

Being Prescribed to Perform Romance? Game Platform as a Place for Romantic Relationship Practice

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Digital platforms have been ingrained in Chinese people's lives, influencing their romantic relationships. Game platforms, a significant component of the platform ecosystem, provide virtual spaces for the formation of players' romantic relationships. Is players' romantic behavior merely a prescribed performance dictated by the platform's rules? By examining the game platform *Sky: Children of the Light* through digital ethnography, the study investigates how players navigate the platform's rules to engage in romantic relationships. The findings suggest that the traditional boundaries between the frontstage and backstage of gaming are shrinking. Players not only conform to prescribed scenarios but also break free from platform constraints through negotiation of rules and connectivity rituals. A mechanism of situational intertextuality emerges, creating new situations in the game, platform, and real life. This study explores player agency within game platforms, uncovering the potential for game platforms to serve as places for practicing romantic relationships.

Keywords: game platform, romantic relationship, media situation, players

Dating using digital platforms has become increasingly common among Chinese people (Shen & Qian, 2024; Wang, 2020). With platform giants such as Tencent and NetEase investing in the gaming industry, game platforms also become places where individuals experience romantic relationships (Liu, 2019). Game platform in this research refers to the gaming infrastructures developed by platform companies that connect players, complementors, and a broader platform matrix on mobile through data streaming (Poell, Nieborg, & van Dijck, 2019). As a product of the gaming industry's platformization, games are empowered by the penetrative connectivity of platforms, thereby possessing affordances related to romantic relationships in the gamer community (Chia, Keogh, Leorke, & Nicoll, 2020; Nieborg & Poell, 2018; van Dijck, 2013).

Platform-mediated romantic relationships are also known as ambient intimacy (Zhang & Ling, 2015), cyberintimacy (Kwok & Wescott, 2020), and networked intimacy (Eskridge, 2019); while highlighting different features, these terms imply a shared reality: romantic practices have been extended into digital platforms. Research has focused on the types and development of relationships (Nayar & Koul, 2020; Sharabi, 2024; Sprecher, 2009; Yeo & Fung, 2018), body image and self-presentation (Duguay,

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2017; Ellison, Hancock, & Toma, 2012; Strubel & Petrie, 2017), gender shaping (Albury, 2015; Bonner-Thompson, 2017), platform-induced inequalities (Huang, Hancock, & Tong, 2022; Lutz & Ranzini, 2017), and the interplay between dating platforms and other cultural studies dimensions (Conner, 2019; Miller, 2015). Studies have identified the functionalities of digital platforms in constructing romantic spaces, particularly for long-distance relationships and sexual minority communities: romantic relationships that may be difficult to establish in physical spaces find their expression and fulfillment on digital platforms (Bao, 2018; Chan, 2018; Janning, Gao, & Snyder, 2018; Light, Mitchell, & Wikström, 2018). However, the datafication of dating culture also presents challenges from data breaches under surveillance capitalism (Albury, Burgess, Light, Race, & Wilken, 2017), the overvisualization and superficiality of relationships (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), deceptive information (Toma & Hancock, 2012), and the reinforcement of gender norms (Conner, 2019; Pruchniewska, 2020). These studies indicate the potential of platforms as places for romantic practices while shedding light on their prescriptive rules: as platforms match individuals through algorithms, Global Positioning System (GPS), and big data, these information streams act as labels, becoming "a new form of coupling" (Rosamond, 2018, p. 40) between users and prescribed romantic scenarios.

Games are also places for players to seek romance (Kolotkin, Williams, Lloyd, & Hallford, 2012). In contrast to the implicit rules embedded in platform technologies, the prescriptive power of in-game romance is evident in its content, including audiovisual materials and mechanics as text, genres as paratext, and social culture as context (Fernández-Vara, 2019). In-game romance was pointed out to be forced romance because games provide romantic experiences through "must-read" graphs, music, story, dialogue, and interaction; players must act out the romance to progress the game (McDonald, 2015; Tomlinson, 2021). Typical cases come from romantic video games (RVGs) and Otome games, where the primary goal is to find a partner and pursue a romantic relationship (Kim, 2009). These games usually have overidealized romantic representations and unrealistic love stories (Song & Fox, 2016). Being popular among Asian female players, they are seen as providing a virtual escape from patriarchal and masculine societal norms (Everett, 2005; Wu, Cai, & Mensah, 2023). In China's context, social inequalities such as urban-rural economic gaps and gender hierarchies also extend into the gaming space, indicating that the construction of games' symbolic worlds involve not only game designers and players but also broader social forces and cultural contexts (Liu, 2019; Wu, Fore, Wang, & Ho, 2007).

These studies outline the general features and issues of mediated romance, but how the emerging characteristics of games as platforms affect player romantic relationships remains unexplored. Platformization is essentially a transformation of industrial structure, connecting different social actors into a platform-centric ecosystem through data streams, with games now being part of this matrix (van Dijck, 2013). To understand romantic relationships in game platforms, Meyrowitz's (1986) concept of situation is especially crucial. Drawing from theoretical resources of situationism and symbolic interactionism, Meyrowitz (1986) conceptualizes situation as a social information system, where a continuous information stream integrates previously separated social groups, public/private spheres, and physical locations into a unified media matrix, creating new social situations and situational rules. This aligns with the context of platformization, where game situations, private situations, and daily life situations connect under a set of platform-defined rules: game interactions are scenario-bound, and encounters are algorithmically assigned

based on profiles and tags (Dame, 2016; Rosamond, 2018). Gaming and in-game romantic relationships are increasingly prescribed by platforms.

But is this the whole story? With the structural prescriptions of game platforms, to what extent and through what practices does player agency manifest? Taking NetEase's game platform *Sky: Children of the Light* (NetEase, 2019) as a case, this study stages a dialogue between the two bodies of scholarly work using Meyrowitz's (1986) concept of situation. With over 50 million players, *Sky: Children of the Light*'s appeal lies in its nonhardcore gameplay and label as a game for lovers, and its settings and mechanics are designed as romantic, making it a popular place for players to pursue romantic relationships (Smith, 2024). Thus, it serves as an ideal case. Specifically, the research questions include: with the rules of the game platform, by what situational mechanism does the game platform become a place for the practice of romantic relationships? What are the practices through which players develop romantic relationships? How does the platformization of the gaming industry contribute to the process? Through thick description and analysis of players' romantic practices, this study expands the local knowledge of player culture and the conceptual repertoires of game and platform studies, examining the tensions between game platforms, players, and social culture. Additionally, it adapts Meyrowitz's concept of social situations to the current platform society, developing a new theoretical perspective to understand the social dynamics between social behavior and structures.

Situation as Information System: The Stage in Games

The study of situations can be traced back to symbolic interactionists' discussions; they posited that individuals' perceptions and definitions of a situation influence their behaviors, with situations being physical or psychological distinctions and barriers (Goffman, 1959; Thomas & Dorothy, 1928). This provided a new path to understanding the meaning of social behavior, viewing them as performances that align with the current social situations. Meyrowitz (1986) continued Goffman's (1959) tradition of situationism; he redefined situation as social information systems, arguing that it is not the physical location but rather the patterns of information flow that determine the nature of human interaction. Just as physical spaces create face-to-face information systems, digital media create various other types of situations.

Goffman (1959) metaphorically described social situations as a stage that can be divided into *frontstage* and *backstage* where individuals perform as actors on them. On the frontstage, actors conform to certain rules and conventions to meet social expectations, while on the backstage, they are free from performing. Applying the binary concepts to games, the frontstage refers to the player's role/avatar and his or her gaming behaviors, while players and their social backgrounds outside the magic circle of the game are considered the backstage (Milik, 2017).

With the advent of the new media era, it was pointed out that this binary framework theorized from face-to-face communication needed to be adapted to technological advancements (Arundale, 2009). Meyrowitz (1986) argued that this framework was fixed and failed to capture the situational changes: New media altered the ways people access information and interact, redefining the boundaries of social interactions and giving rise to many "combined settings" (p. 6). A typical example is in-game real-name registration: to better manage children's gaming behaviors, players in China are required to register on

game platforms with their ID numbers. The question arises: Does the information in the game profile belong to the frontstage or the backstage? The answer is ambiguous: In the combined setting, some backstage behaviors inevitably appear in the enlarged frontstage region, leading to new patterns of interaction and social order. For instance, in the profile of a digital platform, users can choose which information to bring to the frontstage or hide in the backstage (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

Therefore, Meyrowitz (1986) expanded Goffman's (1959) situationism, based on Goffman's concepts of frontstage and backstage, he further defined the "middle region," "forefront region," and "deep back region" (p. 47). The middle region is a new stage region created by actors. It combines the frontstage and backstage, allowing the audience to see what was originally on the backstage. For example, game video creators engaged in live streaming on social platforms, where fans can not only see game videos but also the players' expressions and gameplay behind the screens (Zhang & Wu, 2022). The expansion of this middle region is accompanied by the formation of the forefront region and the deep back region, distancing the audience further from the actors: theoretically, players are unfamiliar with the offscreen lives in the deep backstage while being aware that the frontstage performance is merely a performance. However, when games become part of a vast platform matrix, there is a shift in the delineation of situations between the in-game world and the nongame world, which serves as the theoretical foundation of this research: When games become platforms, new boundaries of situations and patterns of behaviors can alter social reality.

According to situationism, each defined situation has its specific rules; they form between objective factors and subjective experiences, shaping the behavior patterns of social individuals (Hałas, 2012). Traditional games have been identified as a "third place" beyond home and work, where different gaming motivations can cause conflict between socializing and leisure situations. Except for those that label themselves as romantic, the game world remains a predominantly public domain, where romantic pursuits seem out of place (Ducheneaut, Moore, & Nickell, 2007, p. 163). The emergence of game platforms, however, has the potential to redefine the boundaries between in-game behavior, platform behavior, and real-life behavior. Through the connectivity of social platforms and the situations they create, virtual romance begins to gain legitimacy, with the potential to cocreate an online romantic place that blends public and private domains alongside other social platforms (Light et al., 2018).

Several notions from Meyrowitz (1986) have inspired this study. First, viewing situations as social information systems fits well with the context of the platformization of games, as the connectivity between platforms is exactly sustained by datafication and data streams, and the merging and reshaping of situations correspond to the process of platformization, which connects people's social lives into a unified ecosystem (Sadowski, 2019). Second, the combination of settings and the concept of the middle region effectively explain the blurred boundaries between frontstage performances and backstage activities. Some gaming behaviors are becoming middle-region behaviors, which is a consequence of the game's platformization. Last but not least, the idea of situational rules helps in considering romantic practices on game platforms, where the relationship between situation and behavior is seen as a duality of mutual shaping: as situations evolve, so do the rules of behaviors. With platforms becoming ubiquitous in daily life, developing romantic relationships in public domains is no longer inappropriate, as the boundaries between public and private situations are redefined. Examining the case from a situationist perspective allows for the reinterpretation

and development of the theory into a new context: to what extent will romantic gaming situations be extended by platforms?

Method and Data

Taking the game platform *Sky: Children of the Light* (NetEase, 2019) operated by NetEase as a case, I conducted a nine-month digital ethnography from January 2023 to September 2023, attempting to bridge the theoretical gap between platform studies and game studies. Digital ethnographic methods have included participant observation through accompanying people online, interviewing people, screen-capture collection, day-in-the-life video collection, and so on (Pink et al., 2016). When applied to game analysis, it is to perform an avatar as the researcher's own representative in the virtual world, immersively analyze the culture of the online world, and coconstruct culture with other insiders.

Digital ethnography becomes a prominent method to investigate games and players, it reflects the notion of game as site/place (Chee, 2015). Using digital ethnography, some classic games were explored in the early Internet age (Boellstorff, 2015; Pearce, 2011; Taylor, 2009). This research gave a thick description of players' gaming experiences and probed into the sociocultural aspects of the virtual worlds.

I used digital ethnography to analyze the players' romantic practice in a highly interactive MMORPG *Sky: Children of the Light* (NetEase, 2019), which is a game platform with the tag of "romance" circulated by NetEase in 2019. It is an open-world social game in which players assume the role of a flying humanoid creature traveling through a fantasy world above the clouds. In this process, players can join hands with others to complete tasks, obtain props and costumes, and get reborn through danger. As a typical game platform, it connects the game with other social media platforms and retains the function of real-time social networking.

To analyze the player's romantic practice, I took both the in-game world and the nongame world as the field sites. Within the virtual world, I conducted participatory observation when I assumed an avatar in the game platform. During this process, screenshots and videos were collected to analyze their enactment in the public domain. Ethnography moves in a go-with-the-flow pattern that attempts to follow the interesting and unexpected phenomena they encounter in the field, which means to journey to a foreign land, discovering and experiencing the strangeness of a new culture (Nardi, 2010). Following this tradition, I used snowball sampling to look for interviewees and objects of observation. The purpose of observation is to participate in interaction and to explore the process of meaning generation.

On the other hand, I also conducted semistructured interviews and scroll-back interviews with the players outside the game. In addition, some artifacts, such as the pictures of gifts they gave to each other, were collected. Twelve game players from China were interviewed. By playing together and engaging in close conversations on other digital platforms, I have established trusting friendships with them. They exhibit diversity in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background, and they are all over 18 years old. In the interviews, players were asked about their direct gaming experiences and their stories of posts on social platforms. Through online and offline investigations, data about players' romantic gaming situations have been obtained, including the ways of engaging with romantic practices, their reasons

for sharing gaming experiences, and how they flexibly transcend rules. All of them were analyzed using Meyrowitz's (1986) concept of situation.

Scenario of Romance: The Skeleton of Performing Romantic

The game is described by NetEase as a romantic game; the construction of romantic media practices is a collaborative effort between the designers, platform companies, advertisers, and players, but it is the game developers who first establish the romantic tone. The romantic elements can be reflected in various aspects such as game visuals, interactive mechanics, gameplay settings, and promotion. The players' consensus about this virtual world lies in its high degree of realism. Humanoid avatars in the game can fly in the clouds and starry skies holding hands, chat around campfires while playing the guitar, and swing beneath fluttering cherry blossom trees. These are stage settings designed by the game developers, manifesting the theme of romance through character modeling, interaction patterns, and in-game landscapes. A 24-year-old female participant described the romantic interaction mechanics of the friends' interaction interface as below:

The "friendship tree" in the game is quite romantic, with many intimate actions that can express affection toward each other. Sometimes, when you manipulate your avatar, it feels like crossing distances and embracing someone in another space. Besides, the chat box allows for great imagination. Sometimes, just sending a few happy emojis, others will imagine you on the other side of the screen as being joyful. (Longxia, Interview)

Furthermore, the game includes numerous unskippable tasks and plots that are usually composed of mandatory gameplay operations and animations. Players must complete these tasks to unlock new zones. Sometimes, avatars find themselves in concerts surrounded by glow sticks and beautiful singing voices, while other times they need to evade pursuit from mutated crabs and dragons amid horrifying sound effects. More often, there are mundane and tedious tasks, just like everyday life in the real world, such as jointly opening a door by lighting a fire. MuoMuo, one of the participants, met her partner in the game and said:

Doing tasks together, visiting scenic spots, taking photos, and experiencing new seasons in the game together . . . as long as two people are immersed in beautiful scenery, everything feels romantic and memorable. As for dangerous areas, being together with my partner provides a sense of security. After going through all these experiences, I feel closer to my partner. (MuoMuo, Interview)

In the process of these romantic practices, there exists a preliminary situational layering. Players who manipulate their avatars become both protagonists and spectators. While appreciating the romantic scenes on the screen, players' avatars within the game become romantic landscapes in the eyes of other players, turning the audience seat into a stage. Awkwardly, this romantic drama lacks leading roles. Each player has the consciousness of being the protagonist while following the scenario, but from the perspective of other players, they are mere supporting roles. This is the result of the game platform connecting private situations, especially in a virtual world where players observe the world from a first-person perspective.

Performing without the awareness of being an actor is awkward. This is why the stage designers introduced embellishment mechanisms. The basic model of avatars is designed as humanoid dolls, and players can acquire many cute actions through in-game transactions, such as holding hands, hugging, and piggybacking. To create a conflict-free social environment, avatars need to exchange candles (the in-game currency) to unlock chat functions, and the chat content is strictly restricted by a sensitive-word avoidance mechanism. A player described it as follows: "There are only limited actions and expressions in the game, and the in-game chat can only express positive and superficial things. Relying solely on the in-game chat function makes it difficult to convey myself."

According to my investigation, there exists a form of "algorithmic censorship" in the game, which involves the use of algorithm technology to filter out and regulate content that does not conform to the promoted "romantic" label in the real world. Accounts that repeatedly engage in inappropriate behavior are subject to punishment, and in severe cases, may be banned. These regulations are implemented to align the stage of performance with its scenario. Previous scholars have employed Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon to summarize the mechanisms of punishment and reward in online multiplayer games, suggesting the existence of a robust disciplinary apparatus: Various disciplinary mechanisms and instruments, such as endorsement, voting, and ranking systems, as well as more direct punitive measures like muting and banning players, have been implemented to decrease toxic behavior among players (Silverman & Simon, 2009; Tomkinson & van Den Ende, 2022). However, in game platforms, this is manifested as a form of prior scrutiny and preconfiguration. Through sophisticated algorithmic techniques, a wider range of sensitive words is directly filtered out, which even affects normal player interactions.

Consequently, once entering the virtual world, players are prescribed to perform romance. Comparing such a virtual world, which revolves around a beautiful romantic relationship, to Foucault's notion of a *panopticon* is evidently inappropriate. Therefore, I categorize such regulatory mechanisms of situation generation as scenarios. Scenarios are the template-like interactive forms established by platform companies to facilitate the progression of the game, including character modeling, basic interactions, and predetermined animations. Through scenarios, players are able to interpret the meaning conveyed by senders and game texts, and they also ensure that the platform company's promotion can reach the target users.

Likewise, scenarios bring about the merging of situations. Scenarios redefine the boundaries between private and public domains and simultaneously generate contradictions between them. The romantic practices of two players should belong to the private domain, but when avatars become actors in the view of other players, the virtual world of the game transforms into a forefront region/stage, and the private situation becomes a public one. The romantic practices of players, as perceived by others, turn into exaggerated performances aimed at attracting an audience for the platform's romantic labels.

Constructing Meaning: Negotiation of Rules

Games are considered rule-based systems (Juul, 2011). The rules of a game must be sufficiently well-defined, and if players cannot agree on the rules, the game cannot proceed. This highlights the relativity of rules: they must be followed by players, but their premise lies in being acknowledged by players. Thus,

rules are not fixed; they change with the alteration of situations. Game platforms can be well-connected to the concept of situational rules. According to Meyrowitz (1986), the rules of each situation are distinct, and they lie between objectivity and subjectivity. For players, developing romantic relationships in the game platform is not limited to merely following a scenario; they construct new situations and meanings through their actions both in the platform and in the real world. This process reflects the negotiation of existing rules, with collaborative construction by players and game developers.

Sky: Children of the Light (NetEase, 2019) is an open-world game that provides players with a great deal of autonomy to explore new spaces and goals (Juul, 2011). One way to go beyond the scenario is to enhance gameplay skills and familiarity with the game map, which can be understood as *showcasing skills*. Some players choose to pass through walls when faced with zones that need a significant amount of in-game currency or time to get in. This requires exceptional flying skills and awareness of modeling flaws. In addition, players may perform a bullfight with unbeatable colossal monsters using their advanced flying skills. Furthermore, for many couples, certain locations accessible through exploiting bugs serve as ideal dating spots. These areas often exhibit more fantastical compositions, revealing a contradictory aesthetic blending order and loss within the crevices of the virtual world. However, accessing these locations comes with a certain threshold. These areas are considered as pranks by the game developers, an unspoken agreement, and negotiation between the authors and readers: Players rely on improving their gameplay skills to discover these spaces, while the official team refrains from fixing these bugs, thereby adding enjoyment to the players' exploration. A graduate student commented on this bug:

Our favorite place is the *Thousand Birds* zone [see Figure 1], and I think this location that requires exploiting bugs to enter is an intentional "Easter egg" created by the developers. He [Yu's boyfriend] is really skilled in flying and can quickly traverse the wall. Otherwise, I wouldn't dare to go alone. Every time he takes me there, I think he's so cool. (Yu, Interview)



Figure 1. Players taking photos in spaces created by bugs (NetEase, 2019).

In addition to enhancing their acting skills, players also bypass the constraints set by the game platform by establishing connections between the game's virtual world and other platforms. Communication within the game is restricted by the game scenario, such as sensitive-word filtering, overly intimate interactions, and certain textual symbols are blocked. This rule ensures that players' performances align with the game's scenario and the "romantic" label that the platform company promotes. However, under such "algorithmic censorship," many players choose to attribute personalized meanings to their in-game actions and expressions. This mode of communication is known among players as "sky language." For example, in addition to predefined actions and expressions, when players click on their avatars, they will emit different sounds. Furthermore, players knowingly use misspelled words to bypass algorithmic censorship when they are aware of what sensitive words will be detected. Tyoen and Sakura stated:

After playing together for a while, we developed a sense of understanding between us. For example, I knew the meaning behind a few sounds he made by manipulating his avatar, so we were able to communicate smoothly without relying on text. (Tyoen, Interview)

After spending a long time playing together, we became very familiar with each other. Even if he made a typing mistake, I knew what he meant. When it came to sensitive words, we would split a word in order to convey it, for example, typing "foll" as "fo-ll." (Sakura, Interview)

Another method for effective communication is to play the game while having a video call using social platforms; this allows for multimodal interaction combining visual and auditory symbols. Additionally, many players choose to share their romantic gaming experiences through other digital platforms. They share

texts, photos, and videos, creating a platform-mediated new situation outside the virtual world of the game. These behaviors are tolerated and even encouraged by the game platform. When players use voice chat during the game, headphones appear on their avatars' ears. The game platform's official accounts also post some of the players' self-created content on social platforms, which serves as advertising, not only promoting the game but also deepening users' impressions of the game's "romantic" aspect, attracting other users to seek romantic relationships in the game. A player said, "I share some videos of us playing together on the social platform because I want to share my gaming experiences. When we get married in the future, we can look back and recall those feelings." (BanLi, Interview)

In conclusion, the rules of the game platform are the result of negotiation between the platform and the players. Unlike predetermined scenarios, players can construct meaning through specific symbols during the gameplay, thereby asserting their subjectivity within the boundaries of the rules. This behavior sometimes occurs within the virtual world and sometimes on other platforms connected to the game platform, highlighting the influence of the platform's connectivity on gaming. When the information system of the game platform includes connectivity as a preset, players' conversations and blog posts within the platform become the outer ring of the platform matrix centered on the game, forming new romantic situations within the platform and establishing intertextuality with the game platform. It, to some extent, reflects players' engagement, but it is more like an "underground party" tacitly accepted by the "authorities." For example, once the game platform fixes the bugs, players lose these private spaces they constructed for romance. A more player-centric situation will be discussed in the next section.

Creating Situations Through Rituals

For Meyrowitz (1986), situations are information systems created by new media. As an information system, digital platforms have the ability to merge situations from the game, the platform, and the real world into "combined settings" (p. 6). This integration requires human effort and experimentation beyond the platform's scenarios and negotiated rules. Users break the constraints and rules of existing situations through specific rituals, creating new situations that blend media and reality. It is precisely the situations created by users in reality that further demonstrate the potential of game platforms as sites for romantic practices and the close connection between games and reality.

According to interviews with players, types of romantic relationships in the game mainly include *fixed play partners* (搭子/固玩), *mentorship* (带崽), *game couples* (cp), and real-life lovers. For the first three categories, players often post matchmaking posts on social platforms. Fixed play partners refer to a sustained playmate relationship, usually without specific gender requirements, although some players may have romantic expectations toward their playmates. Mentorship relationships are usually between new and experienced players; experienced players usually guide new players through challenging game tasks, the tension, and sense of achievement experienced together, and in the process nourish the embryonic stage of a romantic relationship. Cp refers to game couples, typically referring to couples in the game world, which may have requirements about gender and sexual orientation in reality. Since the game does not have an in-game marriage mechanic, the rituals for establishing romantic relationships mostly occur on other platforms. For example, Longxia described his understanding of cp: "We met through a matchmaking post

on a social platform. Cp refers to being in a romantic relationship, but it does not involve meeting in person.” (Longxia, Interview)

Huizinga (1944) argued that relationships in games are never an endpoint, and the same applies to romantic relationships. There are two types of couples in the game: those who develop from fixed play partners, mentorship, or game couples to become real-life couples, and those who are real-life couples playing the game together. Both of these types experience rituals that connect reality and the game platform. For the former, meeting in person becomes an essential ritual. In the current context of increased user awareness of online security, online relationships face many challenges (Toma & Hancock, 2012). Moreover, many players express concerns about the situation of just falling in love with a model rather than the real person, which reflects worries about the game’s embellishment mechanisms (Ellison et al., 2006; Liu, 2019). However, the deficiencies in game platforms can be compensated through rituals constructed by players: there is nothing more revealing than meeting in person. After ensuring the safety of the meeting venue, Sakura decided to bring the romantic relationship into reality:

At first, I thought game relationships and real-life relationships should be separate, it was enough to have companionship in the game because, after all, the person could be an older man or a middle school student. After playing with him, I found out he was a university student just one year younger than me, and we got along well. Although we initially felt the distance was far, when he told me his feelings and came to work in my city, we truly became a couple in reality. We missed the *Days of Bloom* in the game, but we went to Xi’an [a city in China] together to see real cherry blossoms. (Sakura, Interview)

For real-life couples, games serve as a dating venue and a shared space designed for long-distance relationships (Janning et al., 2018). Games enable multimodal interactions, and character modeling allows players to feel immersed in the game world. The game provides players with romantic settings and festive designs. In addition to the four seasons, the game offers romantic scenes and props such as cherry blossom trees, rainbow bridges, swings, and fireworks during occasions like Valentine’s Day and other holidays. Therefore, some players who cannot meet in person choose to meet in the game. For example, Tyoen’s boyfriend organized a birthday party for her:

We are in a long-distance relationship; he cannot be with me in person on my birthday, so he celebrated my birthday using game props in the game [see Figure 2]. He found a spot to set off fireworks, and whenever a stranger came by, he would let them know it was my birthday, so the strangers stayed and celebrated together. He played the piano for me; everyone clapped and set off fireworks. Then I made a wish, hoping for our smooth journey together. (Tyoen, Interview)



Figure 2. Tyoen's boyfriend celebrating her birthday in the game (NetEase, 2019).

In reality, the construction of romantic relationship situations is intricately linked to game platforms. Many players first meet in the game, so they have a special emotional connection to the game, treating the game characters as symbols of their loved ones. They buy game peripherals as gifts for each other, hang game posters at home, and even create handmade crafts. These ritualized behaviors effectively extend the romantic space created by the game, infusing elements of the game into real life. Jue's boyfriend is an art student, while she herself studies physics. She believes that without the game, it would have been impossible for them to be together.

He is an art student and values the sense of ritual in life. At first, he would send flowers every month, and then he started creating art pieces for me [see Figure 3]. To reciprocate, I began learning to make small items and bracelets to give to him. I still find it incredible that I met him in the game. (Jue, Interview)



Figure 3. Game character artwork drawn by Jue's boyfriend as a gift (Jue, personal communication).

In conclusion, the aforementioned behaviors can be regarded as rituals. According to Huizinga (1944), a rite is "an act, an action represented on a stage" (p. 14). But ritual, as a more flexible concept, includes habits and routine activities in personal life. It is no longer a passive performance but largely reflects the agency of players. They create an alternative playing situation between the game's prescribed situation and the situation of everyday life. They are no longer restricted by the game's scenarios but instead autonomously construct symbols and meanings. This also reflects the shift of romantic relationships from the public domain to the private domain in the platform. Through these rituals, players can freely traverse between the media world and the real world. This mode of situation further illustrates the potential of game platforms as places for romantic practices.

Situational Intertextuality and the Formation of Romantic Situations

Social situations are not fixed; the boundaries of situations continuously shift and evolve with the iterations of media affordances, altering people's patterns of social interaction (Meyrowitz, 1986). This study borrows from the traditions of symbolic interactionism and situationism to contend that situations, as structured social information systems, manifests a duality with individual practices as situationized practices. They are shaping each other. Game-mediated romantic relationships are not new phenomena, but as games become a part of the platform matrix, the complex data streams between platforms envelop players in a playful-romantic environment. The process of negotiating situational rules has been overlooked, making the concept of situational merger insufficient to fully interpret this ambient play and ambient romance (Hjorth & Richardson, 2020).

By inductively analyzing players' situationized practices and comparing them with previous studies, this research identifies the impact of platformization on situations and practices. I dub this mechanism "situational intertextuality," referring to the cross-domain mutual projection and shaping between situations under the connections facilitated by platformization. According to Kristeva (1986), intertextuality means the idea that "any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (p. 85), such as the adaptation of a novel into a television TV series. The establishment of social rules relies not merely on consensus but on the negotiated order among social actors with differing levels of discursive power (Musolf, 1992). In other words, the cross-domain mutual shaping is not a mirror-like replication but rather like a distorting mirror with a cycle of distortion and adjustment. Therefore, adaptation and intertextuality better describe the core of this mechanism, as the adapter is exactly the platform.

Sky: Children of the Light (NetEase, 2019), as a virtual world labeled with romance, exemplifies the negotiation process of gaming situations. The situational intertextuality mechanism manifests between in-game content, platform content, and offline content, shaping and referencing each other. This results from the interplay of three situational generation mechanisms, creating new regions of situation.

The first situational mechanism is the scenario prescription, which includes the game's task, character design, animation, and music. These elements prescribe the players' performance of romance; in other words, the players' actions become performances defined by algorithms and modeling. They can enhance the players' emotional involvement, particularly for players in long-distance relationships, where experiences of intimacy often emerge in conducting mundane activities. As players cannot physically

participate in adventures together, the game platform's content becomes a frontstage performance. The avatar's behaviors and visual experiences in the game consistently convey the intended meanings designed by the game platform, deepening both players' immersion in the romantic atmosphere and the audience's impression of the game as a romantic game.

The second situational mechanism is the negotiation of rules. Rules are at the core of the game, and players must abide by them, but they can generate their own meanings of behavior and visual experiences within the framework of the rules. In the game platform, rules are not fixed. If players were deprived of the opportunity for "adaption" behaviors, the game would lose its sense of participation and become no different from traditional, linear single-player games. This includes behaviors in the game where players create new situations by exploiting bugs and behaviors outside the game platform where they create new spaces for communication, such as sharing romantic experiences from the game on social platforms.

The final mechanism is situation construction through connectivity ritual, which is the most open-ended mechanism and manifests the players' agency to the greatest extent. Players begin to go beyond the game platform and create rituals in the real world, extending the romantic situation. On one hand, the game can serve as a symbol of the romantic relationship, bearing memories since they know each other. On the other hand, for players in long-distance relationships, the game becomes a shared space for dating. Through rituals, players connect the game with the platform, the virtual with the real, providing powerful evidence of the potential of the game platform as a place for romantic practices.

Under the influence of these three mechanisms, the merger between situations occurs. Before the platformization of games, the performances within the screen belonged to the frontstage behavior, while the player's offscreen behaviors were unknown to others and thus considered the backstage behavior. However, with the platformization of games and their integration into a vast matrix of platforms, there has been a shift in the partitioning of in-game and nongame scene divisions. The dividing line between situations and patterns of situationized behaviors has been redefined: The avatar's performance following the scenarios in the virtual world occupies the forward frontstage, while the player's offscreen behaviors during remote play, disconnected from the platform, belong to the deep backstage. However, under the penetrating power of the platform, these two situations are continuously narrowing, and more combined situations emerge in a newly formed middle region. The boundaries between performance and audience become blurred, and an increasing number of romantic-private situations become visible on the platform, making it difficult for the audience to distinguish whether they are scripted performances or exposures of private authentic behaviors.

Specifically, players' shared romantic experiences in games originally belonged to the frontstage, but in open-world environments, excessive displays of intimacy may be frowned upon by other players and even be monitored and warned by the platform. Genuine private spaces are scarce, and thus, certain behaviors are subject to scrutiny by platform algorithms and removed from the stage. On the other hand, players' private romantic behaviors originally belonged to the backstage, but now an increasing number of players choose to share photos and videos of their romantic experiences on social platforms. Interconnections and mutual citation of meaning between the game world, the platform, and the real world have emerged, leading to the merger of public and private situations and the advent of situationized middle-region behaviors.

It is worth noting that within the mechanism of situational intertextuality, the platform always holds the primary position in rule-making. When players seek romantic partners beyond the in-game prescribed interaction possibilities by using social platforms, the matching mechanics based on their algorithms project the platform's rules into the game (Rosamond, 2018). The linear and diachronic romantic process is weakened, dominated instead by the categorization of profile data, with classification rules also originating from tags made by the platform's big data (Dame, 2016; Yeo & Fung, 2018). Alongside the implantation of platform rules, the inequalities emerging from overconnectivity and commercial principles of the platform also become the rules of the game and players' romantic lives.

Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the phenomenon and underlying mechanisms of players using game platforms to develop romantic relationships. The study reveals how game platforms become places for romantic practices under platform-prescribed rules, the players' situationized practices to develop romantic relationships, and the dominant role of platformization in this process. Drawing on Meyrowitz's (1986) reflections on situations, I collected and analyzed qualitative data, introducing the concept of situational intertextuality, and identifying three situational generation mechanisms: scenario prescription, rule negotiation, and connectivity ritual. These mechanisms illustrate the platform's prescription of romance and players' playful resistance to these rules. The study posits that the new situations and players' situationized practices exhibit a duality, involving a mutually shaping process: It is not a mirror-like simulation but the process of continuous distortion and adjustment, ultimately forming situational rules within the unified social information systems.

In the shaping of romantic situations, the role of platforms is prominent. The uniqueness of the game's platformization lies in the reorganization of industrial modes, forming a social information system through the platform matrix that connects production and consumption, content and users, work and leisure. Consequently, previous front and back stages shrink, while the middle region brought by the platform expands to be the paratext of games. In so doing, private information becomes public labels made by the platform, and algorithmic rules bind users within the platform matrix, turning romantic gaming behavior into on-stage performance. However, players do not strictly adhere to prescribed scenarios; instead, they create combined settings through ritualized practices in real life, intertwining private and public situations.

This study makes several academic contributions. First, it bridges research on romance mediated by both platforms and games, expanding the knowledge of how these behaviors are influenced by the situations shaped by technology and culture when platforms and games merge. The study not only summarizes players' romantic practices in new situations but also highlights the platform's prescriptive role as a paratext: it becomes the middle region between gaming and everyday life. Additionally, this study adapts Meyrowitz's (1986) notion of situational merger to the background of platformization, further proposing the idea of situational intertextuality. It points out that the simulation of rules between situations is not identical but a process of negotiation among multiple social actors within a discursive arena. Cross-domain rule-making involves the intrusion of platform rules into game rules and individual relationships, coupling users based on tags such as age, gender, cultural background, and lifestyle (Rosamond, 2018). Hence, this study provides a cultural studies perspective for game analysis. Future research can incorporate

more dimensions and groups, such as LGBT players, to explore the tensions between sexual orientation, romantic behavior, and gaming platforms.

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