

Wedding Elements in Chinese Horror Games: A Case Study of Paper Bride

Yingming Wu^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Anthropology, The Ohio State University, Columbus, 43210, The United States

a. wu.4246@osu.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: Video games, as one of the most popular media today, have become a platform for the reinterpretation and creative expression of cultural elements. Folklore elements in games are not merely replicated; instead, they are transformed, blending traditional narratives with modern aesthetics and gameplay mechanics. This kind of reconstructed folklore is different from traditional folklore, forming a hybrid folklore, which is a new field that deserves the research of folklorists. This paper takes the video game *Paper Bride* as a case study and analyses how the element of ‘traditional Chinese wedding’ is presented and reconstructed in a horror game. The game can be seen as a reflection of the game designers’ consideration of traditional wedding customs. Throughout *Paper Bride*, players encounter thematic conflicts and alignments between traditional and contemporary ideologies conveyed through the narrative and visual symbolism. *Paper Bride* uses traditional Chinese artifacts and customs to create a number of elaborate puzzles, while the story shows the ideal love that contemporary people aspire to. This is the main reason it is one of the representatives of Chinese horror games.

Keywords: Video Game Suty, Hybrid Folklore, Chinese Culture.

1. Introduction

Video games are among the most popular media of our time. Video games, celebrated as the ‘Ninth Art,’ are among the most popular media today due to their immersive sound, visuals, and unique interactivity. Traditional Chinese horror games frequently use traditional elements like weddings as cultural symbols, merging folklore with interactive narratives. Weddings, particularly in horror games, serve as powerful narrative tools that juxtapose joy and fear, creating a unique cultural tension. Folklore and Mythology have become inspiration warehouses. After decades of development, game studios are unsatisfied with depicting a story but focus on reconstructing the archetype.

Video games reflect cultural symbols, which is common sense among game lovers. Since China has a rich cultural resource, many players expect to play video games that feature many Chinese cultural features. After 2010, the Chinese video game industry experienced significant growth, with an increasing number of game studios opting to incorporate local Chinese cultural symbols, particularly in horror games. After fighting with tons of monsters and zombies in Western games, this kind of “Chinese horror” has been welcomed by many Chinese game players.

This article will focus on an element that appears frequently in Chinese folklore horror games: weddings. Most Chinese folklore horror games include wedding features, so some players complain

that game studios “do not know how to make a horror game without weddings.” This article will discuss and analyze why Weddings, a symbol of romance, become a frequent guest in horror games. Reconstructed Folklore in video games represents rich materials and a new challenge to folklorists. They might be disguised from conventional folklore since it is a new narrative—highly interactive storytelling. Through the Internet, they can be transmitted to large-scale audiences. However, it is hard for folklore to maintain originality [1]. Reconstructed folklore contains both traditional and modern. Therefore, interpreting it requires new perspectives. In other words, this is a new interdisciplinary field.

This paper will use the famous horror game *Paper Bride* as a case study to analyze and discuss the transaction of the cultural symbol “Wedding.” *Paper Bride* is a representative game with a traditional Chinese wedding theme. It also contains a large amount of Chinese folklore elements. In addition, video game study is no longer limited to researching game design. Many scholars have focused their attention on the cultural factors that games present. The study of Folklore in video games is a new direction. Though there are many limitations, this article hopes to be an inspiration for this new area.

2. Wedding as a Cultural Symbol

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines “wedding” as “a ceremony in which two people marry [2]”. Marriage symbolizes that the two individuals will be formally connected and protected by the law. It is a formal ritual that proves the marriage.

In most cultures, weddings are primarily cheerful, romantic, and happy symbols. However, different cultures have different wedding ceremonies, and this difference reveals the different meanings of weddings. For example, in Western culture, the form of a wedding is often decided by the couple themselves because the civilization has the characteristics of openness and freedom [3].

In Chinese culture, a wedding is a very solemn event, usually considered to represent the birth of a new family. A man needs a wedding to signify his change in status to the head of the family and take on his responsibilities. The wedding also involves the preparation of a bride price, which is a gift to celebrate the female joining this family. In addition, in the blessing to the new couple, besides “Congratulations” and “I wish love and happiness were with you forever,” the most frequent greeting is “Having a baby soon.” This shows one of the critical values of Chinese culture: the continuation of the family. Traditionally, marriage and childbirth are closely linked. Marriage is also known in China as a “lifelong matter,” which parents always worry about. Therefore, in traditional Chinese culture, marriage is one of the most critical events in a person's life, so the wedding must be very formal and grand because it is a ceremony that symbolizes the change of identity, the acquisition of new responsibilities, an alternative “rite of passage.” In other words, a wedding provides a stage for dramatic events that can push the story plot forward.

2.1. Wedding and Horror

China has a long history and a vast area, so it has many different customs regarding weddings. A folk custom must be mentioned to discuss why weddings appear in horror games: ghost marriage.

In the previous section, it was mentioned that weddings are “lifelong events.” Some parents, to fulfill this matter for their son who has passed away early, will also organize a wedding for him. They would invite a Feng Shui master to find a female match for their child. The bride could be a corpse, but more often than not, she was a young, lively female. Marrying a dead man meant that she had to go to hell to unite with her husband and start a new family with him. Funerals, another “lifelong matter” in Chinese culture, are often constructed with weddings. Weddings are red, which is a fortune. While funerals are white, they represent tragedy. In games, the fusion of the two rituals is usually

represented by the contrast of colors and the change in background music. Overlying rituals bring mental stress to players.

In past dynasties, ghost marriage was seen as a romantic theme because people looked forward to love that could not vanish even if they died. However, since the founding of New China, the government has been encouraging people to receive a more rational and scientific education. Ghost marriage is gradually being recognized as a corrupt custom. The female who becomes a bride is not voluntary. She submits to her parents or the clans. From a modern perspective, this is a tragedy. This mysterious but tragic ritual inspires literary creation. In the 20th century, many Chinese writers wrote about ghost marriage. It revealed a drift that “premodern society” will be replaced. Nevertheless, ghost marriage literature in the 20th century cherishes a memory of past-day, which shows a struggle between two ideologies—a traditional ethnic-based society and a rational, scientific modern society [4].

3. Folklore and Video Games

Cyberculture, rooted in the internet's expansive reach, has given rise to new forms of folklore, blending traditional themes with digital narratives. Cyberculture has ushered in a new form of folklore and tradition. Cyber refers to the internet, and cyberculture refers to folklore and tradition presented in digital media. Video games are particularly outstanding in highly interactive narratives, and storytelling is one of the foundations of folklore. In Tamara's article, he calls this new expression a new form of folklore: hybrid folklore—actualized folklore and traditional forms through various complementary tools and media [1].

It is essential to note that while hybrid folklore is derived from reality, it does not simply upload and spread authentic folklore onto the web. Hybrid folklore can be fictionalized. Tamara mentioned that the risk of folklore is drawing to become commercial and lose its original symbolic meaning [1]. The undeniable point is that the trend toward commercialization is hard to stop. When a horror game with a wedding element gets welcomed, more games with wedding elements will be made. Weddings seem to have become a commercial template for horror games. Movies, novels, games... These creations are often criticized for distorting traditional folklore. However, Junwen Zhang proposed a new concept for the reconstructed folklore: Filmic Folklore. He researched “How” and “Why” traditional folklore transferred into fiction. He regarded folklore films and videos as a window to reflect on ourselves [5]. Dr Zhang's study mainly on the film area. However, the concept and theory of Filmic Folklore represent a direction for hybrid folklore study. Not only filmmakers but other content creators prefer to “borrow” folklore in their works. Based on authentic folklore, they created fictional folklore for storytelling purposes. This characteristic is very common in video games.

3.1. Weddings in Horror Games

Meanwhile, in video games, the scene of ghost marriage is depicted specifically and focuses on the tragedy of women. The horror game *Soul at Stake* is an Asymmetric Multiplayer game, and the story is set in the Republic of China. One of the playable characters, Xiu Niang, is forced to marry the dead son of a landowner. She hangs herself in despair on her wedding night in her wedding dress. However, because she has a lot of resentment, she becomes a ghost and cannot truly rest in peace. In her scene, players can see red firecrackers for the wedding and white paper money for the dead floating in the air. In another horror game, *Way Back Home*, a young lady was forced to marry a dead man. Because her parents considered it was a worthwhile business marriage.

Both horror games present female tragedy in the ghost marriage custom; they reflect traditional female roles. In traditional Chinese culture, women are more passive and devoted than men [6].

Furthermore, this article will use the famous horror game *Paper Bride* as the case, which is a representative horror game with a wedding theme.

4. *Paper Bride*: Brief Introduction

Paper Bride is a series of Chinese puzzle-adventure horror games centered around wedding themes, blending folklore with horror elements. This paper focuses on the first installment, released in 2021.

In the game, the player takes on the role of the groom, Ning Zifu. At the beginning of the game, he is getting married to his love, Nie Moqi. During the wedding ceremony, his bride's dress suddenly turns white, and then she disappears. The bride's parents and the food on the table also all turned out to be made of paper. Immediately after, Ning Zifu heard Nie Moqi's cries for help and saw her being taken away by a woman who looked exactly like her and wore a white wedding dress. To save the love of his life, Ning Zifu follows the clues—such as the old photo of Nie Moqi's family—Nie Moqi left behind while gradually unraveling the story behind Nie Moqi's family. Nie Moqi has a twin sister, Nie Moli, whom her parents abandoned. The sister decides to take revenge on them and decides to take away her sister's happy life. In the end, Ning Zifu overcomes the dark forces and rescues Nie Moqi, allowing them to re-organize their wedding with renewed hope and joy.

4.1. Color Code in Chinese Culture

In the game's main menu, two brides are sitting together. One is dressed in red, while the other is dressed in white. This image will remind the player of a ghost bride because white is the color of the dead. However, *Paper Bride* presents a traditional Chinese wedding. The couple both dress in red and need to bow nine times: the first three bows to heaven and earth, second to their parents, and third to each other. While bowing is now often omitted in modern ceremonies, in *Paper Bride*, the ritual is loaded with tension, marking a moment where tradition collides with horror. In *Paper Bride*, things change in the blink of an eye when the couple is kneeling to each other. The sudden change in the color of the bride's dress gives players the first shock. As the bride's dress changes into the color of the underworld, the lanterns dim, and the bride's parents and the food on the table become made of paper; that is for the dead. By shifting colors, the game instantly transports players into a realm of spectral unease, blurring the boundary between the living and the dead. It also shows, from a traditional perspective, how small the interval between life and death is [7]. A scary atmosphere has been created by simply changing the clothes' color.

4.2. Storyline

The game has many contrasts, which are meant to be unexpected on top of the horrors brought by common sense. For example, the Ghost Bride, who wears a white wedding dress, always appears when Ning Zifu meets Nie Moqi and takes her away. Players are prone to preconceive that the Ghost Bride is a supernatural being that needed to be defeat. However, as the story goes on, the player will discover that the Ghost Bride does nothing wrong towards Ning Zifu and even tries to tell him something. Finally, the truth is revealed: Nie Moqi is the bride in the white wedding dress. Nie Moli's magic spell forces Nie Moqi's soul to leave her body. Thus, she becomes a ghost. Nie Moli pretended to be her sister to marry Ning Zifu. Nie Moqi had to appear in this way to stop her sister. Besides, she left some cues, hoping Ning Zifu would find the truth. In the end, Ning Zifu learns about the story of Nie Moqi's family. He also gets the spell to bring Nie Moqi's soul back to her body with the help of other characters. In a final act of love and courage, Ning Zifu successfully restores his beloved, overcoming the darkness that once separated them.

The love between Ning Zifu and Nie Moqi is crucial throughout the storyline. Ning Zifu is like Orpheus from Greek mythology, willing to go to hell to save his wife. But Nie Moqi is not passive.

In traditional Chinese folklore, a soul separated from its body for too long risks complete dissolution. Nevertheless, Nie Moqi didn't wait to die. She risked disappearing early to find Ning Zifu and send her words to him. She also protects Ning Zifu from being attacked by Nie Moli. The contemporary generation prefers this love that both males and females take the initiative. Many traditional Chinese love stories show people's longing for love that 'does not separate even in death' and usually show one partner fearlessly following the other to death. The Butterfly Lovers (Liang Zhu) is one of China's most well-known romantic legends. Zhu Yingtai, a young lady from a wealthy family, pretends to go to school to gain knowledge as a male. She meets Liang Shanbo at school, and they have a wonderful time together. After three years, Zhu Yingtai goes back home. Liang Shanbo finally knows she is a female when he visits her. Liang Shanbo wants to marry her, but Zhu Yingtai has already married another. Liang Shanbo dies because of heartbreak and depression. On the day Zhu Yingtai marries, she passes by Liang Shanbo's tomb. At that moment, the grave cracks open, and Zhu Yingtai jumps into that big hole without hesitation. Then, a pair of butterflies fly out from the grave and fly away together. This tragic love story has been told from the Tang Dynasty to the present day. This story is regarded as a representative example of unswerving love.

However, *Paper Bride* shows a more proactive and life-affirming process: it is not only 'being together even after death,' but 'even if you are already in another world, I will bring you back.' In a way, this is a kind of mockery of the sacred realm of death—mortals escape from death because love conquers all. Their love also proves to be a free marriage--- out of parental expectations or being forced to fulfill the responsibility of constructing a new family, but simply because the couple falls in love and wants to be together forever. This kind of freedom is what commentary youth aspire to [8,9].

In addition to life and death, worshipping the earth god is sacred, too. There are many kinds of earth gods: They may be legendary figures or ancestors of a village who are worshipped by the village. It is believed that the god blesses the land and the people who live on it. This worship is still prevalent in many rural villages. It embodies the clan's existence and binds a particular group [10]. The group members communicate with the divine spirit to maintain this peace. However, Nie Moli's story reacts to the conflict between the traditional worship of the earth god and modern science. She is a victim of the old patriarchal society where the individual is always lower than the collective. From a modern perspective, being abandoned because of an oracle is incomprehensible. This ideological conflict between tradition and modernity mirrors the struggles faced by Nie Moli, whose life is shaped by both. Luckily, she was adopted by Madam Tang and went to university for higher education. In her confrontation with Ning Zifu, she angrily accuses her parents of abandoning her. She emphasizes that she tried to find an answer during her university studies but failed to find one. In her opinion, the Bodhisattva and his oracle are both ridiculous. Because of the rational education of science, traditional land worshipping is losing its persuasiveness. However, she learned those magic spells and again embraced the 'tradition' to take revenge on her parents and sister. Her choices may seem contradictory, but in a horror game, supernatural powers are essential. At the end of the story, Nie Moli is diagnosed as 'schizophrenic' and is sent to an asylum. Yet, is this the fact? Many players consider Nie Moli's ending too far-fetched. It is a poor excuse to cover up her use of evil spells. This comment seems to indicate that in the perspectives of many players, there is a clear boundary between 'traditional spells' and 'modern science.' The latter is unable to explain the former. Because of the deconstruction of nature brought by science, contemporary people find it difficult to believe in customs such as the ghost marriage. Nevertheless, many people also believe in mystical forces and have some personalized beliefs. This ambivalence is similar to Nie Moli's experience.

4.2.1. The Beginning of a Haunting Journey

Paper Bride unfolds over five chapters, with the first centered around Ning Zifu's eerie wedding ceremony. Because his parents have passed away, only Nie Moqi's parents attend their wedding. On a gloomy, overcast day, a mysterious woman identical to the bride, dressed in a spectral white wedding gown, appears and takes the bride away. Meanwhile, the bride's parents were turned into paper figures. By the time Ning Zifu returned from checking the situation in the other rooms, only two effigies had remained on the two chairs in the wedding hall

4.2.2. Traditional Symbols as Puzzle Elements

From this unsettling scene, the puzzle journey begins, inviting players to uncover clues scattered throughout the house. The game designers let the player get clues by interacting with items in the house. During the search, players also help Ning Zifu go through the wedding ceremony process. For example, in traditional wedding customs, the couple is required to give out red envelopes ("hongbao") to pass on the fortune and to treat their relatives and friends who have contributed to the wedding [11]. After the bride disappears, the door to the wedding hall is locked. At this point, a paper boy appears in front of the door. Ning Zifu needs to give him a red envelope, and the boy will give clues to unlock the door. However, the money in the red packet is ancestor money ("ming bi"), notes burnt for the dead. This implies that Ning Zifu seems to have entered another world.

4.2.3. Cultural Heritage in Modern Gameplay

Furthermore, players can see a palanquin parked at the door when Ning Zifu leaves the wedding hall. In traditional Chinese wedding customs, the bride sits in a palanquin and is carried to the groom's house for the wedding. This custom is still preserved in some rural areas. However, in modern cities, palanquins have been replaced by cars, which are more convenient. Despite this shift, the palanquin remains an iconic symbol of traditional Chinese weddings. The windows of the palanquin have red curtains, and as the curtains sway, the bride can be seen in her wedding clothes, wearing a red headpiece: a red cloth covering her hair and face ("hong gaitou"). It can only be removed by her husband [11]. However, unveiling the headpiece in *Paper Bride* does not belong to any of the above categories. The bride has disappeared, but a red headpiece suddenly appears in the palanquin, which should be empty. Ning Zifu must use a steelyard—a symbol of fulfilled wishes in Chinese culture—to lift the headpiece. Players may imagine what scary ghosts will be under the red cloth. However, it is a bow and arrow. The wedding custom of archery for exorcism is uncommon in contemporary times, but the designers put it into the game. At that moment, the bride's voice came from their private bedroom next door, asking Ning Zifu to go to her with the bracelets they had bought. Players can use the bow and arrow to shoot down the butterfly trinket on the lantern, which is the key to opening the jewelry box.

A pair of new bracelets is often an essential part of a wedding. They are made of jade or gold, both precious and auspicious materials. The elders usually choose wedding bracelets as a gift to the couple, carrying good wishes. Bracelets can be equal to rings in Western weddings. With globalization, many Chinese couples incorporate Western wedding styles. Yet, they often preserve the tradition of receiving bracelets from their parents as a symbol of cultural heritage.

Traditional artifacts, such as fake fire pits, red candles, and red lanterns, are also present at the wedding. At the end of the wedding, the bride and groom will go to their private bedroom. Although things get very weird in the wedding ceremony, Ning Zifu still goes through the basic process of 'meeting the bride, nine times bowing, unveiling the red headpiece, and entering the private bedroom.' But, he is the only mortal at the wedding. Many traditional wedding elements are broken up and reorganized by the game studio. Familiar wedding objects transform into eerie puzzle elements,

subverting conventional understanding. By blending the known with the mysterious, the game taps into the primal fear of the unknown.

5. Discussion

A Chinese proverb says, ‘What is scarier than ghosts is humanity.’ Humanity is often highlighted in Chinese horror games and contrasted with supernatural creatures. Rather than direct visual stimulation, Chinese horror makes players feel fearful and powerless through details.

In *Paper Bride*, while the ghosts appear frightening, they often serve as companions, guiding the protagonist through his journey. The dead old man on the fourth floor provides the most jump scares in the game. However, he has been helping Ning Zifu and Nie Moqi in his own way. Instead, the living human beings—Nie Moli and her master—are the real culprits who harm the couple. Despite its horror elements, *Paper Bride* is imbued with a sense of enduring romance. In the end, Ning Zifu rescues his beloved. *Paper Bride* shows an idealized love: Ning Zifu and Nie Moqi decide to get married because of affection and irrelevance to external and material conditions. Their destiny is always in their own hands. However, parents play an essential role in guiding marriages [6]. It is not uncommon for children to clash with their parents over the period of their marriage. Although *Paper Bride* is a horror game, it tells an idealistic story.

In addition, as another ghost bride in a wedding dress, Xiu Niang from *Soul at Stake* is more tragic. Her story is a microcosm of the times. She is a victim of the tradition of ghost marriage. In the game, she is a playable “Devil-type” character who can kill “Gambler-type” characters. However, the game studio emphasizes her tragedy more than her horror in the background story. In *Soul at Stake*, almost all Devil-type characters have a tragic past, while the human characters ‘Gamblers’ come to this battle royale game because of personal desire. Such contrasting characterization is a hallmark of Chinese horror games, where supernatural entities often embody sorrow and suffering while human characters reveal darker aspects of human nature. Rather than direct visual stimulation, Chinese horror makes players feel fearful and powerless through details.

Video games visually reflect the fashions and values of the current era. Game studios pick and choose from the source material, allowing them to assemble a story that fits their values. The story can be romantic—like *Paper Bride*. Or it can be serious—like another famous horror game, *Firework*. The story is set in a fictional town; *Firework* places players in the role of a rookie cop investigating a bizarre murder case. Elements like the telephone service in the supermarket bring players back to China at the beginning of the millennium. Supernatural forces merely serve as a tool to push the story narrative forward, but *Firework* is essentially a human-based story. The opening ending leads the player to think about a real social problem: human trafficking. Therefore, researching video games should focus not only on the design of the game but also on the cultural story behind it.

Although games are called the ‘ninth art,’ they are commodities. It represents not only the point of view of the game studio but also the specific audience it is intended for. Folklore transcends time and is constantly being redefined. And video games are an excellent stage for it.

6. Conclusion

This article examines *Paper Bride*, a puzzle-adventure video game, as a case study to explore the integration of traditional Chinese folklore into contemporary gaming narratives. This article analyzes how game designers use a traditional Chinese wedding as the central theme in constructing a story and how to incorporate traditional Chinese folklore elements into the game. As a horror game, *Paper Bride* tells a romantic story with a happy ending. It reflects a contemporary idealized value of love. Weddings, one of the most solemn ceremonies in Chinese culture, have appeared in many horror games, assuming the role of a kind of ‘turning point’ in the story. This ‘counter-intuitive’ pairing not

only brings a different kind of attraction to the narrative but also shows the game designer's attitude and consideration about traditional weddings. *Paper Bride*, for example, is a romantic love story, while the wedding in Soule at Stake is more severe, highlighting the misery of the bride.

Furthermore, the puzzle props in *Paper Bride* are objects that can be found in reality, and the game designers make them work differently but correspond to reality so that players with the same cultural background can quickly accept them. This fictional 'tradition' shows how folklore can be re-created in video games, turning it into hybrid folklore.

Hybrid folklore originates from reality and spreads through the internet as digital. In the dissemination process, they may have various changes from their archetypes. Video games are one of the most popular media of cyberculture. The characteristics of high interactivity distinguish them from traditional media such as films and novels, making them a new area worth studying. In addition, re-created folklores reflect contemporary values. To a certain extent, it can reflect the change and conflict of values between the old and new eras. Besides, through the excavation and reconstruction of traditional folklore, some folklore that has gradually faded away from people's view has also regained people's attention. Therefore, hybrid folklore represents an emerging academic field with vast potential, meriting in-depth study and greater scholarly attention for its role in bridging tradition and digital culture.

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