No-Name-No: Reality Shifters

Gaoyuan Chen, Dr. Clarissa Ribeiro, Hung Wei
Affiliation: Roy Ascott Studio Advanced Program in Technoetic Arts
Location, Country: Shanghai, China
Contact Emails: chengaoyuan114514@126.com, cr@clarissaribeiro.com, huangwei2022@foxmail.com

Abstract

This paper presents the proposal and first implementation of the project "No-Name-No: Reality Shifters" (2023-2024) — a dystopian online game coded in p5.js that transcends the boundaries of conventional gaming inviting players to navigate a conceptual and abstract simulation of a society shaped entirely by Chinese school education's exam-centered pedagogy. The simulation, inspired by Jean Baudrillard's perspective in 'simulacra and simulation', blurs the lines between reality and artificial life. Characters grapple with the existential crisis of a world where success is merely a hyperreal spectacle, devoid of genuine meaning. The project blends John Conway's Game of Life dynamics with surrealism inspired by Jean Baudrillard. The Game of Life mechanics reveal the illusory nature of choices, reflecting Baudrillard's ideas on simulation and the loss of authentic experiences. The narrative unfolds as a mind-bending exploration of how societal pressures can distort reality, leaving players questioning the true nature of success and the impact on mental well-being. In this game, players navigate through an abstract world where the very fabric of reality is shaped by the oppressive force of exam-centered education.

Keywords

Teaching strategies and practices, Chinese Education Systems, State-run public education system, Nine-year compulsory education policy, oppression, control, depression, warfare.

Introduction

As highlighted by Hugh Fielder in the book 'Pink Floyd Behind the Wall" [1] Bassist Roger Waters' three-part piece "Another Brick in the Wall" is centered on Pink Floyd's rock opera The Wall from 1979. With a children's chorus, "Part 2" is a protest song against harsh and cruel education policies as well as corporal punishment. In 'The Wall', the fictional rock musician Pink addresses an audience of fans at one of his concerts in the first track of the album, "In the Flesh?", as he prepares to conduct an unexpected performance of his life story. Pink's mother raised him by herself after his father was killed in World War II, according to a flashback of his life that starts at that time ("The Thin Ice"). Pink begins to erect a symbolic wall around himself after his father passes away ("Another Brick in the Wall, Part 1"). As he gets older, Pink experiences horrific abuse from her oppressive, controlling instructors at school ("The Happiest Days of Our Lives"), and her recollections of these traumas turn into symbolic "bricks in the wall" ("Another Brick in the Wall" Part 2).

With 291 million students and 18 million teachers spread throughout more than 529,000 schools in 2021, China boasts the largest state-run education system in the world [2]. The People's Republic of China's Ministry of Education is the State Council's department in charge of managing education across the nation. China's Education Modernization 2035 is a blueprint that the State Council released in 2019 outlining plans for the country's educational growth in the ensuing ten years. The goal of this strategy is to create a state-of-the-art lifelong learning system [2] that includes universal access to high-quality pre-school education, balanced mandatory schooling, improved vocational education, and more competitive higher education.

According to numerous reports quoted by Miao Qu and Kun Yang and their team [3] from the Neurology Department, Xuanwu Hospital of Capital Medical University, Beijing, China, Chinese school education, with its exam-centered pedagogy [4], is a major stressor and causes anxiety, depression, suicide attempts, and undeveloped psychological development among Chinese adolescents. Chinese teenagers face extreme academic pressure, and stress related to schooling has emerged as a significant societal issue in China [5] It is challenging to ascertain if the low psychological condition of Chinese teenagers is a result of their schooling or of the physiological and psychological changes that occur during adolescence. According to Rob Schmitz [4] since the seventh century AD, passing exams has been the path to success in China. The key to employment in the imperial bureaucracy back then was to become proficient in the Confucian classics. In the previous year, fifteen-year-olds in Shanghai significantly outperformed their global counterparts in the Program for International Student Assessment, an international standardized examination. 15-year-old Americans came in 17th place.

Creating a dystopian conceptual video game that illustrates the negative impact of Chinese school education, particularly its exam-centered pedagogy, on the mental health of adolescents is a sensitive endeavor to a Chinese artist who is a resident of mainland China. However, it is possible to conceptualize a game that metaphorically explores these themes without directly depicting distressing situations. The game could focus on a fictional society where academic success is the only measure of worth, leading to societal decay and individual struggles. The project's starting point was a tentative integration of John Conway's Game of Life's concept to represent the choices and consequences faced by players in this oppressive educational system. The perspective of Jean Baudrillard, known for his theories on hyperreality and simulation, influenced the game's narrative, questioning the authenticity of success in such a system.

Another Brick in the wall

This paper presents the proposal and first implementation — prototypes 1 and 2 (figures 1 and 2) of the project “No-Name-No: Reality Shifters" (2023-2024) — a dystopian online game coded in p5.js that transcends the boundaries of conventional gaming inviting players to navigate a conceptual and abstract simulation of a society shaped entirely by Chinese school education's exam-centered pedagogy. The simulation, inspired by Jean Baudrillard's perspective in ‘simulacra and simulation’ [6], blurs the lines between reality and artificial life. Characters grapple with the existential crisis of a world where success is merely a hyperreal spectacle, devoid of genuine meaning.

The project blends the Game of Life [7] dynamics with the surrealism inspired by Jean Baudrillard. The Game of Life mechanics reveal the illusory nature of choices, reflecting Baudrillard's ideas on simulation and the loss of authentic experiences. The narrative unfolds as a mind-bending exploration of how societal pressures can distort reality, leaving players questioning the true nature of success and the impact on mental well-being. In this game, players navigate through an abstract world where the very fabric of reality is shaped by the oppressive force of exam-centered education.

The game's visuals would be a psychedelic dance of pixels, morphing and distorting to reflect the distorted realities imposed by the education system. As players progress, they encounter life-altering exams, each a portal to a new level of hyperreality. Baudrillard's ideas will weave through the narrative, challenging players to question the authenticity of success and the meaning of their journey.

Characters, pixels-avatars in this hyperreal spectacle, grapple with anxiety, depression, and existential dilemmas. The choices they make in their ‘Game of Life’ mirror the illusory nature of decisions in a society obsessed with exams and rankings.

Incorporating Jean Baudrillard's theories [6] into the game can add layers of depth and philosophical inquiry. Baudrillard's works, such as "Simulacra and Simulation" and "The Consumer Society," provide insightful perspectives that can be woven into the narrative.

"Simulacra and Simulation" [6] introduces the concept of hyperreality, where reality and simulation become indistinguishable. In the game, the distorted environments and ever-changing landscapes could embody the hyperreal, challenging players to question the authenticity of their experiences within the education system. Baudrillard argues that contemporary society is characterized by simulations that precede and create their reality. The exams and academic achievements in the game could be symbolic simulations, shaping the hyperreal world within the narrative.

In "The Consumer Society," Baudrillard [8] discusses the loss of authenticity in a world dominated by consumption. This idea can be reflected in the game as characters navigate through a society where success is manufactured, and the pursuit of academic achievement becomes a simulation of real personal growth.

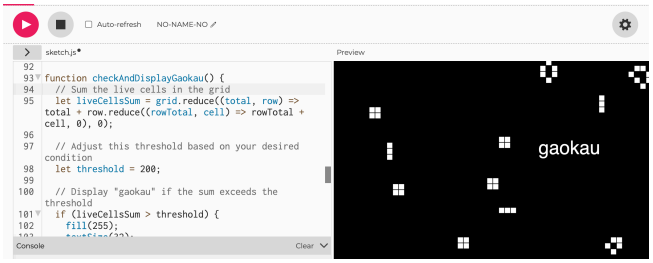

Figure 1. Screenshot of the game (prototype 1) [9]. Image by the author.

Baudrillard’s concept of symbolic exchange explores the replacement of real relationships with symbols. In the game, interpersonal connections could be reduced to symbolic gestures (figure 1) , emphasizing the isolation and emotional toll of an education system obsessed with exams.

Adding vibrant colors and visual effects (figure 2) the idea was to revisit the classic Game of Life [7] and explore the aesthetics of a trippy experience. Remember to replace placeholder graphics and colors with your desired psychedelic elements. In this version, the *checkAndDisplayGaokau* function calculates the sum of live cells in the grid, and if it exceeds a certain threshold (200 in this case), it displays the word "gaokau" in the center of the canvas. Adjust the threshold value based on your preference for when the word should appear.

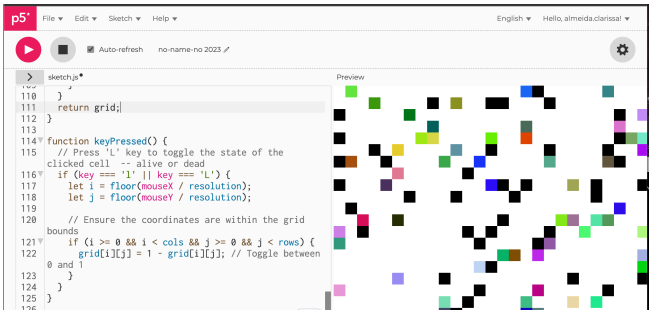

Figure 2. Screenshot of the game (prototype 2). [10] Image by the author.

In the game, using the function Key Pressed — when someone presses the L key having selected a cell with the mouse pointer, — one toggles the state of the clicked cell -- alive or dead, as if the audience plays the role of the “educational system’, design to decide the students future.

As highlighted by Siobhan Roberts [7] Martin Gardner received a letter full of ideas for his Mathematical Games column in Scientific American in March 1970. Written in the hunt-and-peck technique, the 12-page letter was sent by John Horton Conway, a mathematician at the University of Cambridge at the time. Conway’s "The game of life" was a cellular automaton, or small machine of sorts, with groupings of cells that change from one iteration to the next as a clock advances from one second to the next, was the elegant mathematical model of computation that was described.

The game was easy to play [7]: Organize cells in any way on a grid, then see what transpires based on three criteria that determine how the system functions. Birth rule: A cell that is empty, or "dead," and has exactly three "live" neighbors—that is, complete cells—becomes alive. Death rule: Overcrowding kills a live cell with four or more neighbors; isolation kills a live cell with zero or one neighbor. A living cell with two or three neighbors stays alive, according to the survival rule. Some cells survive each repetition, while others die, and "Life forms" change from one generation to the next. The glider, a five-celled organism that glided across the grid with a diagonal wiggle and was useful for information transmission, was one of the earliest species to appear.

Final Considerations

Computer technology and creative expression provide a unique lens through which we can explore the dynamic concept of "Shifting Temporalities." This exploration becomes especially poignant when manifested in a game inspired by John Conway's Game of Life, a cellular automaton that transcends the boundaries of traditional gaming. The game goes beyond mere entertainment, delving into the intricate fabric of Chinese school education and its impact on the psychological landscape of adolescents. As we navigate the shifting patterns of the Game of Life, we metaphorically mirror the evolving realities faced by students immersed in an exam-centric pedagogy. The cells, embodying the students, navigate a complex system where survival is contingent on adapting to an ever-changing environment.

Drawing inspiration from Jean Baudrillard's theories, the game serves as a reflection on the hyperrealities created within the educational framework. The continuous color shifts of prototype e 2 (figure 2) symbolize the relentless pace of academic demands, while the subtle dance of the cells echoes the nuanced struggle for identity and psychological well-being. Baudrillard's notion of simulation and simulacra finds resonance as the game unfolds, questioning the authenticity of the educational experience and the realities it constructs.

ISEA 2024's sub-theme, "Shifting Temporalities," invites contemplation on the fluid nature of time and its implications in the digital age. In this game, time is not merely a linear progression but a malleable force, influencing the narrative of each student-cell. The cyclical nature of the Game of Life mirrors the repetitive cycles within the education system, and the perpetual shifts in color underscore the ever-changing landscape of academic pressures. As players engage with the shifting temporalities within the game, they are invited to reflect on the parallel experiences of Chinese adolescents navigating the complexities of an exam-centric education. The interactive nature of the game fosters empathy and understanding, encouraging a dialogue on the societal implications of rigid educational structures.

The marriage of artistic expression through the Game of Life and the thematic exploration of shifting temporalities not only provides an interactive and immersive experience but also serves as a medium for social commentary.

The game beckons players to ponder the evolving landscapes of education, identity, and time, prompting a deeper exploration of the intricate interplay between societal structures and individual well-being.

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Authors Biographies

Born in 2000 in Qingdao, Shandong Province, Mainland China, Gaoyuan Chen is interested in the intersection of art and activism. Currently, in the fourth year of undergraduate studies at Roy Ascott Studio Advanced Program in Technoetic Arts in Shanghai, Gaoyuan Chen's practice focuses on addressing critical issues within contemporary Chinese society, with a commitment to unraveling the impact of authoritarian politics on human rights, particularly within the context of the Chinese education system. As an observer of societal dynamics, Chen delves into the nuances of how political structures influence educational practices, shaping the experiences and rights of individuals within the system.

Dr. Clarissa Ribeiro, Program Coordinator of the Roy Ascott Studio Advanced Program in Technoetic Arts at SIVA/DeTao in Shanghai, has been honored with the Pete Townshend Endowed Senior Lectureship in Performative Technoetics (2022-2024). Ph.D. in Arts (ECA USP Brazil, Poéticas Digitais/CAiiA hub of The Planetary Collegium, UK), Fulbright Postdoctoral Scholarship awardee (UCLA, Art|Sci Center/James Gimzewski Lab, USA), M.Arch. (IA USP, Brazil), B.Arch, member of the UCLA Art|Sci Collective (2013-present), is the chair of the first Leonardo/ISAST LASER talks to be hosted in Brazil/Latin America (2017-present). The core of her explorations is the interest in cross-scale information and communication dynamics that impact and shape macro-scale emergent phenomena. She has been exploring the metaphysics of information visualization in subversive morphogenetic strategies that welcome the animistic to navigate ecologies as cosmologies.

Huang Wei, digital director, and transmedia artist, graduated from Washington University in St. Louis with an MFA, is a lecturer and researcher in the Shanghai Institute of Visual Arts (SIVA) Department of Digital Media Art and a lecturer at Roy Ascott Studio Advanced Program in Technoetic Arts. Huang often works in collaboration with multimedia artists producing interactive installations, and performances, focusing on cross-media spatio-temporal experiences. Huang Wei has been selected for awards/festivals such as the Lumen Prize, and Ann Arbor Film Festival, and exhibited/performed in important institutions such as Shanghai Concert Hall, Shaanxi Opera House, and the Kemper Art Museum.