

Beyond a Pink Game: Practice of Self-Identities and Cultural Diversity through Artistic Creation from the Dress-Up Game

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Introduction

Playing the dress-up game is one of my hobbies. I enjoy dressing up as virtual characters.

The rich clothing styles in the game enable me to conceive more different character images one after another. Sometimes, I will spend money to acquire more beautiful costumes for the collection. Aside from playing on my own, I often share my game experience with my friends who have the same interests. I also follow certain players' dynamics on the Internet, who regularly post their game creations related to the dress-up game.

However, this hobby is not always understood by others. Some of my friends are confused about my addiction to dress-up games and that I am even willing to spend money on those virtual costumes. I remember one time when I invited a friend who was also keen on playing dress-up games to be my informant for this Final Year Project, another friend, who was

nearby, was surprised by my interview topic. “So both of you are interested in playing this kind of online game? But is it that playable? I think it’s nothing special except dress-up. Why don’t you buy real clothes in reality?” she said, like other people who expressed their confusion concerning this kind of game to me. After I showed her the game screen (see



Figure 1 (left):
Example of the
fantastic costume
in *Miracle Nikki*

Figure 2 (right):
Example of the
Eastern costume in
Miracle Nikki

Figure 1 & 2), she turned to be amazed by the exquisite costumes of the game, although she still expressed that she was not a fan. “I see, it is possible to understand why people are fond of this game genre. I may try this game myself, but I prefer competitive games more overall.” People’s views on dress-up games are usually extreme. While players may highly appreciate the game, others may find it difficult to understand how it can be attractive. Then, how should the attraction of this game be explained by its players?

Dress-up games are not the only digital game I play but also a lot of role-playing games. One of my conscious discoveries from continuously engaging in digital games during my teenage years is that many digital games other than dress-up games contain personalized dress-up features. In fact, the dressing quality of these games has become more and more outstanding recently and some of them are not inferior to pure dress-up games. More particularly, this function in digital games is not only limited to characters. Games such as competitive games and pet development also have similar gameplay. The former may use the term *skins* to refer to costumes for dress-up. Famous examples are *League of Legends* and *Glory of Kings*: although the appearance of their combat characters is fixed, they can be dressed differently by changing their skins. In addition to the official enhancement of the dress-up function, the players themselves seem to consciously support this function included in the game. Both man players and woman players will deliberately personalize their virtual character's image if free dress-up is allowed in certain games. Why, then, do dress-up games seem so strange to many people?

To discuss questions such as this, I explore the dress-up game in my Final Year Project. The project will first explore the differences between dressing up in the game and in reality. Then, the project will investigate what selfhood and values the players pursue through this kind of game. After addressing the reasons why people enjoy playing the dress-up game, the paper

explores how these factors can influence players' preferences in choosing a certain kind of dress-up game, especially their consideration of the sociality and technology of a dress-up game. In the final part of the project, cultural differences between Asian dress-up game players and Western dress-up game players are raised to further elaborate on how the players can engage differently in the dress-up game. Regional political factors are also discussed to re-emphasize the interconnection between the dress-up game and reality.

Academic Significance

Living in the digital age, digital techniques are becoming indispensable in daily life. While these techniques as effective research methods have benefited current academic study, the digital world itself is also increasingly considered an important field site. Earlier, anthropologists explored how the internet reflects different social and cultural contexts from reality (Uimonen 2009: 487-488). However, Tom Boellstroff asserted the significance of digital culture itself. This culture is specially produced by the digital world, rather than entirely as a projection from reality, to involve an essential part of human life and interactions in terms of virtual embodiment (Boellstroff 2012: 516). Therefore, the digital should not be neglected to better understand what it means to be human. One of the significant goals of studying the digital world is to raise the importance of multiplicity. Without the limitation of space and time, people can witness more cultures on the Internet other than their native ones,

reconfiguring their worldviews.

Dress-up games can be a practical field site to study the multiplicity of culture and selfhood through different embodiment. According to Csordas, bodies in terms of embodiment are considered the performative subject of culture (2002: 58). Since dress-up games mainly concentrate on the theme of dressing up the virtual character, the centrality of bodies in this context is amplified, which further stresses the importance of embodiment.

Multiplicity in this kind of game refers to the multiculturalism of virtual costumes. Generally, the dress-up game intends to cover a wide range of costume styles to provide as many choices as possible for players to perform their creativity in dressing up. In my main field sites, these games largely include costumes from Western style to Eastern style, from an ancient age to the high-technical era, and from a magic world to a martial-arts world. Its variety of dress styles implicates the increased visibility of several cultures, especially those non-Western cultures one can witness in the game world.

Meanwhile, the relationship between the players and their virtual characters in dress-up games can illustrate the embodiment of selfhood. The form of the costumes that the player dresses for the virtual character is one form of embodiment. In the dress-up game, the type of

costumes the player tends to choose may reveal their own culture from the actual world. That is about the practice of cultural self in the game. Yet, such preference may sometimes contrast with the cultural self. The core gameplay of the game encourages players to personalize their virtual character, which also enables them to imagine what the ideal self they would like to become. Instead of following the fashion culture they have adapted in reality, they may turn to dress the character based on their imagination and desire. Embodiment is still applicable in this context. Therefore, it is worth understanding what attributes the players apply, either consciously or unconsciously, to the character whom they are dressing, so that the elements they wish to acquire to form their ideal self-image will be realized.

In this case, the dress-up game not only helps to analyze multiculturalism as displayed in the game, but also to respond to the blurring boundaries between the virtual world and reality indicated by Boellstorff, encouraging us to think of how the virtual world contributes to configuring humans (Boellstorff 2012: 40). Both worlds are influenced by each other interactively and dynamically. Therefore, a key question that needs to be addressed in the dress-up game is: to what extent do players involved in this kind of game attempt to express their ideal selves? On the other hand, to what extent is their playing experience influenced by their own culture in reality? The interaction of the ideal self and the cultural self from the dressed virtual character should be analyzed carefully.

Additionally, it is worth discussing discourses within the dress-up game. Since power has been one of the popular subjects in anthropology to study its relationship with culture, we may also draw our attention to which social discourses influence players through the digital world.

Conventionally, people have believed dress-up games are low-technological and childish, pink games designed for girls. Such an impression may repress women, especially adults, to play such a game in public over the concern of being teased as immature. However, with highly developed digital technology, more artistic designs and techniques have been applied to such games. The emergence of the 3D version of dress-up games is a significant example.

Now the dress-up game is no longer played only in childhood but is a common type of digital game appreciated by adolescents and even adults. Dress-up game players today have become more willing to pay for these beautiful virtual costumes and more enthusiastic to share pictures of their dressed-up characters on the Internet. Some of them even treat this kind of game as a kind of digital art. With creativity and by making use of editing software, one can create various fascinating pieces of art and then develop a self-identity as an artist. Digital technology has thus increased exposure to the dress-up game, to continue attracting more players from different backgrounds.

The phenomenon of men playing dress-up games or being interested in dressing up should

also be discussed. To understand this, it is necessary to compare the man players with the woman players to see what they are concerned about in the costumes in the digital games. I also aim to study further how man players are influenced and respond to playing dress-up games under the label of a “pink game.”

Dickey mentioned in her article that the early digital games created for males were usually violent, aggressive, and even erotic, while female-oriented games (“pink games”) tended to be more leisurely or romantic, with beautiful graphic design (2006). Due to the gendered categories of games, male players who engage in dress-up games that are female-oriented are generally misunderstood and even stigmatized. Some of the male players I encountered in my field sites said that they were mocked by friends after expressing their interest in playing dress-up games. Yet in fact, the main reason they enjoy playing dress-up games is usually related to the stunning art design of the costumes. In what context, can playing dress-up games be positively linked with male players? Eventually, it is also a question in terms of gender about whether the desire to be physically beautiful, as expressed in the dress-up game, is a feminine value or value that transcends genders.

Research Questions:

1. What is the relationship between dressing up in games and reality?

2. What selfhood of the player is embodied in the dress-up game?
3. How do the players decide whether to play 2D dress-up games or 3D dress-up games?
4. What is the cultural difference between Asian players and Western players of playing the dress-up game?

Defining Terms

Some crucial terms need to be identified to make the following parts more understandable.

Dress-up game and Digital game (Online game)

The meaning of these two terms intersects intimately. The main idea of a dress-up game is to dress the main story character, sometimes several characters. Or, the player can become the main character and dress up for “myself”. The dress-up game can then be embedded as one category of digital game (or online game, both refer to the same meaning in this paper). But the content of a digital game may include not only dress-up, but its gameplay can also incorporate multiple functions, such as card battle, instant battle, music and so on. Therefore, in this essay, the term dress-up game specifically refers to a digital game which orients itself to the function of dressing up as the primary playing core, while the term digital game in this essay will be used to describe either dress-up games or digital games that contain the feature of dressing up along with another core gameplay.

Costumes and Equipment

The definition of costumes in a dress-up game refers to all the objects that are used to dress up the virtual character. In this paper, costumes in the dress-up game can refer to clothes, hairstyles, makeup, or accessories. On the other hand, costumes in other digital games need to be clarified more carefully. It is a word that differs from the definition of equipment (or gear) in this essay. While equipment means those objects like weapons that can increase the battle stats or attributes of a character, costumes are related to visual appearances without any practical bonus effect. Additionally, different kinds of digital games have their interpretation of costumes in their game, such as skins, appearances or special effects. Despite this different interpretation, the meaning of all these words is the same, regarding the purely visual appearance. As a result, this paper will use costumes for generalizing those purely visual appearances in terms of digital games.

Literature review

There is some digital research done in the past which can be contributed to this project. As earlier mentioned, Boellstroff (2015) in his digital ethnography regarding the digital game “Second Life” revealed the unprecedented insight of investigating the virtual world. During his two-year fieldwork, Boellstroff immersed himself entirely in the game “Second Life”, practicing everyday life going shopping and dating in this virtual world, as he did in the

actual world. He realized the important interconnections between the actual world and the virtual world. The virtual world, resembling the actual societies, constructed its own society through culture. On the other hand, because of the distinctive characteristics of the digital world, the social culture it constructed would be correspondingly different. It, therefore, illustrated the possibility of the virtual world that could also be a practical field site for multicultural studies. Inspired by him, I follow his definition of the virtual and the actual in my research to claim the actuality of the digital world, in order to understand how the specific self-identities and social structure can be achieved in the dress-up game world.

Ford and other researchers (2007) conducted their research on dressing up in Western societies. Their study discussed how the power of Western social discourses along with the influence of mass media discouraged Western adults from playing dress-up in reality and considered such behaviour subversive and abnormal. The dress-up game world thus became an alternative platform for people to express their desire oppressed by the social norms in the actual world, cultivating selfhoods distinct from the ones in reality. Several factors suggested in this article provided the fundamental preview for my research to understand why women enjoy playing dress-up. Instead of assuming women naturally to be interested in dressing up in response to traditional gender biases, female players had various purposes in dress-up games, such as expressing creativity and looking for social life. Thereby, one of the main

research goals of this paper is to explore how dress-up games can contain more significance for the players and explained how it differs from traditional prejudices, especially the gendered label towards this kind of digital game.

Further academic research is concerned with women and games in relation to the technologies of the gendered self. The research challenges another stereotype considering women being inferior in adapting to digital technology. The authors categorize their informants into three groups: the power gamers, the moderate gamers and the non-gamers. The first group is those highly adapted to technology consumption and tend to consume various types of games to earn pleasure by showing their mastery of game-based skills. The second group was those who generally considered games as leisure activities to relieve the pressures from their daily lives. The last group was those who criticized games as a waste of time. Although the gameplay of dress-up games seems superficially to be player-friendly, yet, from my research, it will be found that many women players have consciously used different digital technologies such as Picsart and Snapseed to additionally edit their game-related pictures more beautifully and fantastically so as to impress their audiences. On the one hand, this case study can challenge the negative image that the skills women developed in playing digital games are necessarily weaker than men, on the other hand, it can re-examine the

problem that dress-up games are always marginalized because they are believed to be less challenging compared to other games.

Background of the Field Sites

My field sites are mainly located in the digital world, covering several digital games and some social platforms. I also did some fieldwork in the actual world as well. Initially, I decide to select two dress-up games to be my main game field sites, supplemented with additional fieldwork in other game field sites.

Main field site: Love Nikki

The first dress-up game I focus on in my research is *Love Nikki*. Its full name in English is *Love Nikki – Dress UP Queen!* (*Miracle Nikki* as alternative name) It is a 2D dress-up game primarily produced by Paper Studio in China in 2015. This game is the third game of the *Nikki Up2U*. *Nikki Up2U* is a dress-up game series which features a teenage girl with pink hair, Nikki, as the story protagonist and the main dress-up character. Seven costume styles from seven imagined nations are covered in the game, *Apple Federal*, *Lilith Kingdom*, *Cloud Empire*, *Pigeon Kingdom*, *North Kingdom*, *Republic Wasteland* and *Ruin Island* (see Figure 3). The costumes are classified by various attributes, such as sexy, gorgeous, and lively. Aside from the common costumes for free dressing, *Love Nikki* also includes some special

accessories called background items. Referring to Figure 3 as an example, the chair in the picture of the *Pigeon Kingdom Style* and the elephant in the picture of the *Republic Wasteland Style* are background items. In the general battle of *Love Nikki*, players need to dress Nikki up with the costumes based on the attribute requirement of the certain checkpoint to win the costume battle (see Figure 4).

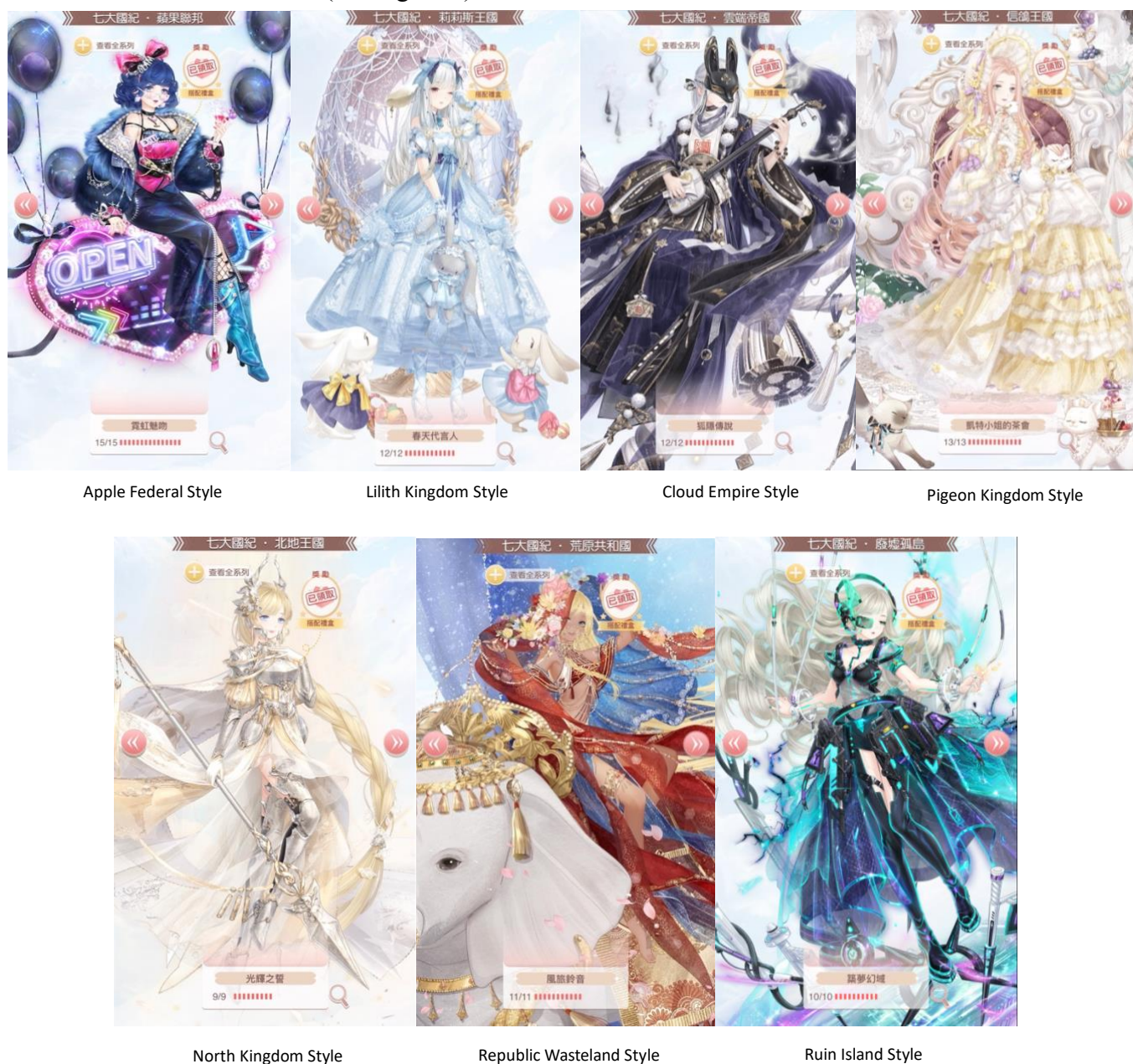


Figure 3: Examples of the seven costume styles in *Love Nikki*

Common ways to obtain costumes are through purchasing plots or events in the game stores. The game regularly launches recharge activities, for which the players need to purchase the relevant costumes with money. Players can also exchange costumes with other players in the alliance. This is a social feature that allows up to 30 players in each alliance. Members can chat on the message board of the alliance, though it is not the usual platform for their communication since they are used to creating a group on other instant messaging platforms like Line and Discord for different social purposes. Generally, the players



Figure 4: The battle screen in *Love Nikki*

regarded the alliance as a channel for obtaining costumes. Members need to cooperate to participate in alliance activities, thereby earning props to make costumes. In addition, the players can perform secondary processing for some costumes in the Recipe Workshop – for example, costume crafting, evolution, and reconstruction.

The Starry Corridor in the game is also worth introducing. This is an in-game platform resembling to a gallery for players to share their styling pictures (see Figure 5). Players can, not only just play dressing in the game, but also freely utilize their creativity to design a variety of unique painting-like artworks with Nikki in various costumes and background items (see Figure 6). While being the designer, players can become audiences to view the

creations posted by other players. They may give a “heart” or comment on those creations that they appreciate. It is also possible to save the creations on their phone and thus some players also post their Starry Corridor artwork on other social media platforms such as Instagram.



Figure 5: The screen of Starry Corridor in *Love Nikki*



Figure 6: My Starry Corridor work in *Love Nikki*

Sub-field site: Shining Nikki

Another dress-up game I studied is *Shining Nikki* (閃耀暖暖). It is the fourth game of the “Nikki Up2U” series. Unlike *Love Nikki*, *Shining Nikki* is a 3D dress-up game first released in Hong Kong in April 2019, then released in China six months later. As a 3D game, this

game has more digital technology applied to it. More textures and types of materials can be presented in the game clothes through digital techniques, creating a quality that is extremely similar to costumes in reality, with the rendering of light and shadow effects (see Figure 7).

The 3D model is also more flexible and comprehensive in displaying the costumes than Miracle Nikki (see Figure 8 & 9).



Figure 7: Example of the costumes' texture and material in *Shining Nikki*



Figure 8: Costume displayed from the front in *Shining Nikki*

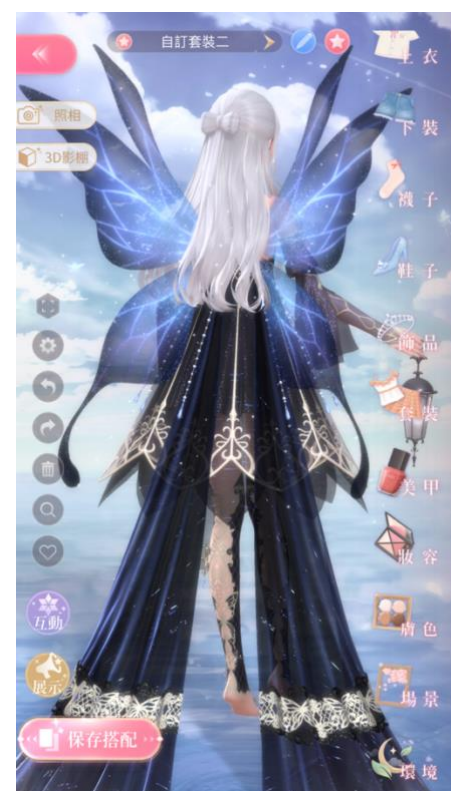


Figure 9: Costume displayed from the back in *Shining Nikki*

Inheriting most of the game elements from *Love Nikki* – such as the seven costume styles, the costume attributes, the Stylist Association, and the Recipe Workshop – *Shining Nikki* develops more features to enrich its gameplay oriented around dress-up. Due to the

characteristics of the 3D model, the game can be more attentive to dress-up details. The makeup, for instance, in *Love Nikki* was all for pre-designed facial expressions. However, in *Shining Nikki*, it is split into eyelashes, lipstick, blush, cosmetic contact lenses and eyebrows for players to design Nikki's make-up by themselves. Later, a Nail Studio feature was also established to enlarge the advantages of the 3D model.

In terms of the dress-up battle, *Shining Nikki* offers more varied mechanisms so that the battle is no longer the same as *Love Nikki*, which sticks to the monotony of the costume battle.

While maintaining the essentiality of the costumes during the battle, *Shining Nikki* adds a

function called Designer's Reflection. This is the feature resembling the equipment in other games to increase one's battle score. Players now not only need to be concerned about the attributes of the costume for the battle but also need to strive for stronger reflections to support their battle, if they want to win other new costumes with higher attributes. I have sought to know players' views on this feature, whose importance is raised nearly as high as the importance of costumes in *Shining Nikki*.



Figure 10

Additionally, *Shining Nikki* further stresses the interaction between players and the virtual character Nikki. In past versions, the personality of Nikki only appears in the plots, thus players can substitute themselves for Nikki when they are playing dress-up. Yet, Nikki becomes humanized in *Shining Nikki*, in that she will express her feelings and share her life with the players (see Figure 10). While this setting helps the virtual character to establish friendship with the player, it separates the identities of the player and the virtual character, refining the players' selfhood in the virtual world. As a result, the question of whether players are satisfied with this setting needs to be discussed.

The selection of the two dress-up games

I choose the two games above as my main field sites for studying the game world of the dress-up game not only because I have been one of the players of these games for a long time before starting my Final Year Project, but also because of their relatively high popularity. I have played *Love Nikki* since 2017 and I was the first batch of players in *Shining Nikki* once it was released. Although I stopped playing the latter a year later until I came up with the idea of studying dress-up games as my FYP topic this year, I have been following the dynamics of this game from the official website and social media platforms like Instagram and Lofter. As a result, I am quite familiar with both games, which enables me to describe their gameplay in dress-up games in detail. The “Nikki Up2U” series seems to be well-known compared with

other dress-up games. Many of my friends have played or used to play either *Love Nikki* or *Shinning Nikki*. In addition, both games include not only the Chinese or the Taiwan/Hong Kong servers, but also servers in other regions, such as the global (English) and Japanese servers. Therefore, the player networks of both games have been large enough to benefit my research, since I seek to get access to the experiences of more players from different cultures to understand the cultural multiplicity in the dress-up games. Although the two selected dress-up games, coming from the same game company, may exclude other dress-up games of other companies, this enables us to closely examine differences in their gameplay.

The online world and the offline world outside the games

The field sites cover both online and offline worlds since holism is required if I need to discuss the relationship between both worlds as a factor associated with the experience of players. Dress-up games lack much chatting function, but social communication concerning dress-up games is possible through various social platforms. Koznets regarded these social platforms as “virtual communities,” with people constantly holding discussions to form a social network in cyberspace (2010: 8). In this research, I have participated in the relevant virtual communities from Facebook and Baidu Bar and followed posts regarding players' game experiences from Instagram and Lofter. Thereby, it will be more understandable to know topics about the games, especially those dress-up games that the players discuss

socially. These virtual communities have also been suitable sites for finding potential informants. The actual world can be a field site as well. To understand if there is any relevance or the conflict between players' dress-up game and reality, I conduct fieldwork in some physical clothes shops with some of my informants to observe their tastes when looking for clothes.

Methodology

Participant observation and interviews have been my main research methods. The accessed informants cover both female and male players, including youths and adults, in order to comprehensively learn the opinions of both genders. Some of the informants are my friends in reality while the others mostly are dress-up game players I met in the game or on the social platforms. In terms of privacy issues, since most of the informants were accessed online, their username and personal information are revealed only after getting their permission.

Anonymity is used for those who do not want to expose either their online username or true name. I invited several informants with different gameplay tendencies to distinguish the experiences they obtained. For instance, Polarbear is a female editor who is capable of making the artwork in *Love Nikki* with editing software and enjoys posting them on her social account while Raven is a male player who is interested in collecting all kinds of virtual costumes in *Shining Nikki* and tends to play dress-up privately.

Netnography is the primary approach in my fieldwork since the dress-up games as well as their online communities are the main subject of my project. Through netnography, therefore, I applied multi-sited ethnography to study not only the in-game world of a dress-up game but also more than one dress-up game as well as their relevant communities on social platforms. In order to interview more players from different cultural backgrounds, most of the informant I accessed come from regions other than Hong Kong. Because of the regional restrictions with different time zones, text interviews were primarily conducted with most of them for convenience. Misinterpretation sometimes happened during my interviews because of the text chat. Therefore, I had to be careful to confirm each response with informants when doing the text interview so as to clearly understand their meanings.

Participant observation provided insights about those practices I observed in the field site, especially those meanings that are difficult to explain through speech and text (Boellstroff 2012: 55). Continuous contact with informants is essential through participant observation after the first interview. Aside from the interview, I followed the social accounts of my informants in relation to the dress-up games they posted. Some follow-up interviews were also engaged. As Boellstroff argued, interviews are elicitation methods for ethnographers to preview the digital culture they aim to know, while participant observation is the core method for ethnography to better distinguish the differences between what people say they do and

what they do (2012: 54). Additionally, while doing the interviews, I continued my identity as a dress-up game player in the field sites – playing dress-up and posting the styling pictures, for example – to collect relevant data. Casual chatting sometimes took place in the game and the social platforms as one kind of interview to get the information responding my research questions. In this case, I might not explicitly explain the questions I asked by clearly stating my academic purpose. Rather, I would have a relaxing conversation with those informants under the identity of a player. Nevertheless, I would still disclose my researcher status to obtain their consent when I planned to explicitly cite any information from these informants.

The relationship between dressing up in the game and the reality

Understanding the relationship between the game world and the physical world is key to studying dress-up games. Culture in the dress up-game world can partly be a continuity of the actual world, and can support the idea of the reality of the virtual world (Boellstoff 2008: 21). The virtual does not that mean things are not real or true; after all, the physical world always consists of both actual and virtual things as well. In the dress-up game world, the players I met and the money the players spent on the game costumes were all real, although their forms were altered in the digital world. I argue for the continuous interconnection between the two worlds.

Cultural continuity?

In *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki*, we can see the in-game costume styles largely respond to the cultures of real life. The seven costume styles mentioned above are *Apple Federal*, *Lilith Kingdom*, *Cloud Empire*, *Pigeon Kingdom*, *North Kingdom*, *Republic Wasteland* and *Ruin Island*. Although it is only an approximate interpretation, the seven costume styles can roughly be understood as the modern American style, the Lolita style, the Eastern style, the European medieval age style, the military style, the tribal and aboriginal style, as well as the futuristic and mechanical style. This interpretation can further be refined. For example, the clothing cultures of the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa are included in the *Ruin Island* style (the tribal and aboriginal style). The multicultural style selection then enables players to access more virtual costumes that they are interested in, enriching their in-game dressing experience.

Besides the seven costume styles, the design ideas of in-game costumes come from reality sometimes. *Sunflower Impression* and *Star Night Concerto* (see Figure 11) are two of the

costume examples in *Love Nikki* which applied the creative elements from artworks in the actual world. Both illustrate elements of Vincent Van Gogh's two most famous paintings. The former suit originated from the theme of "Sunflowers", while the latter suit was inspired by "The Starry Night". I visited some social forums to learn how the players were impressed by these two costume designs. Some of the players from Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) commented that the two suits surprised them because the game official transformed the elements of Van Gogh's paintings so well into such exquisite costumes to express a new



Figure 11: In-game costumes in *Love Nikki*: "Sunflower Impression" (left) & "Star Night Concerto" (right)

creative art. One of the comments typed:

"Most of the costumes in *Love Nikki* are extremely beautiful of course but that two really impressed me a lot. Their design inspiration truly exists in reality, and we knew Van Gogh as well. That's why I was particularly impressed by these two suits when the art designer of the game integrated these elements into the suits harmoniously."

The sense of connection contained in *Sunflower Impression* and *Star Night Concerto* implies the important association between the game and reality. The reason why these two suits were so popular was that their clothing ideas were specially connected with real-world elements. Because of the familiarity with these elements, it was easier for players to resonate with the design inspiration of these virtual suits, and thus have more impressions than only the beautiful clothing design.

Generally, game costumes are based on reference to the cultural elements of reality and then mixed with some creative designs. Although this dress-up game series was launched by a Chinese game studio, it did not only focus on Chinese clothing but tended to cover a variety of different clothing cultures. That was also one of the attractions to players from different countries since they were able to freely dress the avatar (Nikki) with more cultural selections. Moreover, we can see the association between the virtual world and the actual world. Tom Boellstorff indicated the actual world was always bounded by virtual concepts. He claimed anthropological ethnography was a study of the virtual when it instructed anthropologists to study another culture from the insider's perspective (Boellstorff 2008: 6). To become a member of the studied society, anthropologists have to stand in the shoes of that culture, which involves virtual practice. Culture is virtual and therefore anthropologists need to try to

learn the abstract meanings behind it by engaging with the native rituals or behaviours.

Without virtual knowledge, the actual world cannot be consistent. Likewise, the virtual world will be less meaningful without actual references. Therefore, we are often being humans virtually, as Boellstorff said.

Online vs. Offline: Dressing preference

Though acknowledging the interconnection between both worlds, the dress-up game world should not be simply thought of as a one-way continuity of the actual world. It is worth understanding how deviation becomes possible in the virtual world.

First of all, this research asks: Is the player's in-game dressing style a reflection and continuation of preference in reality? I conducted online and offline fieldwork on this issue. But unfortunately, under the pandemic and time limitations, I was unable to do my physical fieldwork in other countries to learn how those locals dress in the actual world. During the interview, although most of my informants, either Western players or Asian players, presented their different dressing preferences in reality and in the dress-up game, I decided to focus this research on the context of Hong Kong with the available data collected offline. Thus, the following analysis is more applicable to Hong Kong.

Kelly is a Hong Kong university student and used to play *Love Nikki* for a few years when she was a secondary student. She expressed her thought on her different dressing preferences between reality and the game:

“In *Love Nikki*, I really favor the costume style from Lilith Kingdom, especially the dark Lolita style. Overall, I tend to dress Nikki to be as gorgeous as possible since that’s the main gameplay of a dress-up game – just make everything you imagine come true in this game! But I don’t dress in the same way in real life. I do love the dark Lolita style, but I still feel uncomfortable wearing such a costume on the street. It will be embarrassing especially when the passers-bys look at you with strange eyes. I think that Hong Kong culture doesn’t encourage people to dress unconventionally unless it is a festival like Halloween. Also, sometimes dressing in real life can be time-wasting. For example, you will go out today and you are deciding on your styling. Maybe after you dressed up as you originally thought, you suddenly find that is not suitable. Then you have to rethink again and remove the clothes you wore to wear other ones. You can try any image you want just with a few taps in the dress-up game. Eventually, I prefer clothes which are convenient and simple in real life. I also avoid dressing with too many bright colors.”

Kelly gave a standard response, like other informants, that her dressing preference in the game tended to be more gorgeous, while her actual-world dressing preference was convenient, simple and with unremarkable colors. In *Love Nikki*, she was eager to express her favorite clothing style and try more exaggerating images without hesitation. In contrast, she preferred wearing normal clothing in the actual world in order not to attract too much attention. To study if her dressing preference in the reality was applicable, I went out with her on another day.

Walking in a big shopping mall in Tsim Sha Tsui, Kelly and I were chatting casually after having lunch together. We walked past some clothing stores, seeing some clothing displayed in the window. When I saw a purple lace floral dress displayed in front of a boutique, I thought of Kelley's favourite costume style in *Love Nikki*. I thus pointed it to her. "Hey, this one is beautiful!" She turned her head and saw the dress, then she agreed with me while walking closer to it. "Yes, it's elegant." After we approached the boutique, I found the store was full of dresses with a similar style. Therefore, I asked Kelly, "They look suitable for you, don't you want to try one piece? I remembered you like this kind of dress." She was looking at some dresses in the boutique while responding to me hesitantly, "Well, I do but...maybe it will be better if the dress can be simpler. I do enjoy looking at this style, but I may not buy it."

Her reaction at that time was similar to what she said earlier in the interview. The dress I showed to her resembled the style she favored but was fancier than the style she preferred in real life. Although she was likely to express interest in this dress, she also shows hesitation to wear it in reality. In fact, she was wearing a white T-shirt and a pair of jeans that day. In my impression, most of the passer-bys we met in the mall at that time were also mainly in this kind of casual clothing also, while some of them wore suits. In Hong Kong society, as Kelly said, people in general seldom dress up conspicuously in public but follows social norms.

Online vs Offline: Clothes consumption

In physical society, it is not surprising that some people argue that spending money in the virtual world is a waste of money. Their reasons usually relate to two main points. Some believe that those digital products are not real, and others realize that their purchased items will disappear once the digital game is out of service after a few years. Both reasons cause people to decide that consuming online is not worth it. However, when we talk about whether an object or an action is worthwhile, this of course is a subjective value judgement.

Teana is a female Taiwanese player in *Love Nikki* for 3 years, now a 14-year-old student.

Love Nikki is the first and only dress-up game she has played. While we were discussing spending money for virtual costumes in the interview, she revealed similar ideas:

“I bought virtual clothes once. The suit I purchased was the Rapunzel suit from the Disney collaboration event. I found the suit fascinatingly beautiful and joked to my mother that I wished I could buy it. To my surprise, she really agreed to let me purchase the items. I was really delighted and thus, I bought it without considering it further. In reality, I seldom buy clothing. I only buy them when the ones that I already have can no longer be worn. However, in the game, my desire for new clothes never seems to stop. When I see new clothes or suits, I’ll try very hard to earn them. Although I want to collect such clothes as much as possible, I don’t usually spend money on recharge suits. I tend to give them up. Even though I have already recharged once, I still kind of find recharging for virtual clothes a waste of money. The main reason is that virtual clothes are not real. If you have recharged for items in the game before, and now you wish to quit this game, then the money you spent would be wasted.”

In the interview, Teana mentioned that she always had to ask her parents for permission before spending real money on the game due to her identity as a secondary student. Despite recharging for a suit once, she still did not prefer buying virtual costumes with real money. To her mind, consuming online was not worth it because the virtual items were not real, and she would waste her money if she decided to quit the game afterwards. Nevertheless, following what I discussed earlier, the former answer is arguable if the virtual is seen as real as the actual. Therefore, I asked Teana further about her latter answer, with a common problem of fast fashion in reality that people buy many clothes but discard them after wearing them only a few times:

“Yes, I believe that is also a demonstration of money-wasting. People should spend money wisely. When you buy an item, you need to make sure that you really need/want it and will continue using it for a long time. For instance, if you’re only buying the clothes for fast fashion, then the money you spend would be wasted after a new fashion trend starts.”

What Teana explained to me illustrated the importance of utility. Instead of arguing whether it was real or not, the more fundamental point was whether it was worth the money. Since she did not have much money as a secondary student, she had to be smart about spending her

money. Regardless of purchasing clothes in reality or in the game, she was accustomed to considering her actual need. Even though the clothes in the actual world seemed to be more “real” to her, that did not make her buying decision any easier, if she thought she could not utilize the purchased clothes to a maximum.

Another informant’s response also related to the condition of utility in terms of consuming virtual costumes. Starr, aged 25-35, is an American and currently an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher in Korea. She has played the global server of *Love Nikki* since 2018. So far in *Love Nikki*, she is already a VIP13 player, one who has spent about \$3000 USD for the virtual costumes. From her point of view,

“Personally, it’s because I like the content that this game puts out there. I’m easily impressed by the designs of the outfits and if they have background items, I especially want to purchase those because my love for the game is with Starry Corridor. And background items always help to elevate the art that I’m making in the game.”

Starr recognized the high quality of the background items and costumes in *Love Nikki* so she felt it was worth spending real money for those virtual items. The background items she mentioned are one kind of special accessory in this game, which somewhat resembles the

stickers feature in the picture editing software. The Starry Corridor is a photo gallery-like feature for players to share their own styling creations. The background items were significant for Starr to design more artworks with the Starry Corridor. The more background items she owned, the larger space for her to create an artwork delicately with these resources. As a result, Starr has been willing to purchase as many virtual costumes in *Love Nikki* as possible because she can always utilize the recharged virtual items for her own interest in the game.

Both Teana and Starr expressed their deep desire for those costumes despite their different financial situation. In fact, they revealed similar thoughts that, if they could continue utilizing the purchased items in the game, then it would be worth buying them with real money.

We have been considering the virtual world as a reflection of the actual world. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this reflection does not mean that the virtual world blindly follows the actual culture; there is also the deviant culture of the virtual world caused by social norms in reality. In the next section, I elaborate on this point.

The embodiment of selfhood in the dress-up game

Cultural anthropology aims to study cultural variation and see how culture makes sense in its specific context. Many scholars have claimed the significance of embodiment. They realized that the human body could be the medium to learn culture as contained in the human mind, through observing and practicing those cultural behaviors through the body. According to Csordas (2002: 58), bodies in terms of embodiment are considered the performative subject of culture. Boellstorf (2011: 508) in his ethnography found that the virtual body (the avatar) was an extension of a self that illustrates multiplicity. Different cultures regard the body in their own cultural understanding. That is how human behaviors can act variously since cultural bodies have their specific symbols and have to be understood in the context.

This concept is important in terms of the dress-up game. When we think of the dress-up game, the first idea that comes to mind is the main subject for dressing, the body of the avatar. The meaning of “avatar” was derived from the film, *Avatar*, released in 2009. This film described the allegorized colonial conflict between two ethnicities from two planets, humans from Earth and Na'vis from Pandora. In this film, the avatars were the artificially grown bodies used by humans for accessing Pandora, where its atmosphere was poisonous to humans. The avatar was thus a Na'vi-human hybrid, whose physical body resembles the native Na'vi but operated by a human connected to the avatar's brain.

In dress-up games, similar to other RPG games, players have their own avatars to control.

Because of the core gameplay of the dress-up game, players mostly engage with their avatar through the free dressing-up feature. However, I seek to understand not only how the players treat their virtual bodies but also their other behaviors within the game, since both can be forms of embodiment. According to my research, three kinds of selfhood can be identified, which are the ideal self (or imagined self), the creative self and the social self.

Ideal self / Imaginative self

The ideal self is primarily embodied by the styling image of the avatar. It is a self-perception toward body image in relation to the expectation of an individual of his/her ideal physical appearance (Kim & Sundar 2012: 1356). In this paper, the ideal self refers to the ideal physical image the player pursues but struggles to reach in reality because of social norms.

Fron and other researchers (2007: 17) conducted a study showing that the dress-up game was a significant platform for people in Western societies to express their imagination, which was not possible in daily life due to the marginalization of such play in adult society. Although their field site mainly focused on Western societies, we will see the dress-up game has the same role in Hong Kong.

In discussing dressing preferences, Kelly explained the reasons for not dressing with her favorite clothing style mostly resulted from social norms. Social norms are cultural rules based on certain social circumstances to instruct what people should and should not do, or else they will be punished or isolated from society (Hechter et al. 2001: 3-5). When Kelly mentioned her worries about causing too many strange stares and gossip from other people if she dressed in ways that are considered too fancy, she was foreseeing the consequences of violating the implicit social norm which hindered her from actually practicing her desires. As a result, she turned to seeking the fantasy satisfaction in *Love Nikki*. She acknowledged that this virtual world was an alternative space for her to shed those fears of the actual world.

Teana had a similar thought as Kelly. She used to love wearing adorable costumes to roleplay her dream characters in Disney stories, although she no longer acted out this fondness in reality. After she grew up, she became too concerned about others' thoughts and thus feared to dress differently from others. However, *Love Nikki* enabled her to continue her childhood dressing fantasy:

“I believe that my clothing style preference in the game is influenced by my past experiences. I was a big fan of the Disney princesses when I was young because I love their always-happy-ending stories and beautiful clothing so much. I also really

liked to roleplay as a witch or a fairy in my childhood with a toy wand and costumes. In *Love Nikki*, my favorite costume style is the dreamy fantasy style, called Lilith in this game. I like this style because I find them adorable, gorgeous and beautiful, at the same time while I think that I myself also have such a dreamy kind of personality.”

Sasa indicated the significance of digital technology in the digital game world. She is a Hong Kong university student who has played *Love Nikki* since secondary school. She favours Chinese-style clothing, but she never wears it in reality due to the social norms Kelly mentioned. Instead, she has focused on acquiring and dressing this costume style (the Cloud Empire style) in *Love Nikki*. She responded to me:

“Unlike the actual world, the dress-up game world includes fewer constraints. Some may criticize the virtual costumes as kind of unrealistic since most of them are largely different from those in real life. But on the other hand, it claims more diversity and the extreme sophistication of the costumes. Such sophistication can be illustrated by digital techniques, such as the electronic drawing software, in the virtual costumes to satisfy those ideas and designs that cannot be achieved in actual-world clothing.”

To summarize, the digital world has different characteristics from the real world and can violate social norms in reality by emphasizing the ideal self. Through various digital techniques, the dress-up game can produce a variety of delicate costumes without considering the factors of clothing production in reality. The in-game virtual costumes allow the unrealistic to become practical. Based on the dress-up game's gameplay of free dressing, players are then encouraged to express more of their own imagination and fantasy to dress without being concerned by the actual-world social norms. The dress-up game world is an alternative platform for players to casually satisfy desires that are discouraged in the actual world. This practice of the ideal self thus responds to my first research question, concerning the interconnection of the actual world and the virtual world. The practice of ideal selfhood in the dress-up game world illustrates that culture in real life can still be influential to generate a new culture but in unexpected ways.

Creative self

It is not difficult to see that the players also expressed their creativity on styling their ideal self-image. Creation, as defined by Edward Sapir (1924: 418), occurred within culturally available contexts rather than without any precedent (Lavie et al. 2018: 5). The heart of the dress-up game is a free platform for players to dress the virtual body as they like, and so it encourages the creativity of players. Especially in *Love Nikki*, the Starry Corridor feature has

played a significant role in facilitating the creative artistic culture, though its original intention might only be an internal feature to allow players to share their own avatar's outfits. Thus, such an ideal self is possible to extend to a creative self.

One of the interesting findings during my interviews with informants was that those players who enjoyed creating in the dress-up game consciously called themselves “*artists*” to declare their specific identity other than “*players*”. Compared with the ideal self, the creative self-identity of the artists regards more broadly the practical intention of players aiming to make innovative art creations rather than merely dressing the virtual body for their own fantasy. As a result, although both the ideal self and the creative self-involve creative expression, the meaning of the virtual body differs. In the dress-up game, while a player tends to substitute himself/herself into the dress-up character as his/her virtual avatar in practicing the ideal self, an artist considers the dress-up character as part of his/her creative material. The way the artist dresses the virtual body is more associated with the theme of his/her artwork. Based on the artist's own creative style, the virtual character sometimes may not even appear in an artwork.

SC artwork

Earlier, in discussing the consumption difference between online and offline, I mentioned one of my informants, Starr, who has been keen on making artworks through the Starry Corridor in *Love Nikki*. She recognized herself as an SC (Starry Corridor) artist. She enjoys fashion and sees different designs on her avatar. When she found that she could use those virtual costumes and background items to make art within the Starry Corridor, she became immediately addicted to this in-game feature and has created her SC artworks continually up until now.

Since Starr's favorite are surrealism and fantasy style, her SC artworks are mostly inspired and created around these themes. She is also enthusiastic about looking for relevant artworks in either real life or online for creative inspiration. In her case, we can notice the intimate relationship between online and offline in terms of art creation. Because of her own creative style, she usually does not include Nikki (the avatar) in her art piece or presents Nikki in surreal ways.

She used to create an SC artwork called “Knowledge” (see Figure 12). This work is inspired by one art piece (see Figure 13) from the “Allegoria” series of a digital artist, Sarolta Bán. Starr found the relative simplicity of this digital artwork made it practical to be recreated in *Love Nikki* with some available in-game items. As a result, she decided to present this theme on her own with the Starry Corridor.



Figure 12: “Knowledge” by Starr (SC artwork in *Love Nikki*)



Figure 13: Digital artwork by Sarolta Bán
(Photo from her “Allegoria” series)

In this SC artwork, she applied a tree, a background item, to make the roots like the original art piece. By layering and blending white items together, she created the shape of a light bulb rather easily. After that, she added Nikki to the left side in a childish cute fashion with a plain background. Eventually, she felt excited about producing a very close replication of Sarolta Bán’s artwork.

Editing artwork

Aside from creating in the SC, some *Love Nikki* artists turned to using editing software to create their *Love Nikki* artworks in an alternative way. While they mainly present themselves as “artists” in their profiles on social platforms, they can also be called “editors”.

Polarbear is a female Taiwanese artist/editor in *Love Nikki* who is attracted by its meticulous art design. At the beginning of her creation, she primarily aimed to beautify the in-game pictures since she found the game interface was slightly too bright, causing many virtual costume details to be blurred. She then tried to refine those details with her past learning experience of using editing software for picture editing. Later, she became dissatisfied and decided to explore more creative possibilities in *Love Nikki* with the editing software. Despite preferentially designing her creative themes with her favorite styles (the Lilith Kingdom, Pigeon Kingdom and Ruin Island style), she also enjoys attempting those styles she was not very good at.

“Venus Flytrap” (see Figure 14) is an anthropomorphic edited artwork by Polarbear. She carefully extracted the characteristics of the Venus



Figure 14: “Venus Flytrap” by Polarbear
(Edit artwork in *Love Nikki*)

flytrap to interpret the theme with the editing software and the edited materials from *Love Nikki*. The main colors of this artwork are green and red, echoing the colors of the Venus flytrap. The baby hat Nikki wears resembles its spiky bristled leaves. The facial expression of the split mouth creates a contrasting style of horror and sweetness. Nikki sitting quietly depicts the moment when the Venus flytrap is waiting for its prey to fall into its trap.

Polarbear was interested in such an anthropomorphic subject since it is always full of challenges and inspires her to have more bold and creative thinking. She was therefore very satisfied with the finished artwork, which successfully integrates the transformation of many features of the Venus flytrap.

SC artwork vs. editing artwork?

A possible question may be raised based on the two kinds of artworks above: is editing artwork better than SC artwork? The editing artworks generally require more digital software, other than just the in-game features, to create with the *Love Nikki* materials. However, it is not appropriate to compare them because they are two different kinds of creation, which contains different creative goals, different limitations of creating and different creative methods or mediums. In fact, some of the *Love Nikki* artists sometimes engage in both types of creations at the same time.

For the SC artworks, players have to design something new based on the in-game limitation since the SC feature systematically restricts the players, who can only use no more than 15 items in each SC work. Thus, the creation can be quite challenging sometimes. Yet, if SC artists can address this problem in their artwork, it can definitely showcase their creative capacity. In spite of being an in-game art creation, the SC artists strive to create amazing artworks within the framework of the Starry Corridor.

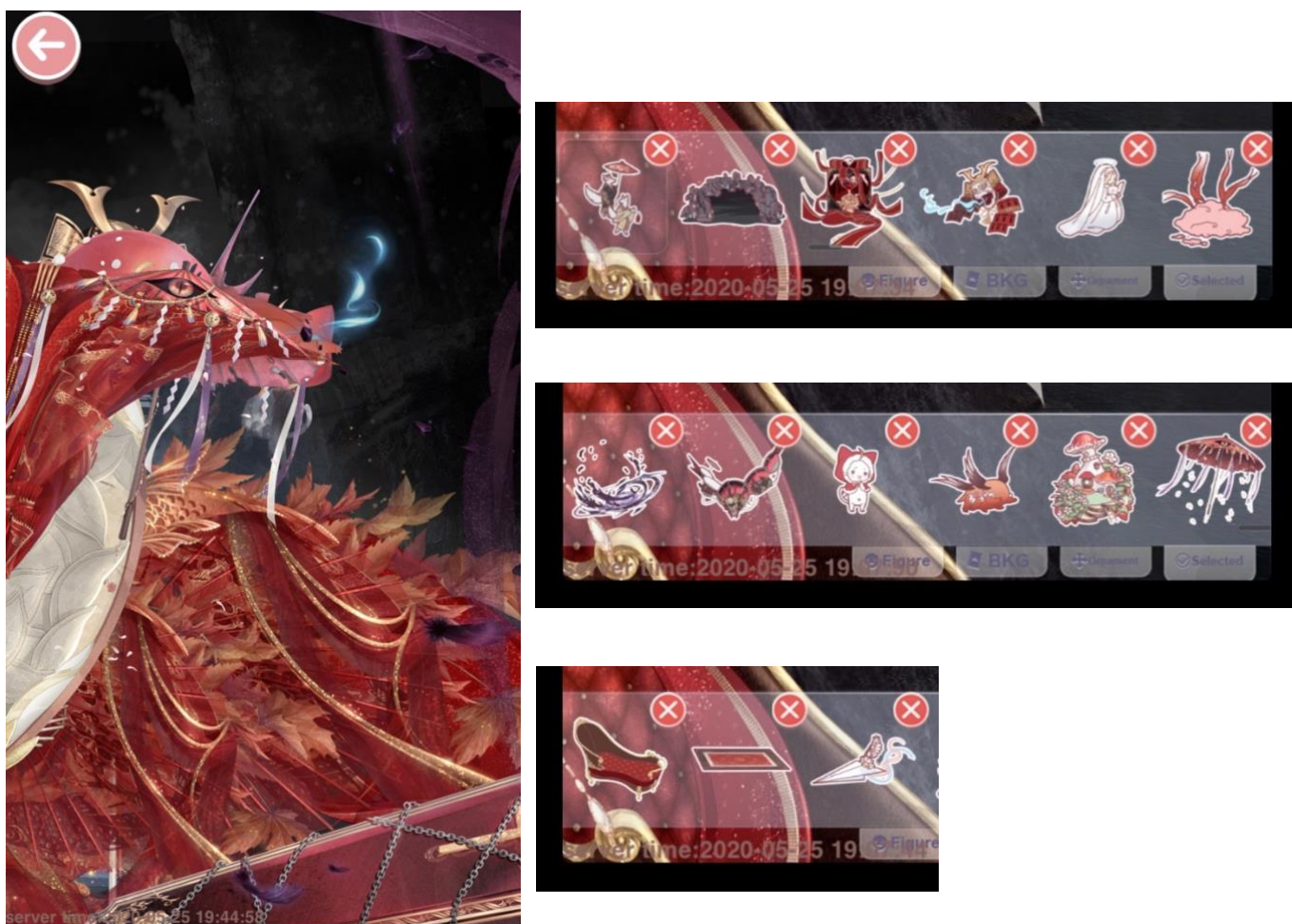


Figure 15: The image of a dragon created by Emily (SC artwork in *Love Nikki*) (left) & the in-game background items she used in this artwork (right)



Figure 16: “Lunar Falls” by Starr (SC artwork in *Love Nikki*)

From the SC artwork (See Figure 15) created by Emily, she was proud of successfully making an image of a dragon within the Starry Corridor with just 15 background items.

Furthermore, Starr sometimes tends to increase the space for creation and enrich the content of her artworks with two SC pieces. Aside from “Knowledge”, another SC work (see Figure 16) is also made with two pieces. Although she acknowledged the creation was flawed, as the merging edges of the two pictures could be seen in the middle of the artwork, she was still proud of her quality work even without the editing software.

The editing resembles photo-editing but the *Love Nikki* editors engaging with editing software and edited materials for art creation may face a more complicated process, since they are required to use editing software proficiently. They may need to know how to access the edited materials they want from the game, such as cutting out part of the in-game items.

Some talented editors draw materials on their own. On the other hand, however, audiences may therefore expect editing artists to create something more extraordinary than the SC artwork.

In the case of Polarbear, she surely applied multiple editing methods to create the “Venus Flytrap”. For example, she captured several background pictures from *Love Nikki* and then changed those background colors through editing software. After that, she combined all these backgrounds into one piece as her artwork’s background. Moreover, the Venus flytraps behind Nikki in the picture were all drawn by Polarbear herself. It can thus be seen that she has actually created artwork different from SC artwork through various editing methods.

Both SC artists and editors respect one another’s creations. According to my informants, rather than arguing over which kind of creation was better, what they were concerned about more was giving *Love Nikki* a new transcendent meaning through their artworks. For them, *Love Nikki* is not a dress-up game, but an artistic platform for them to unleash their creative potential. Starr has repeatedly stated that she recognized *Love Nikki* artworks as a kind of digital art, although this art was made with the dress-up game as the medium.

Social self

Regarding the creative phenomenon in *Love Nikki*, I have discussed how this attribute took place in certain cultural contexts. In the culture of *Love Nikki*, which extensively supports players to further personalize their virtual dress up by providing various special background items, players may then be inspired to develop a kind of artwork based on those items. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that creation typically relates to the zones of interaction within cultures and thus is tightly bounded by social factors (Lavie et al. 2018: 6). The practice of the creative self generally occurs simultaneously with the practice of the social self. This is selfhood embodied through the social interactive behaviors of the players.

In *Love Nikki*, creation is usually not an isolated practice. After completing their artworks, most *Love Nikki* artists are keen on posting them on various social platforms publicly, such as the in-game feature (Starry Corridor) and other social software (Instagram, Facebook, etc). They wish to communicate with other players through their works as mediums. Some of the artists even established their own social media group social software and search specific members for more frequent interaction around the art creation.

SC group – Euphoria

Starr, the SC artist, repeatedly emphasized the social significance of the *Love Nikki* community for her to have a deep-rooted dedication to playing the game. While she enjoys

publishing her SC works on the IG to showcase her creative ability, she also clearly stated her passion for developing closer friendships in *Love Nikki*. Therefore, she founded her own SC group, “Euphoria”, in 2019 and recruited those members who are active and creative in SC artwork. Other than showcasing the talent of creating SC artworks, the group members also explore other interests, such as making SC artworks and exchanging creative experiences. To Starr's mind, the SC group is an important factor to consolidate members' sense of belonging to *Love Nikki* through collective practices.

According to Starr, there were about 500 similar groups in the *Love Nikki* community, which were spread across different social media, such as Instagram, Facebook, Reddit and Discord. The SC groups sometimes will have collaboration with each another to make collective SC artworks. In Starr's case, her group has done five collaborations so far. One of the collaborative projects was “Happy Ever After” for the celebration of Valentine's Day. After settling on the theme of the collaboration, the two groups started to communicate and prepare the relevant promotional posters on the IG as well as the SC works by Discord. When the preparation was finished, both groups posted their collective works on the IG accounts of the two groups. Starr highly supported this kind of SC project since it brought them more enjoyable memories with *Love Nikki*.

SC tournament group – Colosseum

Because of her fondness for the SC community, Starr then established a fan-made SC tournament, called “Colosseum”. This is a seasonal competition of SC art creation, separated from her SC group, for all *Love Nikki* players who are interested in participating. Because each tournament takes place over four rounds, Starr acknowledged that holding such a competition was sometimes exhausting, especially since she was also the president of her SC group at the same time. Yet, she could not help but stick to this activity because of her deep love for this dress-up game, its community, as well as the SC art creation. As Starr related,

“There’s no real-life reward for the tournament but just for fun, and for players who are passionate about SC to challenge themselves as well as to hang out with others like minded players. It’s become a community hub. There are social media rewards though. The Top 3 winners receive a special highlight and post on our Instagram that showcases all their works throughout the season. In our Discord server they get their own special “medal” role, either gold, silver, or bronze [haha]. And their works are placed into the ‘hall of fame’ channel [of the group Discord]. So rewards are based on “recognition” rather money or real prizes.”

Editing group – Love Nikki Edits

Aside from the SC group and the tournament group, those *Love Nikki* artists who prefer creating with the editing software also have developed their own editing groups. “Love Nikki Edits” is an editing group in the English community of *Love Nikki*. The group focuses on using editing software like PicsArt and Photoshop to create *Love Nikki* artworks. It also claims the goal of encouraging innovation and showcasing the members’ talents in editing. Generally, members are required to submit one of their own *Love Nikki* edits and one group project edit every month. Through posting member’s artworks, this can help increase the visibility of the editing group in the *Love Nikki* community, as well as allowing audiences to appreciate how the members create distinctive artworks with their unique creativity.

“Love Nikki Edits” was founded by Emily, the female American author of the SC artwork depicting a dragon's image which was discussed earlier. She is a *Love Nikki* artist who is simultaneously involved in both SC and editing creation. “Love Nikki Edits” currently consists of a president, a project cover artist and 9 members. Since some of the members have stayed in the group after retiring, the group has about 20 members as a result. When deciding on members at the founding of the group, rather than considering editing skills as a top priority, what Emily sought from her members was their enthusiasm in editing. In fact, she told me that she enjoys the experience of growing together with members in her group. In the interview, she mentioned that she had observed how one of her members could greatly

improve her editing skill by learning from other members after joining the group. She was proud as well when she noticed how the group members could have closer ties through the practice of editing in *Love Nikki*.

The group is more international because it includes some members from outside America and Europe, although it belongs to the English-language community. Teana, Sasa and Polarbear, the Asian informants I introduced earlier, also came from this group. Though Sasa was a retired member of *Love Nikki Edits* and eventually quit this dress-up game due to her studies, she later returned to the game due to her intimate relation with group members and her passion for editing. In addition to using IG and Discord for members' internal interaction, the editing group welcomes other *Love Nikki* players to join their Discord's public channel to participate in discussion relating to the dress-up game. One of the monthly group edit projects with the theme of "Mermaid" (see Figure 17-19) also invited the public to participate in editing to enjoy the fun of creating together. Through editing as a medium, *Love Nikki Edits* has increased opportunities for interaction with *Love Nikki* players other than members, encouraging them to have more opportunities to be involved in editing as another way of expressing their artistic creativity.



Figure 17: Discord Event & Project: “Edit This in Your Style”, held by *Love Nikki Edits*



Figure 19: Project edit by *Nobodysleep* (Editing artwork in *Love Nikki*)



Figure 18: Project edit by *Lorn* (Editing artwork in *Love Nikki*)

Regarding Emily, the English community currently only included a few editors or editing groups, because players in this community were relatively more interested in making SC creations. Nevertheless, despite lacking collaborative opportunities with other editing groups, *Love Nikki Edits* has been keeping in contact with other *Love Nikki* groups. For example, the president of the SC group “Euphoria”, Starr, indicated her close relationship with this editing group and has been actively supporting their creations. With the group’s effort, Emily was

delighted to see that the editing culture had become more familiar in the English community of *Love Nikki*.

Intersectionality of the social self

Of course the *Love Nikki* community not only consisted of the SC groups and the editing groups; other types of players also created groups with different interactive purposes and interests. As a result, this community resembles a large family with many branches, containing various kinds of groups. A *Love Nikki* player will probably join several different types of groups at the same time, illustrating the intersectional practice of several social selves. Despite having different social identities in the community or not, based on which kinds of *Love Nikki* group(s) one participates in, he/she will consciously follow and practice the culture of his/her own group(s) in order to express the specific social self (selves).

Obviously, Starr contains various social identities in the *Love Nikki* community. According to her different identities, she is responsible for different duties for each specific group. As a member of “Love Nikki Edits”, Polarbear is also one of the managers of a *Love Nikki* society on Facebook. Unlike in “Love Nikki Edits,” she is mainly in charge of sorting the practical game information in this society: for example, producing a table showing the amount of

diamonds (an in-game currency) needed for acquiring specific costumes for a limited time event.

It might be assumed that the dress-up game is primarily a single-player game since most of the things players can do in the game involve dressing up their avatar, which does not require much interaction. Indeed, in the very beginning of a web-based dress-up game, probably the extremely simple dress-up function is all it can provide. With the advancement of digital technology, dress-up games have clearly become more diverse in order to cater to players' social needs. In *Love Nikki*, even though its primary gameplay remains oriented to dressing, it also tries to offer some interactive features like the Starry Corridor. Nevertheless, there is a particular need to pay attention to those social groups outside the game world of *Love Nikki* to understand its dynamic sociality. Otherwise, all the social interactions that can be seen may tend to be static and inactive, if just observing the internal game world.

One of the main reasons why the *Love Nikki* community could develop that many social groups outside the game is because of the limitation of the game itself. The game lacks an instant chat feature but only the message boards carried in a few features, such as the Starry Corridor and the Stylist Association. Unfortunately, players ended up finding those message boards very inconvenient and unreliable since the sent messages are often blocked or

disappear due to game errors. Players ultimately prefer communicating on other social platforms. Perhaps the technical problems of the dress-up game itself cause this type of game to fall under the label of a single-player game, yet in fact dress-up game players often have a desire for social interaction. Even if these interactions are limited in-game, they will still actively build relationships with more players through exploring or developing relevant social groups and other social platforms.

Gendered self?

Another traditional stereotype of playing the dress-up game is that of gender labels. Dress-up games, as earlier noted, are generally considered pink games, a game genre specifically for girls. Personally, I might agree that dress-up games are indeed woman-oriented games but the idea that they are exclusively for women is false. So far, the informants I have mentioned are all women, but I have also interviewed a man player from *Shining Nikki*. In fact, I encountered several man players on various social platforms, despite lacking the opportunity to interview them. There certainly are more man players in dress up games than what I have known my fieldwork.

The first factor that can be used to argue that dress-up games as woman-centered is the artistic creations in *Love Nikki*. However, is the art creation only for girls? Definitely not.

Regarding the group project held by “Love Nikki Edits,” one of the artworks I displayed (see Figure 19) was actually edited by a man artist, Nobodysleep who is a member of this group.

That is a practice about creativity instead of gender and everyone can be involved in art creation, regardless of gender.

My informant Raven explained his reason for playing *Shining Nikki*. He is Chinese, a recent graduate from university and have played *Shining Nikki* for about three years. Same as most female players, he was greatly attracted by the exquisite costumes from *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki*. He used to play both at the same time and ended up concentrating on the latter because of his preference for the 3D game. In our interview, he clearly expressed his predicament of playing the dress-up game due to his gender identity:

“That may sound strange but yes, I do enjoy the feeling of dressing up Nikki. I will feel...very satisfied whenever I can style a new image for her. *Shining Nikki* not only includes the dressing feature, but it also has a special feature called Designer’s Reflection. The battle in this game is mainly conducted with costumes as well as these reflections. So I think it's like a card-battle game sometimes rather than a normal dress-up game. But of course, most of my friends cannot understand my interest. They find a man playing the dress-up game weird... Most of them play

Honor of Kings or *PUBG*. Although I think that's just a personal preference and I feel playing *Shining Nikki* is very relaxing, I sometimes feel slightly isolated from my friends and can only express my interest on social platforms with other players...And I am a whale player, which refers to the player who spends a lot of money on the game. In order to have more space for styling Nikki, I will purchase every newly launched costume as soon as possible. So my friends always get confused about why I'm willing to spend so much money on a dress-up game. But I actually don't think my behaviour is any different from the skins they purchase in those battle games. In fact, they probably spend a lot more money on those games than I do. Yet...in short, playing dress-up games seems to be always inferior, regardless of gender.”

Hart argued that gender is a social construction and certain stereotyped and polarized images of males and females are given privilege in a certain society (Hart 1996: 43). Johnson in her article also stresses the performative process of being masculine and feminine, suggested by Butler (2018:199). Thus, gender is not natural or biological but cultural, whose definition varies within different socio-cultural contexts. Although Raven was fond of playing *Shining Nikki*, he never thought it was because he was more feminine, or because he wanted to be a girl, or even due to sexual orientation. Rather, he simply likes the delicate art design and

enjoys creating different styling images for Nikki through clothing matching. Perhaps the selfhood he practices is more appropriate to relate to the creative self, though he seldom shares his works publicly. As a result, what we have to learn is the diversified ways of being masculine and feminine.

Even many female players would not agree with the classification of dress-up games as female-only games. When I was doing my research on Facebook, an advertisement suddenly popped up on my page, which was a promotional poster for an upcoming dress-up game.

What particularly impressed me was its slogan – “A dress-up game exclusively for women!”.

I then surprisingly found there were lots of comments on the message board of this advertisement criticizing its gender label. Most of the comments questioned why the game had to insist on emphasizing that this dress-up game was exclusive to women. Some even pointed out that it was not uncommon for men to play dress-up games nowadays.

Indeed, the phenomenon of players regardless of their gender consuming beautiful virtual costumes in different kinds of digital games is quite common. Thereby, playing dress-up games should not be considered as feminized behavior. Especially in the contemporary society, the need for men’s beauty services has increased through the active promotion of the mass media; men are more encouraged to pursue their beauty as women do nowadays (Fung

et al 2009: 349-350). If players can have the desire to dress up their avatars in other kinds of games, as Raven commented upon, then why does playing dress-up need to be gendered in a dress-up game? Maybe one of the reasons is the dress-up game companies' profit-seeking strategy, as Raven discusses:

“Probably because they are still in the traditional mindset, dressing is a feminized interest and therefore the advertisement of the dress-up game companies of course usually target girls, since they may be easier to be attracted by this gameplay. That’s why the dress up game always contain many more female players, and why people mostly refer it a pink game when discussing this kind of game.”

The preference of playing the 2D dress-up game or the 3D dress-up game

So far, I have discussed the significance of *Love Nikki* for its players, especially for artists and those who seek a fuller social life through this game. Aside from the stereotype of a single-player game and its gendered label, the lack of difficult and competitive challenges is also a prejudice against the dress-up game. Dress-up games in general are considered to be made for children, in particular for little girls, and thus do not feature any very challenging gameplay and technical application. However, it should be understood that complex gaming technologies are certainly possible to utilize in the dress-up games, as I earlier showed.

Being a talented player in the dress-up game

In my fieldwork of learning about the *Love Nikki* artists, it was clear that these artists recognized *Love Nikki* as an art platform and have enthusiastically sought various challenges of artistic creation there. From the discussion of the creative self in the previous section and the pictures of the artworks from various artists on display, it can be clearly seen that each of their works required considerable effort, from the conception of the theme to the selection of materials to decoration.

Since SC artists pay more attention to the authenticity of SC, they emphasize not using any editing software to modify their works. However, they are also concerned about how to solve some defects of SC. For example, Starr decided to complete a finished SC artwork by using two SC pieces so as to solve the limitation she encountered when using only one SC piece.

As it involves the combination of the two pictures, she needed to be more careful with various design details, such as the proportion and positioning of the items she used in both pictures. The editors I interviewed all demonstrated their deep understanding and use of different editing software. They needed to learn how to obtain editing material through digital software, for example. When they edit pictures, they also think about how to use the functions carried in editing software to make their works different from SC, such as changing the color of the in-game costumes. Some editors, such as Polarbear, even draw materials by

themselves when she could not find a currently suitable one. The dress-up game is thus not just a simple way of playing dress up. When those players create art through dress-up games, they have often involved a large number of complex technical applications.

Shining Nikki, as earlier noted, uses 3D models to make game costumes. In order to present a sense of realism, designers use more advanced digital technologies to render the costumes and increase their detail. From the earlier introduction of SN, I showed some pictures regarding the costumes in SN, explaining how the game utilizes light and shadow effects as well as textured materials to make the overall sense of the game costumes similar to clothing in reality. Therefore, dress-up games should be thought of as no less technological than other kinds of digital games.

High technology as a necessary attraction for players?

In the dress-up game, the high quality of the virtual costumes is more important than in other kinds of games due to its core gameplay. Putting aside the discussion of the creative self temporarily, the general players of dress-up games hope to pursue more gorgeous costumes, especially those styles that cannot be achieved in reality. This could be confirmed from my fieldwork, when I posted some public posts on several social platforms, such as Facebook and Baidu Tieba, about the reasons for players playing dress up games. The

costumes in *Shining Nikki* should be much better than *Love Nikki's*, because as a 3D game, the design technology it applies will obviously be more advanced and the effect of the costumes will then be more realistic. However, according to my informants who have played both the 2D dress-up game and the 3D dress-up game, the high-tech application factor did not necessarily encourage them to play the 3D dress-up games more frequently. All of my informants said that the social factor was more essential when they were playing *Love Nikki* (LN) or *Shining Nikki* (SN). Starr expressed her preference for *Love Nikki* due to its community and the Starry Corridor (SC) when mentioning that she was playing both *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki*. The SC is the significant feature in *Love Nikki* to maintain her social relation with other players with SC artworks. Even though *Shining Nikki* includes a photo-taking feature which resembles a feature in editing software, as SC does not, Starr still thought that it was hard to replace the SC. She tried making artwork in *Shining Nikki* (see Figure 20) but she also admitted that could not be as good as the SC artwork. Therefore, she still mainly plays *Love Nikki*:

“Everyday I look forward to logging online and chatting with my friends. LN is what brought us together but our bonds is what makes us stay. Another reason why LN has kept my attention is because of the Starry Corridor feature. It transcended this game from normal dress-up to a place I can make art, using the items available

in game. It became a game of expression mixed with art and a bit of a new challenge. [Did you ever come up a thought of opening a SN group like you did in LN?] I would never open up an SN artistic group. The game doesn't have any real outlet for that creativity to take place. I enjoy doing only my stylings within my association group. And while I do like SN, it's not something that would ever actually replace LN.”



Figure 20: The image of Nikki going shopping, created by Starr (Artwork in *Shining Nikki*)

On the other hand, unlike the informants above, Raven mainly plays *Shining Nikki* instead.

Although he indeed expressed his favor towards the 3D games, he also mentioned the social importance of *Shining Nikki*:

“Aside from SN, I play other kinds of mobile games also. Like PUBG, which I

sometimes play with my friends. Since I have played 3D games a lot more than 2D games, I am more accustomed to this kind of gameplay. [Is your preference related to the community in SN?] Yes, that matters! I tried SN first after watching its advertisement on the Internet, then LN after I got curious about the sister games of SN. The art design in LN is also amazing and attractive! But I finally decide to focus on SN due to the friends I met there. I was lucky enough to join a very lively association in SN. In every tea party (an in-game association event), I chat with the members a lot, like which designer's reflection is stronger. We even opened a group on QQ to have further communication later. Sometimes we even talk about our lives outside of the game. These friends are actually important for maintaining my passion in this game."

Emily also plays both dress-up games at the same time. Similar to Starr, her main social network is also concentrated in *Love Nikki* and her friends in *Shining Nikki* are usually those players she encountered in *Love Nikki*. She used to have thought of adding SN edits to her editing group, which currently focuses on edits in relation to *Love Nikki*, when she noticed some of the members played SN also after its launch. Yet, she ultimately decided to be involved in LN edits only because she believed there were good reasons for keeping all the members in this *Love Nikki* group. Even though some were starting to edit with *Shining*

Nikki, they continued their edited work with *Love Nikki* as well. She became interested in SN's attempts to add more interactive functions. Although those were mainly interactions with NPCs, she believed that these new attempts could help players to be more engaged in the game:

“I do enjoy the friendship between the player and Nikki in SN. In the story, you play as yourself and Nikki speaks to you directly. Sometimes you'll activate an event while visiting her home where she gets to know more about you. She remembers the answer you give her and she will even change her dialogue the next time you visit her. I also like the idea of Designer's Reflection, they give more personality to NPCs and make you feel closer to them. Each designer's reflection has a story relating to the costume but also gives some lore and reasoning as to why they act in a certain way. I've found them to be pretty moving, and really sad. I'm definitely more attached to characters in SN than LN, more because they feel like people and have these stories that make me sympathize with them.”

As a result, all these informants emphasized social reasons as to why they play which kind of dress-up game. Along with the 3D game itself usually having some gameplay that is different from the 2D game, the launch of 3D dress-up games thus offers an alternative selection type

for dress-up game lovers, rather than trying to replace 2D dress-up games. The 3D dress-up games cannot be entirely seen as an advanced version of 2D dress-up games. In fact, my informants recognized the sophistication of both versions' technologies in designing costumes. While the 3D version pays much attention to the realistic construction of the costume models, the 2D version also takes great effort into the sketching details of painting the costumes. Moreover, informants raised other factors that influenced their playing preference. Other than the technological and social factors, the difference in costume variety, and consumption and game features between both game versions are also important factors players may be concerned about. It is not simply about high technology being able to attract more players. In Starr's case, for example, she focuses on making SC artwork in *Love Nikki*, whereas she prefers playing with the nails and styling in *Shining Nikki*. Below are some considerations from informants:

“Consumption rationality is the most important factor I consider in playing a dress-up game, along with the quality of the virtual costumes. I had played SN for a few months when it was first launched but then I quit, since its costume consumption was much more expensive than LN. The costumes in SN are mainly obtained by a drawing....Even though you had drawn a hundred times, you still cannot obtain a costume which is the rarest.....It's very frustrating when you cannot get any costume you want....In contrast, consumption in LN is

relatively reasonable. Just remember to check in every day.” — Sasa

“Since I joined LN very late, there were already a few thousand costumes back then. If I wanted to catch up the collection progress in the short term, then I had to spend a lot of money which would be unaffordable to me, so I ended up playing SN only. Since it has just been launched, I can have more time to collect more of them. And because one of my friends in SN can share her LN account with me, I sometimes play the Starry Corridor in LN by using her account, which has already collected more than ten thousand costumes! On the other hand, I prefer the battle in SN more. The Designer’s Reflection feature is really a nice try to enrich a dress-up game’s gameplay beyond dressing only, while LN doesn’t have. I really enjoy building my reflections, as well as collecting the beautiful costumes.” — Raven

To conclude, the dress-up game needs to be understood as a kind of social media. Social media, instead of causing its users to be socially isolated, aims to further develop and tighten their social network (Miller 2016: 3-4). Dress-up games are also related to polymedia. It is a concept regarding the personal choice of choosing the specific media for facilitating social interaction, rather than a merely technical consideration (Miller 2016: 22). Polymedia is thus contrasted to affordance which assumes users simply focus on one single platform or media, and only respond to one preset usage of social media. In the comparative analysis of LN and

SN, players' choices for different dress-up games are often based on where their primary social network is located. For those players like Emily and Starr who have played LN for a long time, although they were attracted by the 3D gameplay of SN at the beginning, due to their developed social network in the LN community, they eventually continued mainly playing LN. The opposite was the case for Raven, who started with SN. His social relationships therefore started from there, which also became a main driving force for him to choose SN.

Cultural difference between the Asian players and the Western players

As cultural anthropology aims to understand the cultural variation through studying different cultural societies, it is worth understanding how players from different cultures may have diverse experiences in dress-up games in the final part of this paper.

Diverse major artistic creation cultures in Love Nikki

I have discussed the two creative cultures in *Love Nikki* since it revealed the new possibilities of the dress-up game by transcending its meaning from simply free dressing to a broader social and digital artistic significance. As *Love Nikki* opened its service in different languages to different regions, my research attempted to look for players in those different servers to understand whether cultural differences exist. Although some of my research data seem to

illustrate different gaming cultures in both Japan and Southeast Asia, the cultural comparison I make will mainly focus on Western and Asian regions (mainly China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) because of the limitations of the nationality of accessible informants.

The first significant difference between the Western players and the Asian players is the different cultures of art creation in *Love Nikki*. I have noted that the *Love Nikki* artists in general create artworks through two main approaches, which are the Starry Corridor feature and the application of editing software; however, Western artists and Asian artist seem to have different dominant preferences for these two methods. Based on my fieldwork and the interview with both Western and Asian informants, in *Love Nikki* the Western English community tends to make their artworks through the in-game Starry Corridor feature, whereas the Asian community prefers adopting editing software into their art creation.

Such variation may result from mainstream cultural trends, which also responds to my first research question about the interconnection between the actual world and the digital world. In Asian societies, editing culture has been common to be observed in multiple social media. As a Hongkonger, I see a popular trend called “check-in culture” (打卡文化) in Hong Kong and China, where there is a habitual behavior of some people continuously taking photos of their everyday activities and posting them on social media. One of the most general and relevant

examples is the ritual of taking pictures of the food before eating in a restaurant. The whole process can be described in a way that a person tends to spend about five to ten minutes to set the plate for taking a picture, then take dozens of minutes after the meal to edit the photo with editing software. Eventually, he/she will post the edited photo on social media and wait for the “likes” or “hearts”. This daily ritual has become a popular medium for social media lovers to maintain their online social connection with friends or followers. When I was doing my research through different social media, this culture had been playing its role, enabling me to trace the life dynamics of my friends, and even some strangers recommended by the algorithm at that moment. It is thus apparent that this editing-related culture is well developed in these Chinese societies, especially among adolescents. Thereby, the phenomenon that Asian players are keener to use editing software to edit pictures of *Love Nikki* can be related to the fact that they are more likely to have accumulated practical experience in applying editing software in actual life.

On the other hand, regarding the Western community of *Love Nikki*, the development of the various SC groups in the English-language community is considered a unique cultural phenomenon which the other language servers do not contain. Possibly because the editing culture in Western societies is not as common as it is in Asian societies, most of the Western players were then not used to applying editing software for making art in the game in the

beginning.

Starr and Emily discussed this situation with me. Both stated that the editing culture was rare in the English community of *Love Nikki*, causing those players to find using editing software more challenging to them since they lacked sufficient practical experience. Starr also admitted that one of the reasons she preferred creating SC artworks was her relatively unadvanced capacity for editing. Emily commented that the Western players are not enthusiastic about editing because it is so time-consuming. Generally, the quantity of the available editing resources (materials) for editing artworks is much more than those available for SC artwork because the editing resources are not limited to those background items in the game, but also includes more resources obtained by other editors in different ways. Whenever an editor decides to design a *Love Nikki* artwork by editing, he/she may have to spend much more time than in the Starry Corridor – Emily usually spends 8 hours on average for each editing work, for example – by scrolling through thousands of items for selecting the suitable ones and redesigning them with editing software. That will hardly be friendly to the artists who are not familiar with editing. Thus, although editing in *Love Nikki* is getting more familiar to the Western English community, the Starry Corridor feature is still much more popular.

Due to these different approaches to art creation in *Love Nikki*, there are also differences in the composition of the two communities in different languages regarding the types of the main social groups, as well as some consumption tendencies, as a result. More editing groups exist in the Asian game communities while the Western community turns to facilitating more SC groups. Those Western artists who focus on SC artwork may be more eager to purchase more costumes with real money, since they can have more available items when designing an SC work, and thus may expect higher frequency for the launch of the new costumes. Whereas the consumption desire of those Asian artists may be lower when the in-game items are not necessarily for their art creation. Both Emily and Sasa, apart from their value judgements on spending real money for digital games, also agreed that by editing, they could then access the costumes which were required to recharge in the game and other new costumes apart from *Love Nikki*'s. Eventually, they no longer had to spend real money for those in-game costumes.

The question about whether the emergence of the digital world mostly causes cultural homogeneity rather than cultural diversity has been discussed. Miller and Horst suggest that instead of oppressing non-major cultures, leading them to be further marginalized, the digital world could also allow more distinctive cultural voices other than the mainstream culture to be heard (2012: 19-20).



Figure 21: First pair of pictures for comparison in *Love Nikki*

This cultural diversity can be discussed in the case of *Love Nikki*. Despite being launched by a Chinese game studio, the dress-up game includes a variety of different costume styles, instead of just the Chinese style only. Players can learn costume cultures other than their local ones and even help to spread those “exotic” cultures when they make their artwork through either the Starry Corridor or editing. Additionally, a cultural deviation between the West and Asia can be seen in terms of the art creation with *Love Nikki*. Not all players only adapt to the in-game feature for making art, but some also have their own preferences based on their cultural contexts. Therefore, players from different servers do have a different cultural atmosphere when playing *Love Nikki*. Although it will be inappropriate to interpret these differences all in terms of culture, they do help to understand the contribution of the digital

world to the concept of multiculturalism.



Figure 22: Second pair of pictures for comparison in *Love Nikki*

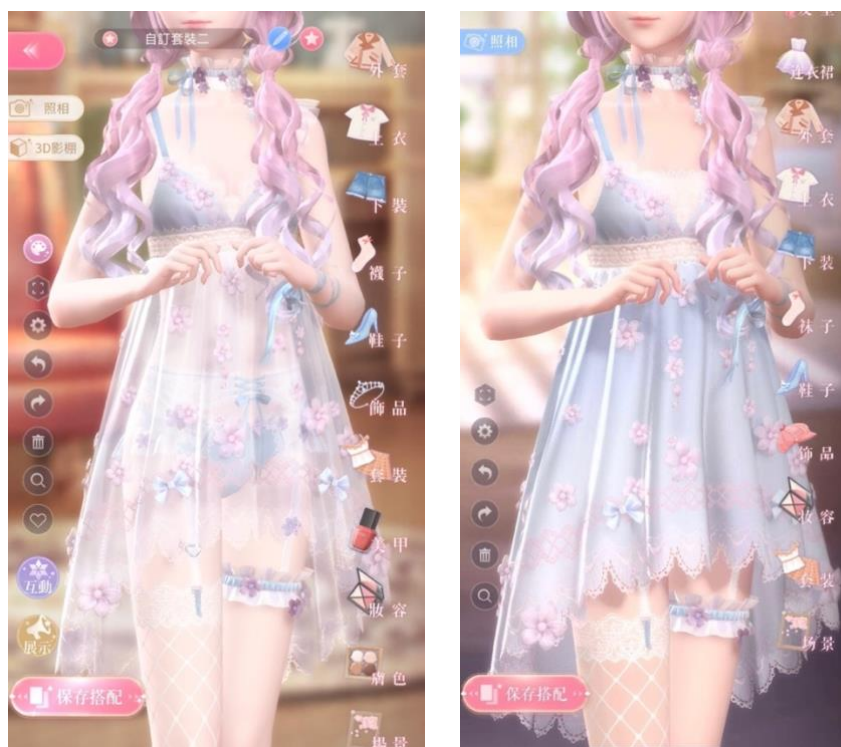


Figure 23: Third pair of pictures for comparison in *Shining Nikki*

Political influence in the dress-up game

The last point worth discussing is the influence of politics in the dress-up game. Although the Chinese (CN) server generally has the most players in *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki* and therefore usually is the first server to launch new events, political influence from the actual world is always involved in the digital world, causing the content of the Chinese server of the dress-up games to be different from the other servers. Internet censorship in China is relatively harsh. Aside from the mandatory real-name authentication system, I also found some of the in-game costumes on the Chinese server seemed to be different from the same ones on other servers during my fieldwork. In the comparison of the first pair of pictures regarding the suit of Valentine's Day in *Love Nikki* (see Figure 21), Nikki on the left is wearing a pair of black stockings and her figure looks sexier, while on the right she turns to wear a white dress that tightly wraps most of her body. The black stockings have also been replaced with short ones and her sitting position has changed significantly. The second pair of pictures illustrates the suit depicting an imprisoned elf in *Love Nikki* (see Figure 22). In this comparison, Nikki's hands on the left were bound by chains, her dress was torn in a mess, and her body was covered with scars and bloodstains, making a pitiful image. Whereas on the right, her image no longer is as helpless as the former one, her dress is relatively well preserved, the scars on her body reduced, and her hands are liberated into a prayer-like posture. In addition, there are also the comparative pictures collected in *Shining Nikki*, which

is the suit of the nightdress (see Figure 23). Again, Nikki on the left shown a sexier image, wearing a thin nightdress of transparent material with panties that could be vaguely seen inside. Then on the right, the nightdress she originally wore became untransparent and a layer of cloth has also been added to the chest position. In fact, all the pictures on the left are the original images of the virtual suits in the games, yet these images all turned into the ones on the right pictures in the Chinese server.

After collecting information from some Chinese social platforms such as Weibo and Baidu, and discussing this with Raven, who is the player on the Chinese server, the reason why these virtual costumes were modified in the Chinese server became clear: it is the result of Chinese digital policies strictly prohibiting pornographic, violent, and bloody descriptions in every game's content. Once reported, the content of the violation must be amended. Some players expressed their dissatisfaction with such incidents, mainly because they feel that the modified costumes are no longer as attractive as before. For the Valentine's Day suit, which needed to be obtained through recharging, some players criticized the change of the suit, which made it no longer worth purchasing with real money. Although the Chinese server compensated those players who had purchased the suit before its modification with three thousand diamonds (the in-game currency), some players still felt disappointed in the less attractive modified suit and regretted purchasing it.

In addition to disrupting the gaming experience for some players from the Chinese server, such policy-related incidents may also affect the game server the player chooses to play the game on. Because most of the images of this type of costume were not modified on other servers, some players from the Chinese server chose to participate in other servers instead or played on two different servers at the same time. Raven played *Shining Nikki* on both the Chinese server and the Taiwanese/Hong Kong server:

“I actually play the TW/HK server first because I remember that it seems to have started its service half a year earlier than the CN one, and this nightdress suit definitely impressed me a lot back then. As a game costume, I thought its design was exquisite and unique, though I was also a little bit shy of this design [haha]. So I had tried so hard to get it as soon as possible. When the CN server was launched, I turned to it and quit the TW/HK server for a while. But this nightdress suit already became the modified one as soon as the CN server was launched. I guess it’s because the game company clearly realized that’s impossible for its original design to pass the policy review, so it was modified to a conservative look. And yeah, that’s disappointing and I was also not as obsessed with this dress as I used to be.

Afterwards, several costumes were modified due to the problem of being too

exposed as well. I don't like this change and basically I don't choose these modified costumes when I play dress up on the CN server. But I really like their original designs, so I then decided to continue my account on the TW/HK server to collect them. I think if I hadn't joined the lively associations on the CN server, I would have given up my CN account for the TW/HK one.”

These policy-related incidents may explain why Chinese players have often adopted the editing culture in the dress-up game. According to Raven, some of his friends from the same association in *Shining Nikki* chose to engage in editing software to obtain those virtual costumes they were dissatisfied with or hardly could get from the game through the Chinese server. Considering that *Shining Nikki* does not have the same features as the *Starry Corridor* in *Love Nikki*, *Shining Nikki* players may not be as eager as they are in *Love Nikki* to collect as many costumes as possible, if they do not have the intention of being a “completionist” like Raven. The whale players sometimes are sometimes called “completionists” who aim to collect all the launched in-game costumes as soon as possible. Thus, if players just want to get their desired costumes for *Nikki*, then using editing software with the editing resources may be better for them since they do not need to think about those common and annoying questions such as whether spending money will end up being wasted in the game.

Nevertheless, using editing software to obtain editing materials from the game, although convenient for players, may possibly cause an infringement problem, especially regarding costumes obtained through recharging in the game. Such a potential problem may be one of the reasons why the topic of editing material acquisitions is sensitive in the dress-up game community, which is the main reason why I hardly described the editing resources as well as the relevant material groups in detail so far in this paper. Some editors such as Teana were also aware for this problem. Therefore, they tended to avoid using this kind of material when editing, in order to avoid unfairness—using costumes for free that they should have paid for.

As Postill (2012: 165) has discussed, digital politics have become more prevalent nowadays, which has introduced a new form of political life to further stress political control of the government of digital media. Social media is not an independent medium isolated from the context of the actual world. It can still be found in political control over *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki*. In fact, this policy may have its justification, since most of the dress-up game players are teenagers. According to digital game classification, both *Love Nikki* and *Shining Nikki* belong to a classification with a younger age limit. For example, the classification of SN in Hong Kong belongs to the tutoring level (recommended for those who are 12 years old or above to play). Therefore, politically prohibiting pornographic, violent, bloody and other bad content may be better to prevent some immature players from receiving such harmful

information prematurely, which will affect their psychological development. In any case, undoubtedly, political influence exists in dress-up games; there are particular restrictions on the Chinese server that are not apparent on many other servers.

Conclusion

In this paper, I raised four research questions for discussion along with addressing some traditional stereotypes contained in dress-up games. The claim for the interconnection between the actual world and the digital world was raised in order to emphasize the actuality of the digital world and thus was vital to be studied in order to understand the contemporary culture more comprehensively. Dress-up games, as one digital world, illustrated by the playing behaviors of their players, were affected by culture in reality, either extending this kind of real-life culture or having different behaviors from reality. The two worlds were thus explored as to their interconnection, noting that dress-up players were likely to have different selves in these two different worlds.

The paper then analyzed the types of selfhoods the dress-up game players present. Three kinds of selfhood were discussed in the dress-up games: the ideal self, the creative self and the social self. The Ideal self is about the practice of the players pursuing their ideal physical image within the game. Some players expressed the social norms they encountered in the

actual world, which discouraged people from dressing too exaggeratedly or provocatively. They ended up rarely dressing in their favourite style in reality out of concern for violating social norms. However, the free-dressing gameplay in dress-up games make it possible for them to try out a large number of gorgeous styles of in-game costumes which hardly appear in real daily life. Players are thus encouraged to unleash their dressing desire that was oppressed in the actual world into the dress-up game world, in order to practice their ideal physical self-image by dressing the virtual avatars in their favorite styles.

Other distinctive gameplay, more than the well-known personalized dress-up, was available in dress-up games. In *Love Nikki*, its Starry Corridor feature has become a creative platform, allowing players to not only satisfy their fantasies through the in-game dress-up feature, but also further transform such fantasies into a kind of digital art creation. The virtual character in the dress-up game was no longer just an avatar of the player in the game world, but one of the materials they could use to create art by combining with other in-game items to create a painting-like artwork. Showing their creative talents in the dress-up game, players have therefore turned to consciously establishing their creative self-identity for interpreting their creative behavior in the game, from “players” to “artists”.

Love Nikki enabled more interaction between players while it has given its players a huge

space for artistic creation. Despite the lack of instant interactive features inside the game, players have proactively developed their game-related social networks on other social platforms. For example, to expand the visibility of their artistic creations, *Love Nikki* artists created different types of art groups, such as SC groups and editing groups, and interacted with others through their own artworks as mediums in the game community. Within the group they belonged to, these artists could consolidate their sense of social self by exchanging creative experiences with members sharing the same interests and creating art together.

While discussing the significance of selfhood to dress-up game players, this paper also discussed some traditional prejudices against dress-up games. Dress-up games today are no longer completely single-player games since social interactions among their players could always be carried out through social platforms outside the game worlds, responding to the social self. At the same time, dress-up games are also not entirely low-technological and only “pink games” for girls. There are often possibilities to utilize design knowledge or editing software when players are creating art in the dress-up game. Some artists, proficient in using editing software, have used several kinds of digital software for their art creation, illustrating the possibility of the dress-up game being challenging. Also, inspired by the practice of art creation in the dress-up game, the paper suggested its increasingly various gameplays are not only limited to woman players, but man players as well. In view of the rising popularity of

the personalized dressing feature in other kinds of digital games other than dress-up games, plus the desire of pursuing physical beauty in the actual world being more important to both genders, dress-up games bring up the gender bias that pursuing physical beauty and dressing up is for women.

As digital games have been more popular, dress-up games have become more diverse. Apart from the 2D dress-up games, more 3D dress-up games can be seen in the digital world. As the sister game of *Love Nikki*, which is a 2D dress-up game, *Shining Nikki* was released in a 3D version, using detailed and high-simulated 3D models to optimize the player's experience of dressing up in the game. Although both types of dress-up games were embraced by the players, the importance of dress-up games as a kind of social media was highlighted when studying the players' preference of playing either the 2D version or the 3D version. Dress-up game players, when choosing a dress-up game, were likely to be concerned about its social factor for maintaining online interpersonal relationships, rather than just considering whether the advanced digital technology was applied or not.

The final part of the paper showed that dress-up game players in different regions might have different gaming experiences. Such differences re-emphasized the important interconnection between the actual world and the virtual world. Through studying dress-up games to learn

about the possibilities of multiple cultures in the digital world, this paper hopes to contribute to digital anthropology to support the understanding of more complicated factors shaping the intimate relationship between the actual world and the virtual world.

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