Meta-game, Bardo and Cyberdrama

On the origin and writing of Deep Simulator

Deep Simulator is both a literary text and a single-player video game. Though each comes with its own focus and nuances, in terms of sensory workings and content, they are born out of the same concerns – the player's identity in the contemporary world, the idea of the multiverse, and the demolition of dimensional walls.

Deep Simulator is a living, organically evolving long-term project. The single-player video game was initiated and directed by aaajiao, and completed with a team made up of Xu Cong, Nara and myself in 2020. It was presented at the Castello di Rivoli d'Arte Contemporane in Italy in November 2020 as the lead object of aaajiao's eponymous solo exhibition curated by Marianna Vecellio, and the work is now part of the museum's permanent collection.

The process of making this game was a new creative experience for all four of us because of the global quarantine brought about by Covid-19. At one point, we were in four different regions in the world, and had to use online tools like basecamp, WeChat and zoom to discuss, integrate and review our work. aaajiao and Xu Cong were responsible for the game's programming and visual production, Nara was in charge of the sound effects and the soundtrack, and I was leading the construction of the game's worldview and the script.

As early as winter 2019, aaajiao and I attempted to conduct a dialogue through our works. I responded to his new media creations with short stories, and we did not set out topics or structure, but tried to stimulate each other through improvisation and free flow writing, like how friends would communicate.

At the time, aaajiao was preparing for his solo exhibition Cave Simulator at AIKE Gallery in Shanghai, and I had just left my position as an editor at an art magazine on its deathbed. I remember, that day, I went to Fuxing Island on the Yangpu Riverfront, an artificial island where aaajiao's studio was located, and we had a long chat.

We shared the sentiment that the world had entered an extraordinary state: the exposure of karma, the ideological rupture between various movements, melancholia, the final struggle, and accelerationism all foreshadowed an ominous sense of change looming ahead. These elements were present in his then new Cave Simulator works, as well as in some of the short stories that I was writing, where everyday spaces and worlds in different media were overlapping. So, I wrote a short piece entitled, Simulating Simulator, which was published as a parallel dialogue to aaajiao's solo exhibition Cave Simulator. This work, together with a conversation about the making of the game, are included as appendices in this book.

I think these texts help to sort out and present the attributes of the Deep Simulator project, that is, its multidimensional and expandable nature, from real interactions between two humans, and conversations I had with aaajiao about the concept of Simulator, to the short stories in Appendix II Simulating Simulator, which encodes many of our collective memories and ideas in a semi-fictive way.

At the same time, we also want to break the decaying status quo of art criticism and the solidified create-exhibit/create-publish model through this spontaneous approach. The relationship between Deep Simulator and my personal writing as well as my experience in

independent publishing also plays a part. *The Infinite Bedroom* published by Mephisto, *A Geographical Exegesis of Shanghai* by 51 Personae, and a new series I have been working on for the last two years, whether intentionally or not, all carry the themes of illusion and reality, space of consciousness and geography, which find their way into this game in an eccentric way. As such, the Deep Simulator project is both a union of individuals separated by great distances and the integration of the continuously evolving inner nature of a single individual.

In the early summer of 2020, the Deep Simulator project was launched officially, when Covid-19 has already swept across the globe. aaajiao was in Berlin, where martial law was imposed, whereas in China – the first region where the pandemic was detected and was initially put under strict lockdown – was beginning to ease up measures, then we were immersed in all sorts of ideas about societal involution, which was the really depressing part of the whole situation.

    At that time, aaajiao mentioned that he had a solo exhibition in Turin, Italy, scheduled for the fall, but the situation in Europe meant that it was unlikely to happen. Still, the museum wanted to realize it somehow, and so,

aaajiao started thinking of ways to present his works in a virtual form. He figured this was the chance to make real a dream he and his old partner Xu Cong had for many years – to make a game. He asked me to write the script. It was a bold invitation, but I followed my intuition, and we hit it off immediately. However, to enter the dimensions of this game, both from the perspective of the creator and the player – and especially for the creator in the first place – required an understanding and intimacy with the concept of meta-game.

From a personal point of view, meta-games and lucid dreams are consistent in their observational nature – you know you are playing a game when you are playing it, just as you know you are dreaming when you are having a lucid dream. Breaking through the fourth wall of the game is a more general interpretation, where the player has additional observation and awareness of subjective existence. It is in such a circumstance that you become aware that you are both the character in the game and the person manipulating that character, while at the same time you are watching it all happen.

    Meta-games rely heavily on dialogues to develop a metaphysical train of thought rather than simple

melodrama or one-track missions force fed to the player. The intention is to stimulate and provoke the player into developing a perspective beyond the original dimensions that are provided. The words said by NPCs, the inner monologues of the characters, the various images and hints in the game map, the options generated during the interactions, are all attempts to dissolve the stereotypical perspective of a traditional game protagonist and point more directly to the mental dilemmas of the players themselves.

In order to create Deep Simulator, aaajiao and Xu Cong learned the unity language from scratch, and I, as a novice, tried to understand the interactive logic of the game's interface and translate them into story and dialogues. Other than some simple ready-made objects, the concept of computational power with its sense of perspective difference, and the basic idea of the appearance of NPCs (whose form came from aaajiao's previous works), the whole pre-production process was a blank sheet of paper, where nothing was certain. The only thing we could predict was that the game would contain a certain weirdness and abnormality. We wanted to maintain these attributes because the game itself was more like an unrepeatable, extreme adventure – a group experiment

full of loopholes or surprises, rather than a form of entertainment.

Perhaps due to the blessing of the Padmasambhava, when I first started to construct the script outline for the game version of Deep Simulator, I was inspired by many synchronicities that were born from death, such as corpse clubs from *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, as mentioned in Appendix I, which allowed the framework of the entire game to be established with the Bardo as the basis of its worldview.

The Bardo is characterized by great uncertainty and unpredictability, with nowhere to hide in terms of perception. It can be divided into six states: the Bardo of This Life, of Dream, of Meditation, of Dying, of Dharmata and of Existence. There is hardly a single moment in our life when we are not in the Bardo.

After the worldview and the general framework of the script were established, I moved onto the more complicated content, framing different NPCs in the game scenes to fit a fictional narrative. In order to improve the plot, I incorporated interactivity and metaphor, and went back to the starting point of the corpse club, which itself is a kind of magical instrument in Tibetan Tantric practice, so

I added the element of Magical Instruments to the game.

The game's scene 0, which is also the opening "space" of the book, The Lost Horizon, directly demonstrates the no-whereness of the Bardo. The player, as a lost wanderer, falls into this space and asks the fundamental question: Where am I? The NPCs the player encounters offer different interpretations and challenges. Mythology, dreams, interstellar disasters, hallucinogens, social networks, war, history, social events, lust, near-death experiences, transmigration, narrative gameplay... A large amount of potentially relevant information with leaping connections constantly disrupts and stimulates the player's memories, emotions and thoughts.

In the beginning, I had no idea if this ambitious script would make sense with the audiovisual language and interactive design of the game, but I was pleasantly surprised by the integration of each group. The limited 3D materials available to Xu Cong and aaajiao – the plants, rocks and fungus hovering on their own on the screen – and the awesome minimalist ambient music by Nara, all seamlessly pointed to the same meta substrate, as if they were all one of us, thinking what we think, having a dialogue with us, and as if everything was alive, entangled and resonant.

The adventure was supposed to end by late 2020 with the opening of the exhibition in Italy and the online release of the game, but in early 2021, my good friend Chen Yun, publisher of 51 Personae, and I met for coffee after not having seen each other for a whole year because of the pandemic. She asked me about my recent writing, and I told her all the little things I had done, and mentioned that the most in-depth work was the script for Deep Simulator, because it was not entirely my own writing, but a unique result of team effort.

I told her how I thought the pandemic and quarantine had broken the border between the virtual and the real, and the whole world was in a state of Bardo, but how, for me, this restricted and unknown state had made creation and awakening possible, and real connections between people all the more important, which gave me special attachment to the game script.

Chen Yun was excited by my description and asked me if I wanted to publish the text as a book, with our old partner Mira as the designer. She then invited Jude Keeler to translate it into English as she believed it was vital to continue the bilingual format of the game. I immediately agreed, just like when aaajiao asked me if I would write for the game.

The Deep Simulator publication can be considered as an act of breaking the sub-dimensional wall, a process of penetrating, fusing and re-growing back and forth: from text to video game, and now from video game back to physical text. Back then, aaajiao, Xu Cong and Nara superimposed their creation on my text and extended it, and now, I drew inspiration and ideas from the resulting multimedia work as I re-portrayed it in words.

Of course, moving from the game's interactive audio-visual scenes to a purely literary language comes with many challenges, and I have not done much in this area, but as they say, when it is time for the child to be born, they will come, no matter what, and I simply have to keep going. The key driving force is that this is not my "child" alone, but everyone who has been brought together to this place and time.

As for the form of the book, I did not have any specific concept, until I thought of describing it as a cyberdrama, since the story contains a lot of dialogue, and unfolds in a succession of scenes, which in a way revives the classic form of a play text. The cyber aspect is embodied in the continuation of the game's interactive design, which is achieved by allowing readers to skip around in their

pursuit of different trajectories.

This page-skipping design relies heavily on the physicality of a paper book, which the book design re-enforces. I remember my first experience of this kind of storytelling was in the second year of middle school with a young adult sci-fi thriller, in which I tried out all the options and pursued all the possible endings. The pages were tattered and torn from multiple readings and I lent to my friends at school, until it was lost after having changed hands so many times.

I adopt the page-skipping method because of its retro nature, and it also echoes the game version of Deep Simulator which cannot be played on smart phones or tablets and is only available for computers with a decent graphics card, meaning the player has to have enough time to sit down with the game.

I hope that the appendices and this epilogue are also part of the entire cyberdrama, along with the wandering stories of Deep Simulator, and they are preserved as a physical archive inseparable from our real life. In this uncanny year, we look back at the most meta phenomenon of the world and ask: Is the so-called reality a phantom drama disguised in the depths of a complex space of

consciousness, a Bardo of dream within a matrix game? Is it possible for us to transform the limits of reality and create new narratives on such cognitive interfaces?

I would like to thank my friends, especially Chen Yun and aaajiao, for their help with this book.

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