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Reconfiguring Daoist Cultivation in a Video Game

A Case Study of AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR

Abstract

With AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR (GSQ Studio, CN 2019) as a case study, this article analyses how this video game reconfigures the practice of self-cultivation, which has deep roots in religious Daoism, and how it was inspired by online novels in a contemporary context. The game draws on Daoist worldviews, the five elements, and cultivation methods which can be found in the Daoist scriptures. However, the religious elements presented in the game are more aligned to reformed 20th century Daoism, while the game developers' interpretation of cultivation follows secular and nationalistic discourses from the 20th century onwards. Those facts collectively mark the distance between the game and pre-20th century cultivation tradition, which is underpinned by the abundant Daoist texts. In addition, cultivating transcendent novels, mainly distributed online, provide readers with some cultivation narrations which are relevant but alternative to the Daoist cultivation tradition. The game borrowed features from such online novels, so that the content of the game is in fact a contemporary reconfiguration of heterogeneous sources. The game's popularity and commercial success not only suggest that players accept such reconfiguration of cultivation, but also concede that the game somewhat satisfies the contemporary comprehension of cultivation tradition. Through the media of video games, Daoist cultivation tradition is stimulated but reconstructed in the contemporary context.

Keywords

Chinese Indie Game, AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR, (Self-)Cultivating, Daoism, Game Studies

Biography

Ye Yuan is a doctoral student at École Pratique des Hautes Études – PSL, Paris. Within the field of religious studies, he focuses on Daoism in terms of history, ritual, and idea, and he analyses the interaction between the religion and communal life. Trained in the discipline of anthropology (master's degree from SOAS, London), he brings anthropological and ethnographical insights into his studies on Daoism, in both historical and contemporary contexts. His interests also cover art, video games, Guqin, and painting.

Introduction

Despite governmental restrictions on game licenses, the Chinese gaming industry is now the biggest in the world in terms of number of players as well as total revenue.[1] The games industry has increasingly taken content from religion and adapted it, showing that to some extent, religions, for example Daoism, are being re-understood and re-interpreted in the context of contemporary Chinese popular culture. Amazing Cultivation Simulator (了不起的修仙模擬器, 2019)[2] an independent game developed by the emerging GSQ Studio, arguably exemplifies the contemporary presentation of Daoist religion in video games. Unusually, it also has in its title the religious term "cultivation" (i. e. self-cultivation), originally *xiuxian* 修仙 in Chinese, a reference to an essential component of the Daoist religion that proposes that following certain techniques allows the human body and corporeal essence to be purified and then transformed to reach the immortal state. Thanks to the elaborate gameplay design, the players are introduced to an imaginative cultivation world in which the character-practitioners aim to acquire longevity and, eventually, divine immortality. From an initial funding of just RMB 100,000, GSQ Studio, founded in 2018 by three game developers, earned over RMB 10 million. Moreover, despite harsh criticism of the game on the Steam gaming platform immediately after its release, diligent efforts and intensive updates indicative of the commitment of GSQ Studio rescued popular perceptions of the game, which won a positive rating of over 87 per cent.[3] Furthermore, the studio is reportedly proud of the gameplay design of cultivation and stated that the cultivation demonstrated in the game is "authentic".[4] Such a claim to "authenticity" deserves scrutiny by those who research Daoism and modern China. The extent to which Amazing Cultivation Simulator adopted and reconfigured the Daoist practice of cultivation is the main concern of this article.

The game digitalises the Daoist cultivation practice through reference to Daoist cosmology and terminology such as five elements and *qi*-energy, which are widely found in Daoist scriptures. However, even though GSQ Stu-

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1   For a comparison of revenue in the global video game market since 2017, see Statista 2022. For a recent news report with observations on the Chinese gaming industry, see Mullin 2022.

2   General information for the game can be accessed at Steam 2022b.

3   Steam 2022a; Steam 2020.

4   Steam 2022a.

dio strives for "authenticity", it is impossible for the three game developers to avoid the difficulties of understanding and interpreting Daoist cultivation tradition, for the significant reformation of Daoism in the 20th century left a hermeneutic rupture between modern Daoism and the classic form. The game developers largely followed the secular and nationalist discourses developed during the 20th century and beyond. With cultivation a popular genre of the contemporary online novel, the game creatively marries Daoist religious elements and literary imagination, thereby somewhat bridging the gap between cultivation tradition and a contemporary mindset. By doing so, the game involves itself in the reconfiguration of cultivation practices in the contemporary context. In order to explicate the religious terms, theories, and methodologies adopted in the article, the first section will review previous studies on religious Daoism and cultivation practice, with a strong focus on the religious transformation in the 20th century. The article will then introduce the gameplay design for cultivation and the principal content of the game, and will also explain how the game models that religious practice in quantitative terms. The third part of this article will analyse the in-game representation of religious Daoism and cultivation practice and how they are reconfigured in the contemporary context.

Theoretical Approach and Methodology

Whilst the primary concern of this article is scholarly scrutiny of the video game Amazing Cultivation Simulator in light of its religious character, its foremost challenge is explanation of the term "(self-)cultivation" and its role in religious Daoism. In Chinese, the term *xiuxian* 修仙 literally translates as "cultivating transcendent". *Xian*, described in early Chinese scriptures, is a kind of individual who has already overcome physical constraints and has ascended to a superhuman state.[5] These individuals are believed to have retreated from the lay world and to have lived as hermits on remote mountains and in caves, obtaining extraordinary longevity and the capability to perform certain miracles.[6] In terms of these legendary characters' depiction in the Chinese religion, *xian* has been commonly translated "immortal" or "transcendent", terms that highlight longevity and supremacy

5   Campany 2009, xiii–xiv; for the definition of *Xian*, see Miura 2008.
6   Miura 2008; Vervoorn 1990, 13; see also Schipper 1993, 164–165.

over the secular world respectively. As the latter term more effectively summarises the multifaceted character of *xian*, the article will use the term "transcendent" unless further explanation of the Chinese character *xian* is necessary. The process by which practitioners condition themselves to become transcendent physically and mentally is "(self-)cultivation". The (self-)cultivation process, which can be dated to the middle of the fourth century BCE, involves techniques that include making an herbal potion, producing an alchemical elixir with mineral materials, and meditating to purify one's spiritual essence and *qi*-energy within the physical body.[7] Since the creation of the Daoist religious institution in the early second century, the narrative of "transcendence" and the techniques of "(self-)cultivation" have been merged into a principal constituent of Daoism, with different techniques developed and emphasised in line with the socio-political and religious context over the next 1,800 years.[8] It is worth noting that cultivation is not a term exclusive to Daoism but is used also in a broader sense by Confucianism and Buddhism. In Confucianism it tends to refer to self-improvement and the moral pursuit in daily life,[9] while in Buddhism it relates to the series of means by which a Buddhist disciple reaches mind enlightenment and nirvana.[10] This article will only examine "(self-)cultivation" in Daoism. The prefix "self-" suggests that "cultivating transcendent" is practised individually, yet collective aspects are also worth noting: Daoist monasteries permit communal religious life and practitioners are not isolated from personal contact with their families, patrons, and clients.[11]

"Cultivating transcendent" has a religious character, but as the universalism of "religion" is questioned,[12] we must rethink the theoretical configuration of Chinese religion and engage the socio-political context of contemporary Daoism. With Durkheim's sociological definition of religion as a single moral community that pivots on a unified system of beliefs, religion has come to be regarded as a distinctive social domain.[13] The Durkheimian

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7   Roth 1996, 127–128. The idea of transcendence and divinization of the body with certain methods are also applied to politics in the antique period, see Puett 2002, 214–217; 242–243.

8   Penny 2000, 109–112; see also Campany 2009, 34–35.

9   On the different and shared character of cultivation across Daoism and Confucianism, see Kirkland 2008, 138–139; also Barrett, 2008.

10 Eichman, 2016, 70–72.

11 Kohn 2000.

12 Dumont 1970, 32; Asad 1983.

13 Durkheim 1995, 44.

definition resonated with sociologist C. K. Yang, who stressed that Chinese religions are diffused through communal life and quotidian affairs, and thus the ideas and organisation of religion must be analysed with reference to the social routine.[14] The interaction between religion and other factors in the social context must then be highlighted. While Max Weber claimed in his comparative studies of religions that religion impacts the social and economic mechanisms of a given society,[15] Talal Asad emphasised the presence of power and discourse for religion because the symbolic world constructed by religion is not separate from socio-political discourse.[16] The perspective suggested by Asad is frequently adopted in the study of Chinese religion since the 20th century, as religions in China have experienced intellectual challenges and institutional reformation that were intertwined with nationalism and modernisation discourses. From the early 20th century onwards, modern ideas imported from Japan and the West, especially ideas of rational science, clashed with Chinese traditional customs and religious rituals. The socio-political structure of the nation-state that had gradually emerged since 1910 called for an ideological adjustment of religion in terms of both doctrine and organisation.[17] Communist policy from the 1950s to the 1970s stifled religious activity in principle. In the midst of social upheaval and change, Chinese religions continued to emphasise their communion with science, their contribution to the social good, and their positive role in the construction of a Chinese national identity.[18] In the first half of the 20th century, self-cultivation was reinterpreted by Yingning Chen 陳攖寧, who was himself a cultivation practitioner, scholar, and promoter of Daoist reformation, as a defence against the ideological accusation of being "superstition". Chen replaced the indecipherable cosmology underpinning the self-cultivation techniques with nutritional science and modern medicine, which to a significant extent disenchanted "cultivating transcendent" within the religious context of Daoism. Such disenchantment continued at the end of the 20th century – for example, ordained Daoist priest Chengyang Tian 田誠陽 attempted to erase the esoteric character of Daoist cultivation practices and to systematise those practices theoretically into a discipline accessible

14 C. K. Yang, 1961; Feuchtwang/Bruckermann 2016; Chau 2019; Schipper 1993; for cases studies see Freedman 1999; Dean 2009.
15 Weber 2002; Weber 1951, 196; 206.
16 Asad 1983.
17 Goossaert 2006; Goossaert/Palmer 2011, 127–130; Schipper 2002.
18 Goossaert 2008; Hsieh 2017.

to the public.[19] Thanks to the weakening of restrictions on religious activities in the 1980s, Daoist institutions such as the China Daoist Association and the Daoist Academy were gradually rejuvenated,[20] while Daoist cultivation practices returned to the everyday life of the masses during the Qigong fever 氣功熱 (Qigong re) over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the demonstration and instrumentalisation of *qi*-energy enjoyed nationwide popularity.[21] Contemporary Daoism is vibrant, but there is a clear rupture between the traditional organisational structure, transmission by teachers and disciples, and doctrinal thinking.[22]

With the rise of the Internet in China, especially in the 21st century, "cultivating transcendent" has become, as we noted, an online literary genre and has been increasingly adopted in video games, and accordingly, online novels and video games have begun to invite the audience to reimagine "cultivating transcendent" with fantastical and literary characters. The online novel is a type of literary work published mainly on online literary platforms and read by a large number of Internet users. For a number of reasons, including the nature of the literary market, platform profit, and authors' personal interests, online novels are usually published in serial form, with a more popular language and a genre-driven plot proving attractive to readers. "Cultivating transcendent", which is nowadays a popular genre of online novel, often envisions a hierarchical world of the transcendent in which the protagonist commits to cultivation practices and finally achieves divine immortality. Along with the cultivation process, the protagonist usually must deal with challenges from both themselves and their opponents. Longevity and miraculous power, which are two significant characteristics of the traditional Daoist state of transcendence, are still pursued by these protagonists in a fantasy world, and numerous terms from cultivation practices in relation to *qi*-energy and the body are employed in those online novels. However, elements related to transcendence in online novels (as well as in video games) should not be dismissed as replications of their religious counterparts in pre-20th century Daoism, for the 20th

19 For Chen and his interpretation of self-cultivation, see Liu 2009; Liu 2012; for Tian, see Ni 2020a, 758; for the reimaginating of cultivation and literature, see Ni 2020b.

20 Goossaert/Palmer 2011, 323; for the rise and reformation of the Daoist temple, see Goossaert/Ling 2009, also Yang Der-ruey 2009; for Daoism's obedience to the political discourse in the contemporary context, see Yang Der-ruey 2012.

21 Palmer 2008.

22 See Yang Der-ruey 2012.

century societal adaption from Daoism to nationalism and modern science discourse weakened and even abolished the religious worldview on which the cultivation practices rested. According to Zhange Ni, whose work was a precursor to the study of cultivating transcendent elements in the cyber world, the popularity of cultivating transcendent novels is a response to neo-liberalist contemporary ideas and a rethinking of modernist concepts such as religion, science, and superstition in a post-socialist and post-secular context.[23] In the literary genre, the protagonist starts from a low social class and finally obtains ultimate power and the highest ranking through cultivation practices, with the application of those cultivation terms made possible by the de-stigmatisation of Daoism. The use of these cultivation terms is intended not to reassert their original meaning in a Daoist religious context, but to create specific fantasy worlds in online novels and even, on some occasions, to embellish a so-called Chinese identity. Video games not only share contemporary settings with popular online novels, but also are inspired by well-known fantasy literature and their plots. However, video games are generically different from literature because of their interactivity and in light of the software development with which they are produced. Additionally, video games with cultivation elements have not yet been explored academically, and video games were not Zhange Ni's main concern. Cultivating transcendent video games merit academic attention, and such research will bolster comprehension of the representation of Daoism and relevant religious practices in contemporary contexts.

The Cultivation Mechanisms

According to the developers, AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR is a simulation and management game integrating rogue-like characters, survival, role-play, and strategy elements.[24] This official description of the game does not capture the "cultivation" in the game's title, but "cultivation" undergirds the game. The imaginary in-game setting is full of cultivation practitioners, mysterious creatures, and *qi*-energy, and has a tranquil environment. The game begins on a randomly generated map, where the game

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23 Ni 2020b.
24 See the "about the game" section on the Steam store page: https://tinyurl.com/24hzfmvh [accessed 31 August 2022].

player initially controls three character-practitioners with several abilities weighted unequally (in the basic mode). The game player is expected to manage the character-practitioner such that they will collect natural resources, settle down properly in the game world, survive periodical or occasional challenges, and, finally, become transcendent by completing the cultivation process.

Thanks to the continuous updates since 11 January 2019, when the early access version was available on the Steam platform, the game has been significantly expanded.[25] As well as the human character-practitioner, game players can now select an anthropomorphised animal which gains strength to participate in the game world. The cultivation practice is elaborately categorised into two kinds – spiritual and corporeal – and the developers have even designed numerous talismans, garments, precious weapons, and treasures which can collectively enhance the mysterious power of the character-practitioner. Bifurcated storylines and random events break through the limitations of a single-line narrative, and the ever-increasing designed architecture and landscapes amplify the imagination of the cultivation world for the game player. This content distinguishes Amazing Cultivation Simulator in terms of gaming experience and cultural traits, and it also enables game players to experience a digital cultivation world. Cultivation, once an esoteric tradition in Daoism, is simulated visually on the computer screen.

Role and Ability

The very first step in the game is to generate the character-practitioners, generally three as default in classic mode. In the following section, only the human character-practitioner will be discussed, in order to aid the focus in content and the direction of the analysis. After being randomly generated, a character-practitioner takes its shape in the centre of the screen, next to two sections: basic information (left) and skills (right) (figure 1). The basic information section shows personal records and six qualities, with the latter, which heavily influence the character-practitioner's capabilities, illustrated with a radar chart (figure 1, left). The six qualities are:

25 The updates mentioned in this paragraph have been announced by the production team in the development log since 2019. For a concise summary, see Steam 2020. "Early access" is a game development strategy permitted by the Steam platform: the developer releases a demo on the platform for purchase while the game is still in development, to get feedback from players.

Fig. 1: The board with the basic information and skills of an in-game character.

Potential (POT): The character-practitioner's training potential, which is related to the age and background of the character.

Perception (PER): The character-practitioner's ability to explore and gather intelligence from the outside world, which affects the character-practitioner's vision and efficiency.

Constitution (CON): The physical strength of the character-practitioner. This value affects lifespan, resistance to temperature, and efficiency of their manual labour.

Charisma (CHA): The ability to gain favour from other character-practitioners in social interactions in the game.

Intelligence (INT): The character-practitioner's ability to think, and a value affecting the learning speed in the game.

Luck (LUK): This value affects the chances of a character-practitioner encountering a random event in the game.

On the right-hand side, there is a table measuring the skills of the character-practitioner (figure 1, right). The values of the skills depend on the six qualities visualised in the board of basic information. Furthermore, the level of skill will be upgraded if the character-practitioner shows commitment to a specific job in the game. The unbalanced values allow the player to assign jobs and tasks in the gameplaying according to the character's talent. The twelve skills are categorised into three sections: labour, delicate (i.e., elaborate work), and cultivation.

Labour: the four skills in this section provide the initial efficiency of manual labour: "mining", "farming", "construction", and "crafting" collectively affect the survival of the character-practitioner in the game.

Delicate: this section includes four components: "social", "artisanry", "cooking", and "medicine". The social ability affects the interaction between character-practitioners, and the values of artisanry, cooking, and medicine influence the quality of the artworks, aliments, and medicaments produced by the character-practitioners. The latter three skills contribute to self-cultivation because of the manufacturing of talisman and elixir.

Cultivation: this group consists of "battle", "qi sense", "magic", and "magic crafting", which are directly related to self-cultivation practices. The "battle" value indicates the performance in the battle against enemy or demonic creature. The "qi sense" affects the maximum *qi*-energy that will be consumed in self-cultivation. The "magic" ability determines the proficiency of artifact mastery, spells, and spiritual protection when a character-practitioner starts cultivation practices. Magical crafting measures the character-practitioner's ability in alchemy and the crafting of spiritual items.

From the start, the capabilities of the character-practitioner are clearly labelled and quantified, although the implication of these indexes will be unclear to gamer players unfamiliar with self-cultivation and Daoist cosmology. However, the quantification of the character-practitioner's abilities provides the game player with a clear reference sheet according to which the virtual roles and, accordingly, gameplaying strategy can be tailored. Self-cultivation, a famously esoteric religious practice here becomes a project that can be managed in light of the addition or subtraction of numbers; both the character-practitioner and the self-cultivation practice are considerably "rationalised" via quantitative principles, as will be discussed latter in the article.

The Five Elements and the Fengshui System

The application of the five elements (or five phases) makes the game distinctive (figure 2). According to Chinese traditional cosmology, the taxonomy of five elements – fire, water, earth, metal, and wood – creates a universal principle for the classification of the nature of all things. Since 2nd–1st century BC, the five elements have formed a quinary taxonomy which has been widely applied to

	Symbolic Colour in the Game	To Create	To Destruct
Metal	Gold	Water	Wood
Wood	Green	Fire	Earth
Water	Blue	Wood	Fire
Fire	Red	Earth	Metal
Earth	Brown	Metal	Water

Table 1

astrology, political theory, medicine, and Daoism.[26] Significantly, the interaction between any two of the five natures is positively or negatively correlated. The positive correlation is called "to create" 生, whilst the negative correlation is "to destruct" 克, and those correlations are summarised in Table 1:

The game adopts the idea of five elements. In the game every material object has at least one of the five elements, and the main element defines the elemental nature of that object. For example, for a willow tree standing by a lake, the main element is wood, while the minor element is water and the elemental nature is also wood. The self-cultivation technique selected for the character-practitioners, which is called "law" in the game, is also characterised by one of the five elements. For example, the default "True Sun Refining Law" with which the character-practitioner starts the cultivation process is defined by the fire element in nature. Once a game player activates a certain installation in the game, the five-element feature of every object is visualised with a bar chart. In the character-practitioner's individual board the game player can review the five-element feature of the character-practitioner's cultivation technique. The idea of the five elements is transferred into statistics and image, in line with what the developers have done with the character-practitioner's abilities and skills.

26 For astrology and politics, see Csikszentmihalyi 2000, 53; 62–63; Hendrischke 2000, 13–137; for medicine, see Engelhardt 2000, 89.
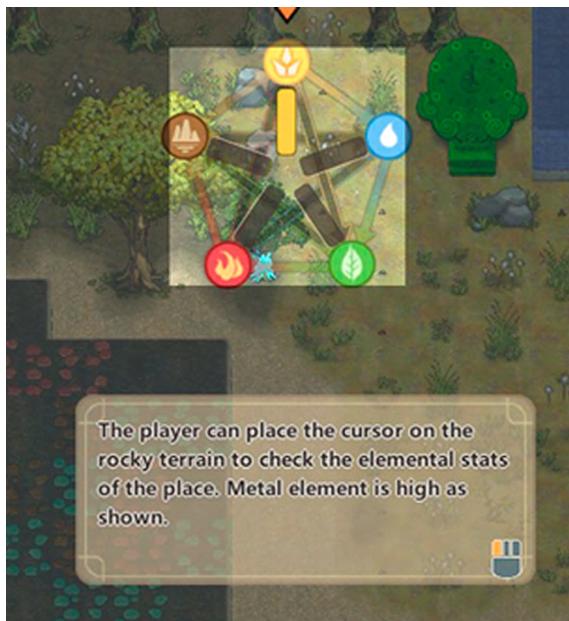
Fig. 2: An example of the five elements statistics in the game.

The correlation between the elements "to create" and "to destruct" is also applied in the game. Whether two objects affect each other positively or negatively depends on the elemental nature behind them: a water object positively affects a wood object because according to the elemental correlation, water creates wood; a water object negatively affects a fire object because of their destructive relations. The five-element mechanism in the game can be summarised as follows:

Object A causes a negative effect on object B, whose element is defined as being destructed by object A's element; similarly, object A positively influences object C, whose element is considered to be created by object A's element.

The elemental nature and correlation allow the game player to maximise the efficiency of cultivation. For example, with fire-nature "True Sun Refining Law", the game player may construct a cultivation venue with wooden building materials for the character-practitioner or may simply make the character-practitioner practise in an arboreous landscape because the wood-nature environment has a beneficial effect for the fire-nature cultivation technique (figure 3).

The elemental nature of the object and the mutual effect among the elements support the designing of *fengshui* as part of the game. *Fengshui*, which is translated as "geomancy", but literally means "wind and water", is a series

of ideas and practices which evaluate and manage (generally to optimise) the *qi*-energy in the physical human environment.[27] A space with good *fengshui* is regarded as positive for health and fortune, and the harmonious co-existence of the five elements is indispensable for a favourable *fengshui* condition. The game player can optimise the residential *fengshui* environment in light of the five-element interactions in the game. For example, if the game player installs an iron bed (metal nature) in a bedroom surrounded by mud walls (earth nature), the *fengshui* of this room will automatically be reckoned by the system to be positive, as according to the five-element interactions, earth creates the metal. The character-practitioners favour *fengshui* conditions that are beneficial for their mood and cultivation practices, while the game player can play with the five-element interactions and *fengshui* in order to rationally accelerate the cultivation process of the character-practitioner.

The Process of Cultivation

In the game, the cultivation process is made up of five sequential phases: "qi shaping", "core shaping", "golden core", "primordial spirit", and "demi god". Before the "qi shaping" phase, the character-practitioner is a novice who has not yet begun the cultivation process, but the character-practitioner becomes transcendent once the "demi god" phase has been reached. In order to accomplish the cultivation process from "qi shaping" to "demi god", the character-practitioner has to acquire sufficient cultivation points to progress phase by phase, which is functionally equivalent to a point and level-based mechanism of progression in a role-playing game. For example, a character-practitioner must gain 1,200 cultivation points to satisfy the "qi shaping" phase. Each phase of the cultivation process has several "limits", normally at the middle and the end. The "limit" can be understood as an obstacle which the character-practitioner must diligently acquire extra cultivation points to overcome, which is in turn necessary in order to continue the cultivation progress. As figure 4 shows, if a character-practitioner chooses the default cultivation technique "True Sun Refining Law", there are three limits in the "qi shaping" phase: "innocence", "sympathy", and "sensibility", and the character-practitioner will be able to proceed to the next phase only if the "sensibility" limit has been overcome.

There are several methods for acquiring cultivation points. The principal method is to meditate, while the game player can also instruct the charac-

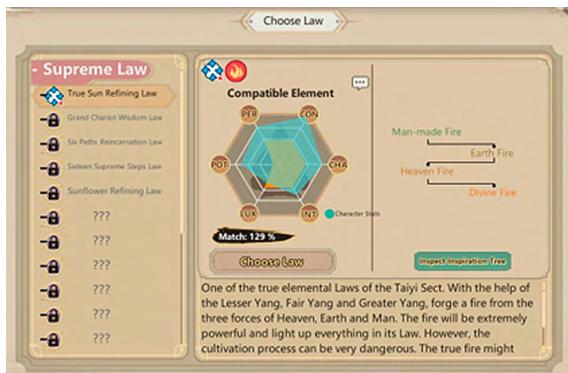27 Feuchtwang 1974, 6–8.

Fig. 3 The board of a Law.

Fig. 4: The cultivation board of an in-game character.

ter-practitioner to consume special items, such as elixir and medicine, to accumulate points. The efficiency in gaining cultivation points corresponds to the character-practitioner's qualities and the five elements system, which we have already encountered. The character-practitioner whose "delicate" and "cultivation" skills are higher can produce special items of better quality and meditate more professionally, both of which can accelerate the accumulation of cultivation points. If the character-practitioner lives and cultivates in a place with good *fengshui*, cultivation points will increase more quickly (as shown in figure 4, as "element" in the top-right box).

The Reconfiguration of Daoist Cultivation

The production team use the game's cultivation mechanisms to systematise the cultivation practices in the game, an indication of the developers' passion for the cultivation tradition and their efforts to create a world of the

transcendent for the game. Cultivating transcendent is intricately related to the character-practitioner's abilities, the randomly generated landscape, game player's strategy, etc., and a set of cultivation terms assist in forming the conceptual world of the religious practice. In addition to this in-game design, the cultivation atmosphere is deliberately maintained by the production team on Steam. For example, in the development log where the team announces game updates, the game players are named "friends of Dao". The team is appreciative of the game's overwhelmingly positive reviews, which show the developers' efforts are recognised by game players:

> when we saw such comments as "the production team knows about Cultivation" and "this is the *real* Cultivation", we were really excited, and we felt that our painstaking efforts were not wasted.[28] [1]

As a video game player, I understand the joy of resonances between player and developer, but as a researcher of Daoism and modern Chinese history, I am wary of this statement about the "authenticity" of religious practices. To some extent, the production team agreed with the comment, namely, they too saw "real cultivation" as a goal. This raises the issue of the nature of "real cultivation" and encourages us to consider the extent to which the cultivation in the game is consistent with the religious tradition and whether that cultivation is has been reconstructed in light of the contemporary context. The following section will examine the "authenticity" of cultivation designed in the game.

The De-emphasis of Religious Context

As suggested in Amazing Cultivation Simulator, cultivation practices consist of meditation and the consumption of an herbal and mineral potion, with the magical support of precious objects that are rich in *qi*-energy. The game design corresponds to cultivation instructions recorded in early Daoist scriptures dating back to the third and fourth centuries, for example *The Book of the Yellow Court*, to which we will shortly turn.[29] Cultivation practices in the Daoist tradition aim to transform the practitioner's body by purifying the postnatal *qi*-energy to coalesce with the atemporal energy, which

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28   For Chinese original see Appendix 1; Steam 2022.
29   Schipper 1993, 132–133.

is the purest energy and omnipresent in the cosmos according to Daoist cosmology. Once the coalescence of energy is accomplished by practising meditation, the human body is empowered to obtain longevity and eventually become transcendent.[30] By meditating, the practitioner can cleanse all desire so that the heart and mind enjoy internal tranquillity, the fundamental process required to purify the contaminated postnatal *qi*-energy and the essence/spirit. At an early stage of religious Daoism, alchemist Ge Hong (283–343) spoke of the essential character of this practice:

> The method of learning transcendent is to achieve tranquillity and indifference, to cleanse superfluous cravings, to look inward and listen back, and to live mindlessly.[31] [2]

Meditation is well refined and accompanied by several techniques in Daoist scriptures. According to *The Book of the Yellow Court* 黃庭經 (ca. 3rd–4th century), a practitioner should fast on certain days in order to calm the mind and body and then visualise the deities inhabiting their body in order to acquire divine assistance and power.[32] Furthermore, the practitioner is expected to pay homage to the divine agents in regular rituals. From the 10th century, meditation, also known also as "internal alchemy", became increasingly influential with the rise of the Daoist School of Complete Perfection 全真. According to *Anthology of Central Harmony* 中和集 by Daochun Li 李道純 (late 13th–14th century), Completing Perfection aims to "perfect the essence 精 (jing), perfect the *qi*-energy 氣 (qi) and perfect the spirit 神 (shen)".[33] This process is divided into three stages: refining essence into *qi*-energy 煉精化氣 (lianjing huaqi), refining *qi*-energy into spirit 煉氣化神 (lianqi huashen), and refining spirit and reverting to Emptiness 煉神化虛 (lianshen huaxu). However, the cultivation practice in the game erases any differentiation within Daoism and disconnects meditation from the Daoist context, thus removing the richness of the engagement with the deities and also conceptual understandings of the human body and mind. The produc-

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30 Liu 2009, 161–162; Yamada 1989, 100–101.

31 For Chinese original see Appendix 2; Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 25, nos 1, 6.

32 For comprehensive studies of *The Book of Yellow Court*, see Robinet 1993, chap. 2; Verellen and Schipper 2004, vol.1, 92, 96; for the original scripture, see Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 23, nos 1, 2.

33 Daoist Canon 2004, vol. 27, nos 14, 279, 293; for explanation of meditation terms and techniques, see Despeux 2008, 562–563.

tion team's words make evident its indifference to Daoist deities and this reinterpretation:

> In fact, putting aside the content of metaphysics, the spirit of the Golden Core is a ritual of removing the false and keeping the truth, and clarifying the mind …[to] cultivate truth 真 (zhen) in ourselves. Such pursuit has been advocated by Chinese nation since the ancient time, and we have been taught from childhood that this is the truth of the unity of knowledge and action.[34] [3]

The idea of "clarifying the mind" resonates with Ge Hong's suggestion that meditation is a means "to cleanse superfluous cravings", but several ruptures between the cultivation in the game and the Daoist tradition are worth noting. At the beginning of this statement, the production team draws a boundary against "the content of metaphysics". In the original text, the Chinese term for "metaphysics" is "*Xuanxue*" 玄學, which means mysterious learning or superstitious knowledge. In the history of Daoism, *Xuanxue* refers to a 3rd century school of ideas in northern China, when thinkers became involved in philosophical discussions of Daoist concepts, such as Dao and Emptiness, whilst practising Daoist meditation.[35] In the contemporary Chinese context, *Xuanxue* is somewhat stigmatised, as it implies deviation from the reality and the idea of the mystical, such as religious worldviews and miracles. Therefore, by excluding *Xuanxue*, the production team make evident that they intended to explain Daoism neither from a philosophical point of view nor in terms of polytheism and cosmology. Even though the term "truth" 真 (zhen) in "cultivate truth in ourselves" is identical in terms of the Chinese character with "perfection" 真 (zhen) in Complete Perfection 全真 (Quanzhen) as defined by Daoist Daochun Li, the meanings are significantly different. While the production team emphasises the "truth of the self", Complete Perfection Daoist Daochun Li gives the perfection of essence, *qi*-energy, and the spirit as the purpose of cultivation practice. In short, the production team de-emphasised the significance of "truth" in terms of cultivation and meditation.

The omission of Daoist polytheism also marks a difference between the in-game cultivation and the prototype in Daoist tradition. Lacking a

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34   For Chinese original see Appendix 3; Steam 2022a.
35   Fung Yu-lan 1952–53, 2:168–179.

visualisation of Daoist deities, which is accented in Daoist scriptures such as *The Book of Yellow Court*, the video game separates cultivation practice from Daoism's polytheistic doctrine. The absence of that polytheistic context makes the game consistent with Yingning Chen's proposal that Daoist polytheism is irrelevant to cultivation and meditation, which is seen in terms of a transformation of Daoism in light of secularisation in the 20th century.[36] In his commentary on *The Book of the Yellow Court*, Chen used the terminology "visualisation of spirit" 存神 (cunshen), which requires the cultivation practitioner to concentrate on the practitioner's spirit, rather than on Daoist deities, for physical and spiritual benefits, and by doing so, he distinguished his meditation technique from the original version, which dates from the third and the fourth centuries:

> "Visualisation of spirit" is different from "visualisation and imagination". "Visualisation and imagination" is … to visualise and to imagine the clothes, crown, belt, appearance, action of hundreds of deities. Talking about "visualisation of spirit", it is to imagine nothing, rather it is to concentrate the spiritual light.[37] [4]

Furthermore, the production team accented the specifically Chinese character of Daoism and of cultivation practice, adopting a nationalist perspective. The Chinese nature of Daoist cultivation has been articulated with the construction of the nation-state since the early 20th century, because as a religion that emerged in China, Daoism represents inherently Chinese folk traditions. Daoism has therefore been used as the cultural basis for a Chinese identity that is under pressure from foreign influences.[38] The production team's nationalist discourse does not seek cultural understanding but rather declares national identity by proposing oversimplified contrasts between China and "the West":

> The superheroes of western culture are basically born by chance, but our Cultivation is telling the most ordinary people to break through their own bottleneck step by step and change their lives against destiny. In western culture, people will ask God for help when encountering difficulties, but

36 Hsieh 2017; Liu 2009.
37 For Chinese original see Appendix 4; Hu/Wu 2006, 1:119; see also Liu 2009.
38 Hsieh 2017.

in our culture, we will face the obstruction of destiny, cultivate, and turn into immortals. In western culture, people always want to change the world, but in our culture, we want to be unity with the world.[39] [5]

The Rationalisation of Cultivation

As the introduction to the game design above suggests, the in-game mechanisms for cultivating transcendent, for example the cultivation process, *fengshui*, and five elements, are mainly illustrated by data and images, suggesting a rationalisation of religious practice in the game. "Rationalisation" as used by Max Weber in his work on modernity is related to the "disenchantment" of the traditional – for instance, religion and custom – and its replacement by calculation aimed at the efficient management of society.[40] The quantification and visualisation of the in-game cultivation mean that religious practices that used to be esoteric and mysterious become instead understandable and predictable. The skills and features of the character-practitioner are all numbered, like the skill level in a role-playing game; the cultivation process is designed in light of cultivation points, accumulated in order to climb the five-step ladder of cultivation; the elemental nature of an in-game object is illustrated by a bar chart on which the ratio of five elements is quickly identified through symbolic colours. These data and charts allow game players to visualise the characteristics of their character-practitioner and the elemental nature of the various objects in the game and thus manage their character-practitioner's cultivation, for example by enhancing the efficiency of the cultivation.

The rationalisation of cultivation practice in the game builds on Yingning Chen's goal of reforming Daoist cultivation tradition in the 20th century. As Daoist scriptures and hagiography show, knowledge of cultivation is passed on esoterically between master and disciple, and instruction by a master is a prerequisite for practising cultivation. The transmission of scriptures and practices from master to disciple often involves a specific ritual and a mutual covenant overseen by Daoist deities.[41] The three phases of cultivation are illustrated in Daochun Li's *Anthology of Central Harmony* (see figure 5).[42]

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39   For Chinese original see Appendix 5; Steam 2022a.
40   Weber 2002, 26–28; see also Habermas 1985, 2.
41   See Mozina 2021, 2–4.
42   Daoist Canon [Zhonghua Daozang], vol. 27, no. 14, 279.

上關 三鍊神還虛 為無
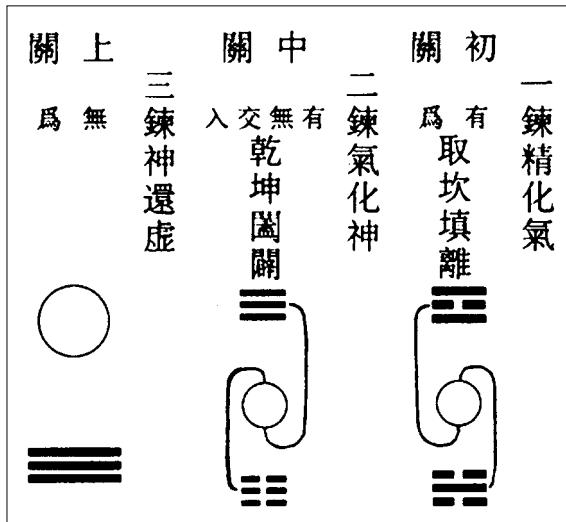
中關 乾坤闔闢 入交無有

初關 取坎填離 為有

二鍊氣化神

一鍊精化氣

Fig. 5: The three cultivation phases and illustrations in *The Anthology of Central Harmony*.

Readers unacquainted with the symbolic meaning of the images, probably because they are not affiliated with Li's Daoist sect, would be unlikely to find them helpful for understanding or guiding cultivation practices.

Yingning Chen attempted to remove this esoteric barrier by excluding Daoist deities from cultivation and also by publishing a great portion of cultivation knowledge publicly. Chen founded the semi-monthly journal *Yangshan* 揚善 (lit. 'Promoting the Good', 1933–1937) and the *Xianxue Yuebao* 仙學月報 (lit. *Monthly Journal of the Learning of the Transcendent*, 1939–1941), in which he wrote and published numerous articles regarding the methods and benefits of cultivation. According to Chen, cultivation practice is a planned and measurable series of acts that can be integrated with modern city life.[43] Practitioners are expected to quotidianly follow the cultivation plan, in which the duration of meditation gradually increases in a systematic way, reaching its full purpose for cultivation in five to ten years:

> In order to succeed, we must work step by step, increasing our time [of meditation] day by day. If the environment is suitable, and working hard without cease, we will succeed in five years; if working leisurely with occasional interruptions, we will succeed in ten years … The so-called five or

43   Hu/Wu 2006, 1:427.

ten years is based on calculation which is an accumulation … Start with one hour, then add 20 seconds a day, then three days to one minute, then thirty days to ten minutes, then six months … to 60 minutes, namely, [after six months] you add one more hour.[44] [6]

In Chen's perception, cultivation practice is not elusive but comprehensible, and the accomplishment of the cultivation process is attainable and calculable, albeit requiring an elaborative accumulation of effort. Therefore, in Chen's view, a practitioner's routine should be rationally managed for the purpose of cultivation, an approach echoed by the structure of the cultivation practice in the game.

The Influence of Literature and Video Games

Although AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR highlights cultivation in its title, many settings in the game stray from Daoism and cultivation tradition, elements such as the video game's survival simulation mechanics and the in-game interactions with other martial arts disciplines. Those non-Daoist elements suggest a diversity of influences on the development of the game, which was confirmed by the game's developer in an interview:

Attracted by AI-powered "story generator" of RimWorld, (we) realised that this is a possible method to create a world … Based on the understanding of classic martial-art novel *Legend of Shushan Swordsman 蜀山劍俠傳* and the influential online literature *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal 凡人修仙傳*, we decided to create a *reliable* world of cultivation with principally the classical settings (of cultivating transcendent) and supplementarily (ideas from) the online novel.[45] [7]

The admiration of RIMWORLD (Ludeon Studios, CA 2018) reflected in the gameplay marks a difference between AMAZING CULTIVATION SIMULATOR and earlier video games interested in cultivation. RIMWORLD is a construction and management simulation video game officially released in 2018. In the 2D plan, game players, supervising from above, direct the in-game characters in dealing with the survival challenges. Most interestingly, the game

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44   For Chinese original see Appendix 6; Hu/Wu 2006, 1:427.

45   For Chinese original see Appendix 7; The interview can be found at Fotuo 2022.

is generated by an AI storyteller, who estimates the game player's current situation and produces random in-game events, which makes the game's narrative irregular and challenging[46] According to its 98.28 per cent positive reviews and its high ranking on the top-sellers list on Steam, Rɪᴍᴡᴏʀʟᴅ is an outstanding example of its genre.[47] Its graphic design and the automatic AI storyteller were a good solution in light of game developer GSQ Studio's lack of personnel and financial means. Its similarity with Rɪᴍᴡᴏʀʟᴅ in terms of game graphics and user interface led Aᴍᴀᴢɪɴɢ Cᴜʟᴛɪᴠᴀᴛɪᴏɴ Sɪᴍᴜʟᴀᴛᴏʀ to be accused of plagiarism during the period of early access (see figures 6 and 7), even though the design of the 3D character was in fact inspired by earlier Chinese role-playing games. Since the late 1990s, the Chinese game market has contained martial art games with fantasy features: for example, Sᴡᴏʀᴅ Hᴇʀᴏᴇs' Fᴀᴛᴇ 劍俠情緣 (Seasun, CN 1997–) and Cʜɪɴᴇsᴇ Pᴀʟᴀᴅɪɴ: Sᴡᴏʀᴅ ᴀɴᴅ Fᴀɪʀʏ 仙劍奇俠傳 (Softstar, TW/CN 1995–) are famous Chinese role-playing game series. Both involve Daoist elements such as transcendence and priesthood. In fact, the three game developers of Aᴍᴀᴢɪɴɢ Cᴜʟᴛɪᴠᴀᴛɪᴏɴ Sɪᴍᴜʟᴀᴛᴏʀ are former employees of Seasun 西山居, the game development company responsible for the Sᴡᴏʀᴅ Hᴇʀᴏᴇs' Fᴀᴛᴇ series. They resigned as a group and devoted themselves to their own divergent cultivation-themed project, although their professional experiences exemplify the interpersonal connections within the Chinese video game industry.[48]

The game development was considerably inspired by martial arts fiction and an online novel. As GSQ Studio's statement notes, *Legend of Shushan Swordsman* (1932–1948), in which various martial arts schools interact within an imagined society, marked the beginning of martial arts fiction as a literary genre, while *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal*, a widely read cultivating transcendent online novel, signifies the influence of contemporary literature.[49] These novels participate in the game world by providing references with which the players are familiar. For example, a prototype of the 'Shushan sect' 蜀山派 in the game, proficient in sword-related martial arts, is found in *Legend of Shushan Swordsman* and in other works that have enjoyed popularity since the 1980s. In the game, the practitioner must upskill through the hierarchical system of cultivation by overcoming challenges

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46 For the introduction of the gameplay and AI-powered generation, see Wiltshire 2016.
47 Reference to the store page on Steam, https://tinyurl.com/55e5jzay [accessed 31 August 2022].
48 For the creation of the production team, see the interview in Chinese, Brother B. 2018.
49 Ni 2020a, 8.

Figs. 6 and 7: A comparison of graphics for Amazing Cultivation Simulator (above, 6) and RimWorld (below, 7).

and consuming a magical potion, a process common in online literature such as *Cultivation Legend of a Mortal*.[50]

Interestingly, GSQ Studio claimed that the authenticity of the cultivation world is sustained through reference to Daoist tradition and contemporary lit-

50   Ni 2020a, 9–10.

erature, implying that cultivating transcendent features in diverse narratives. In light of the cultural and practical ruptures with the Daoist cultivation tradition, those interested in cultivation might import elements from literature and video games in order to construct a logical and self-consistent world of cultivation. In the case of Amazing Cultivation Simulator, contemporary cultivation novels, which are mainly released online, satisfy this need. The novel enriches the content of the game, and at the same time it allows readers who are already familiar with the imagined world envisioned in the online novel to find pleasure and empathy in the game. In other words, the cultivation online novel has, through its influence and its considerable readership, merged into contemporary understandings of cultivation. The popular genre of cultivation literature is juxtaposed with Daoist cultivation traditions, which means that the contemporary interpretation of Daoist cultivation cannot rid itself of the influence of that literature, even though there are many differences between the two. The in-game cultivation is regarded as "authentic" by both game players and game developers not only because it contains reminders of Daoist cultivation before its institutional and doctrinal transformation in the 20th century, but also because it presents a contemporary reconfiguration of cultivation to which various factors, not just Daoist tradition, contribute.

Conclusion

As the analysis in this article has shown, the statement that Amazing Cultivation Simulator "is real cultivation" is suspect; in fact the game satisfies only some players' imagination and expectations of cultivation. The cultivation mechanisms in the game borrow techniques and ideas from the Daoist cultivation tradition which is recorded in the Daoist scriptures, but the interpretation and the representation of cultivation continues with concepts and discourses from the 20th century. The 20th century witnessed the institutional and conceptual transformation of Daoism according to modern ideologies imposed by secular polities. Cultivation in this period has therefore been reshaped, with the variation from the pre-modern model emphasised. Given the changes to the cultivation tradition and to the historical context, it is difficult to be certain that in-game cultivation practice is "authentic", not least as the production team does not explicitly identify the game's historical prototypes for its cultivation mechanics. Further, the in-game cultivation is actually a hybrid of Daoist cultivation tradition and cultivation

online novels and contains references to analogous games in the market. As a popular genre distributed via online platforms, cultivation novels offer contemporary readers a variety of imaginative cultivation worlds and in this way are integrated into Daoist cultivation. Instead of presenting a "real cultivation", the gameplay experience satisfies the player's idea of cultivation, especially for individuals who are already familiar with cultivating online novels. By analysing the game AMAZING CULTIVATION STIMULATOR, this article has demonstrated the significance of video games for the reconfiguration, through contemporary representation, of Daoist cultivation.

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Appendix: Chinese Excerpts

[1] 當我們看到'製作組是懂修仙的','這才是真正的修仙'這樣的評價,真的倍感振奮,也覺得認真考究的心血沒有白費。

[2] 學仙之法,欲得恬愉淡泊,滌除嗜慾,內視反聽,屍居無心...

[3] 其實拋開那些玄學的內容,結丹在精神上講的是去偽存真,明確心念的儀式。所謂修真,修的這個真,其實指的就是自我的真實,這樣的追求本身就是我們中華民族自古以來所提倡的東西,我們從小就被教育,知行合一便是這個道理。

[4] 存神與存想不同,存想者...想百神之衣裳、冠帶、形容、動作。……若夫存神,則無所想,不過將神光凝聚於一點……

[5] 西方文化的超級英雄,基本都是機緣巧合而生,我們修仙卻在講最平凡的凡人一步步突破自身瓶頸,逆天改命。當西方文化講究遇到困難向諸神求救,我們修仙講面對天道的阻撓,渡劫成仙。當西方文化講改造世界,我們修仙講天人合一。

[6] 若要成功,必須工夫一步緊似一步,逐日增加時間。設環境適宜,工夫急進,一日不斷,五年可成;若工夫緩進,偶有間斷,十年可成;……所謂五年十年,其中有個計算,就是按每天逐漸增加之數積累上去,到某種程度為止,並非隨意虛擬一個數目以寬慰自心。最初從一個鐘頭做起,每天加二十秒鐘,三天加到一分鐘,三十天加到十分鐘,半年一百八十天,加到六十分鐘,即是加一小時。

[7] 當時我們被 «Rimworld» 故事生成器這個設計模式所吸引,並意識到這是一種具備可行性的創造世界的方法。……又因為對修仙題材的喜愛,基於對《蜀山劍俠傳》這樣的古典仙俠小說,還有《凡人修仙傳》這樣的經典網文的理解,所以我們決定要以古典設定為主網文為輔的方式創造一個可信的修仙世界。