [£8.01], plus NT$500 [£13.35] for those who successfully enter the netherworld.

Figure 16: Guanluoyin *escape room in Ximending* 西門町*, Taipei's leisure district. Photographs by the author, used with permission*

The escape room business thus cashed in on gamers' desires for playing religion by branding itself – as opposed to temples as '*guanluoyin* ritual service providers' – as a specialist '*guanluoyin* play provider'. By merchandising talismans and blindfolds as gaming accessories and repackaging *guanluoyin* as a physical, multiplayer game, it successfully enticed customers

to purchase and consume religion as a trendy commercial product. This suggests the emergence of a 'pop religion' (*liuxing zongjiao* 流行宗教, akin to 'pop music' and 'popstars') that stands alongside 'popular religion' (*minjian zongjiao* 民間宗教, i.e. the religious practices of the common people) in Taiwan.[23]

Still Loading: On the Afterlife of a Game

While conducting fieldwork in Taiwan during the 2022 Spring Festival, I stumbled across a Toyota car gift-wrapped in grand, red ribbons, parked outside a temple. This temple turned out to be one of the hundreds throughout the island that host annual, quasi-gambling competitions, whereby visitors pay (frequently large sums of) money to toss divination blocks (Hokkien *poa̍h-poe* 跋栝) in a bid to win prizes including cars, motorbikes, iPhones, and rice cookers. Ordinarily, divination blocks are ritual instruments for communicating with deities. However, during these events, their spiritual potency is paused and competitors' sole objective is to get them to land curved side-up as many times in a row as possible (the more you pay, the more turns you get). In the exuberantly festive atmosphere of the temple, competitors burn incense, crawl under the temple deity's palanquin, and bind themselves into the temple community, even if only temporarily (for an example video, see Wuya, 2021). Resonant with the *guanluoyin* temples welcoming *Devotion* gamers to play their ritual, the lasting popularity of temple-run divination block-tossing contests indicates that religious gamification is not new in Taiwan. What demands ongoing attention is how more videogaming phenomena, like *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play, embed themselves into these dynamics and shape Taiwanese people's religious conceptions and practices in the future.[24]

Having traced *guanluoyin* as it was transplanted from temples into a horror videogame and its subsequent journey beyond it, this article has probed how Taiwanese gamers 'played religion' beyond the boundaries of demarcated play spaces. For many players, completing the *Devotion* game did not mark the game's completion, as they extended their play on their own terms and in various directions, most notably towards the temples. More broadly, this case study instantiates the conceptual schema of religious gamification – an energetic, multi-vectorial process that entails an often unexpected nexus of social actors and institutions, each with their own agendas. Following *guanluoyin*'s gamification into the *Devotion* narrative by the RCG designers, ordinary and celebrity gamers alike sought out *guanluoyin* beyond their consoles, with outcomes ranging from explicitly secular entertainment to meaningful spirit-realm experiences. Furthermore, whilst some devotees resisted *Devotion*-centred religious gamification out of godly concerns – notably gamers' playful prayers to Cigu Guanyin online – the two *guanluoyin* temples discussed here adopted the strategy of *self-gamification*, partially as a mode of religious commodification (i.e., to attract these play-seeking visitors and generate funds), but also to sustain their ritual's relevance and vitality. An escape room business then tapped into the gamification of *guanluoyin* as a pop commercial product, further fuelling

[23] Here, I am playing on the semantic difference between the Mandarin terms *minjian* – 'popular', as in 'of the folk/people' – and *liuxing*: 'popular', as in 'fashionable/trendy'. Numerous pop religious phenomena have emerged in Taiwan, such as the "cute-ification" of Buddhist and Daoist deities into cartoons (Silvio, 2019: 88-120).

[24] The future interplay between religion and gaming in Taiwan is exciting. I read in local gaming chatrooms that RCG has developed a new fantasy game, *Nine Sols* (*Jiu ri* 九日), in which players adventure to the land of an ancient alien race and discover sacred rituals, blow up enemies with talismans, and combat with godly weapons. RCG describes its genre as "Taopunk" (*daopangke* 道龐克) – a fusion of Taoism (Daoism) and cyberpunk (a techno-dystopian subgenre of sci-fi).

gamers' experiments with new notions of the 'playable' and religious participation in a rapidly gaming-mediated world.

By developing the concept of religious gamification, I have sought to make two wider contributions. Firstly, by forging a new encounter between game studies and Taiwan studies, this project provides insight into how the seemingly disparate entities of religion and gaming technology are symbiotically evolving. Whilst *Devotion*-inspired *guanluoyin* play is a local trend in Taiwan, everyday religious practice in the future will have growing and sustained "entanglements" (Singler, 2020: 945) with gaming on larger, even global or metaverse scales. For instance, games are now increasingly common features of mobile apps for religious worship (e.g. Vekemans, 2019: 62) and, since the pandemic, Muslim gamers worldwide have built virtual mosques and celebrated Ramadan in Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* (Bevan, 2021). In response, we need to continue searching for religion in places beyond the 'temples', even if this leads us back to the temples.

Secondly, this article offers fresh input into the ongoing debates in game studies regarding 'metagames' – that is, the games that emerge from and extend beyond the videogames themselves (see Boluk and LeMieux, 2017). As videogames in the future spark not only more religious gamifications, but perhaps also environmental gamifications, political gamifications, military gamifications, culinary gamifications, philanthropic gamifications, and others that may remain inconceivable for now, more research on gamification will be vital to better understand how people's transitory experiences in digital *gameworlds* merge into and re-configure their extra-game *lifeworlds*.

Lastly, I return to my interview with RCG co-founder Doy Chiang, who told me that gamers' desires to play *guanluoyin* suggested the beginnings of a larger phenomenon unfolding on Taiwan's gaming scene:

> 「還願」只是短短幾個小時的遊戲體驗…但即使只有在玩家心裏留下一點點對於宗教民俗的思考或理解，也是一件相當值得開心的事情…假以時日，只要環境適合，這樣的種子自然會成長的。
>
> *Devotion* is just a short gaming experience, lasting only a few hours…That said, if it left even a trace of reflection or understanding about folk religious culture in gamers' hearts, then that is indeed something worth celebrating…When the time is ripe, and in the right environment, naturally these seeds shall grow (Doy, 2021).

This study of *Devotion* and *guanluoyin* has served to problematise the persistent, universalising assumptions of technology's displacement of religion in the secularised twenty-first century, of games as inconsequential, escapist entertainment, and of gamers as their passive consumers. In conceiving the *Devotion* gameworld, Red Candle Games planted the seeds for Taiwanese gamers to draw nearer the potential worlds beyond their screens. From sharing accounts of supernatural apparitions in their everyday surroundings, to reciting mantras and (inadvertently) mobilising evil spirits, and to playing *guanluoyin* and watching *guanluoyin* played in temples, these seeds germinated into gamers' fertile re-imaginations of popular religion and the infinite realms and beings encompassed therein. As Doy Chiang predicts, more such phenomena may surface with time, as more and more gods enter the games of the future. For now, however, *Devotion* and gamers' diverse interactions with it are a sign that these

infinite realms and beings may not – or, dare one suggest, need not – be as distant as we might think.

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