

What are Studio Games: Using the GFI model to Investigate Chinese *Jubensha*

Abstract: This paper examines *jubensha*, the localized adaptation of live-action role-playing (*larp*) in China, focusing on its artistic representation and interpretation. Since the 1990s, China's digital game industry has grown rapidly, while the analog game sector developed more slowly and received little attention before the 2010s. This trend shifted with the rise of the immersive role-playing genre, *jubensha*, in the late 2010s. *Jubensha* represents a distinctive Chinese adaptation of *larp*: this format is originally adapted from immersive experiences, such as escape room, in which specialized studios charge fees to provide organizational services, customized props, and immersive, themed environments. Moreover, a *jubensha* studio uses professionally crafted narrative scripts to enhance immersion, enforces strict gameplay rules to ensure logical coherence, and employs game masters to guide the experience.

Following Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020), the *Goal-Feedback-Interpretation model* (GFI) offers a critical framework for analyzing narrative design in games, complementing the MDA model. This paper applies the GFI model to analyze *jubensha* studios in China, examining game design elements alongside artistic representation and interpretation. Evidence is drawn from existing literature, the researcher's gaming experience, and two expert interviews with *jubensha* studio owners, Yodi Zhu and Shuting Peng, from Luoyang, China. Conducted via WeChat, these interviews provided insider perspectives on industry development and key operational data through neutrally phrased questions. This study positions *jubensha* as a significant case in the analog game industry and seeks to answer: What is a *jubensha* studio, and how does it function? Can the studio structure enhance players' narrative gaming experience?

Keywords: *Jubensha*, *Jubensha* studio, Chinese studio games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, China's analog game industry has developed more slowly than its digital counterpart. For many Chinese, "analog games" traditionally refer to classic board games such as Go and Mahjong, or imported card games like Poker, which primarily appeal to middle-aged demographics. Although some young people engage in card games inspired by Japanese anime, most gravitate toward digital games in internet cafés. Consequently, analog games only took 2.1% share of the Chinese game market before the 2010s (Hu and Ma 2019). This trend shifted dramatically with the rise of the immersive role-playing genre *jubensha* in the late 2010s, reflecting how analog games have become central to the social lives of Chinese youth.

Live-action role-playing (*larp*) involves players acting out fictional scenarios in real time through costumes and collaborative storytelling (Harviainen et al. 2018). *Jubensha* represents a distinctive Chinese adaptation of *larp*. It employs professionally crafted narrative scripts to enhance immersion, follows strict gameplay rules to ensure narrative coherence, and features a professional staff to guide the experience. This format has popularized a novel business model in which specialized studios charge fees to provide organizational services, customized props, and immersive themed environments. This paper defines this format as studio games. *Jubensha* studios incorporate scripted dialogue, professionally designed rooms, and trained staff, distinguishing them from *larp*'s improvisational nature and self-sourced equipment and clothing. Furthermore, *jubensha*'s industrial scale has earned it widespread popularity within mainstream Chinese society. Similar service-based play experiences exist internationally, such as haunted houses and escape rooms; however, *jubensha* has attracted far greater attention in China. In 2021, *jubensha* received praise from official Chinese government media, signaling the growing importance of analog games in China's gaming industry and culture (Zhao 2021).

As Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020) note, the Goal–Feedback–Interpretation (GFI) framework is essential for analyzing narrative design in games and complements the Mechanics–Dynamics–Aesthetics (MDA) framework. This paper examines the current state of jubensha studios in China, applying the GFI model to provide an in-depth analysis of game design elements and their artistic representation and interpretation. Evidence is drawn from existing literature, the researcher’s gaming experience, and interviews with two jubensha studio owners, Yodi Zhu and Shuting Peng, from Luoyang, China, who offer insider perspectives on industry development and operational data. Conducted via WeChat, these interviews included neutrally phrased questions to elicit data. This study positions jubensha as a significant case in the analog game industry and seeks to answer: What is a jubensha studio, and how does it function? Can the studio structure enhance players’ narrative gaming experience?

2. BACKGROUND

Research on jubensha is closely connected to broader discussions of role-playing games and narrative play. Game studies scholarship has long debated the relationship between games and storytelling, questioning whether games can “tell stories” in a conventional narrative sense (Juul 2001). Later frameworks emphasize that games generate meaning through systems and player interaction. The MDA framework proposed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) is particularly influential in this regard, offering a structured way to analyze how mechanics and dynamics lead to specific aesthetic experiences. This framework has since been widely adopted in game design and research (Sellers 2018). However, this framework focused primarily on game mechanics and paid less attention to narrative design. Fortunately, the Goal-Feedback-Interpretation (GFI) model offers a precise framework for understanding narrative design in games, serving as the main analysis approach of this paper (Cardona-Rivera et al. 2020).

Immersion and presence are recurring themes in role-playing and narrative play literature. Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are often understood as a foundational form of collaborative narrative play. Scholars describe TTRPGs as systems that rely on shared imagination, improvisation, and character embodiment to construct fictional worlds collectively (Carbonell, 2016; Mizer, 2019). Definitions of TTRPGs stress the importance of player agency, social interaction, and negotiated meaning (Smith 2015). Besides, rather than being produced solely through narrative coherence, immersion is understood as emerging from the interaction between space, rules, performance, and social dynamics (Haahr 2018). Klintö (2024) further argues that players often perceive narrative implicitly, assembling story meaning through participation rather than explicit narration. Murder mystery games (MMG) also form an important historical reference. Xiong et al. (2023) thinks jubensha is a localized and updated version of MMGs. Though this definition is not accurate because murder is only a script genre of jubensha, jubensha is influenced and inspired by MMG and larp, as jubensha’s gameplay consists largely of discussion, immersion, and interpretive performance.

From this perspective, jubensha can be understood as a hybrid form that combines role-playing game systems with theatrical performance. Performance theory can provide useful perspectives for understanding jubensha gameplay experience, e.g. Fischer-Lichte (2008)’s theory of performance emphasizes transformation through bodily co-presence and mutual feedback between participants, and larp scholars similarly frame role-play as a liminal activity in which players oscillate between fictional roles and real social identities (Becker

2016; Harviainen et al. 2018). Players are not only problem-solvers but also performers who actively negotiate character identity, emotional expression, and narrative.

The development of jubensha cannot be separated from China's broader game market and cultural environment. Research on game localization demonstrates how global game forms are adapted to align with local cultural values, regulatory requirements, and player preferences (Dong & Mangiron 2018). Studies of traditional Chinese games, such as mahjong, and various forms of local chess and board games (Wang et al. 2021; Popova 2021; Heinz 2021), illustrate the long-standing social and cultural functions of analog games in Chinese society.

In recent years, jubensha has attracted increasing scholarly attention as a uniquely Chinese development within the global landscape of role-playing and narrative games. Liu (2023) explores its cultural value as a distinctive adaptation of larp, and Wen (2021) identifies the factors driving its popularity among Chinese youth. Perera (2024) offers a reflexive perspective by analyzing the interplay between drama and role-playing within jubensha experiences. Zhang et al. (2024) conceptualize immersive jubensha as a "dramatized game" rather than a "gamified drama," arguing—through an analysis of actor, audience, story, and stage elements—that its evolution from murder mystery gameplay to an immersive theatrical form reveals a distinctive Chinese path of ludic and performative convergence. Liang et al. (2025) conduct a detailed investigation to clarify the definitional and structural characteristics of jubensha games. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the significance and growing influence of jubensha within contemporary Chinese game culture. However, existing research has primarily focused on the design and player experience aspects of jubensha while overlooking the commercial studio system that sustains and popularizes it. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how the jubensha studio structure functions as a commercial and cultural mechanism that enhances player experience and supports the broader development of China's analog game culture.

3. DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Jubensha is a script-based game that incorporates extensive role-playing and narrative elements (Liang et al. 2025). It draws inspiration from live-action role-playing (larp) as a form of gameplay representation but includes significant localization and cultural adaptation. Jubensha itself is relatively easy to organize; it can serve as a simple party game played at home, with scripts available online. Thus, jubensha does not refer to a single specific game. In this paper I approach jubensha as a game format, comparable to poker, which includes variants such as Texas Hold 'em. Similarly, the variety of jubensha games depends on the script being used.

Jubensha games served by studios, however, differ from the general jubensha game format. This paper introduces the term "studio games" to refer to role-play-focused games hosted by studio teams for commercial purposes. Specifically, the term refers to a commercial structure that provides a designed environment and professional services for tabletop or puzzle-based games, thereby enhancing participants' gameplay experience. In later sections, "jubensha" refers to the overall game format—ranging from simple, home-based gameplay to more elaborate studio experiences—while a "jubensha studio" denotes the commercial entity, referring to an organization that sells jubensha-based services to customers. Before the emergence of jubensha studios, haunted houses and escape rooms had already demonstrated early prototypes of this structure in China, while Werewolf Kill further popularized the model and became a key development in Chinese gaming culture.



Figure 1. Jubensha Studio.

Haunted houses are a common type of studio game, typically located in amusement parks. Players navigate a meticulously designed horror environment on a suspenseful, frightening journey. Their primary goal is to evoke fear by bringing imagined horrors, ghosts, and monsters to life (Yang 2013). Commercially, haunted houses rely on elaborately designed spaces, with staff using props, traps, costumes, and sometimes dressing as ghosts to simulate horror scenarios. However, they face limitations: narrative design is minimal, focusing on jump scares and eerie environments rather than storytelling. The static nature of their spatial design also makes renovations costly and infrequent, reducing replayability and audience engagement.

Escape rooms are another common studio game. Like haunted houses, they use themed physical spaces, but players solve puzzles to achieve escape. Participants are isolated from the outside world and must uncover clues to progress through the story. Narrative design is central, as puzzles are embedded in the storyline. Escape rooms appeal to a broader audience and align more closely with the social dynamics of party games, yet reliance on environmental narrative remains a key limitation. As research shows: “Participants underlined ongoing development needs because they aimed to differentiate their escape rooms by creating diverse themes and special events that change regularly” (Ye et al. 2025, 2280).

Werewolf Kill, a nationwide localized adaptation of *The Werewolves of Miller’s Hollow* (des Pallières and Marly 1986) in China, is a social deduction party game where players use logic and conversation to identify hidden werewolves. Unlike haunted houses and escape rooms, it requires minimal physical space, as the core mechanic is social interaction. However, it demands large groups—typically at least ten participants, including a judge—which makes organization challenging. To address this, some studios are set up to sell service like providing private rooms, trained judges, and merging smaller groups into full games. Additional services, such as food and beverages, enhance the experience and business model. This studio system exploded rapidly, for example, a high-end studio, JYClub in Shanghai earned a million RMB on opening day alone through live streaming promotion (jennyteo 2017). Nevertheless, Werewolf Kill requires strong analytical and communication skills, and its core gameplay remains largely unchanged, limiting player retention. For example, Yodi’s

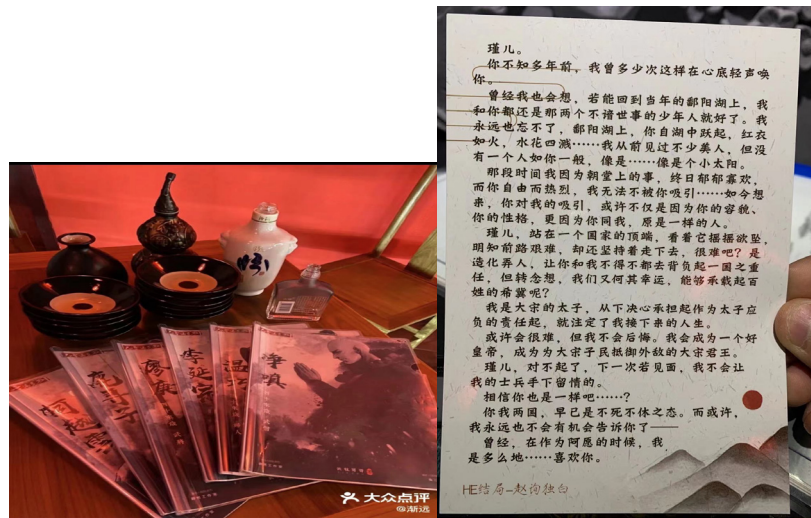
(personal communication, May 2024) jubensha studio originally began as a Werewolf Kill studio before transitioning to jubensha after that game's popularity declined. Unlike previous studio games, Werewolf Kill studios sold services rather than physical spaces. This service-oriented model offered critical insight for later jubensha studios, suggesting that marketing game experiences boosting services rather than tangible games could open new market opportunities.

The term "jubensha" is a direct Chinese translation meaning "Script Kill." The word "Script" refers to the game's narrative core, while "Kill" denotes murder, as most scripts feature murder-centered plots (Liang et al. 2025). The "script" serves as the backbone of a round of the jubensha game, which presents roles, plots, dialogues, and potential endings. It has multiple pages, and different roles will get a specific script for their perspectives that contains the plot information and a guide for acting. Additionally, this title likely functions as a commercial strategy designed to resonate with Werewolf Kill, helping players immediately recognize jubensha as a narrative-driven party game. As previously mentioned, jubensha refers to a game format, whereas a jubensha studio represents a commercial model that uses jubensha as its foundation. Jubensha studios combine elements from haunted houses and escape rooms—such as themed rooms and props—with the social interaction and narrative emphasis of Werewolf Kill, alongside larp's performative style. Jubensha closely resembles larp in its narrative representation, incorporating costumes, dramatic play, and interpretative storytelling. However, interviews with Yodi and Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) indicate that while jubensha borrows certain aspects from larp, key differences exist. Unlike some larp traditions that emphasize character progression, using systems such as levels, health points, and mana mechanics, jubensha prioritizes dialogue and the use of props to advance the story (Shuting and Yodi, personal communication, May 2024). Shuting and Yodi's statement is not accurate: While some larp traditions employ game mechanics such as levels or health points, many—especially chamber, freeform, or blockbuster larps—focus instead on collaborative storytelling and emotional performance. In contrast, jubensha relies on a fixed script and a deductive structure: players do not create new core narratives but collectively reconstruct a predesigned script through performance and reasoning.

Jubensha scripts are more structured, professionally designed, and guided by staff, while larp scripts prioritize improvisation, player freedom, and minimal physical infrastructure (Liang et al. 2025). Studio jubensha can be seen as a commercially packaged, "rigorous scripted larp", optimized for consistent narrative delivery and studio-based play. While jubensha emphasizes immersive, scripted, and physically realized narratives, tabletop role-playing games rely on imagination, dice mechanics, and improvisation. They give players more freedom to change story outcomes, whereas jubensha scripts balance structured storytelling with role immersion, guided by trained staff. Furthermore, larp often draws on traditional tabletop role-playing themes, such as medieval fantasy settings (Harviainen et al. 2018), which may be less appealing to Chinese players due to cultural differences. While jubensha has evolved into a large-scale commercial industry, larp has not achieved comparable commercialization, but it is a fact that jubensha is influenced by tabletop role-playing games and larps (Xiong et al. 2023).

A defining feature of all studio games is their reliance on physical space and human labor. Most are situated in malls or amusement parks, where players purchase tickets to participate. Jubensha studios adopt a similar model but differ fundamentally in their focus: rather than relying on fixed puzzles, they emphasize dramatic live-action performance, in which players assume immersive character roles. In terms of content, jubensha experientially aligns more closely with games such as larp and Werewolf Kill, emphasizing social interaction

and emergent narrative creation. This convergence of role-playing, dialogue-driven gameplay, and service-based business strategy has allowed jubensha to overcome many of the structural limitations that constrain other studio games.



Figures 2 & 3. Commercialized jubensha Scripts in a jubensha studio. Each script has a specific role name marked.

4. HOW DOES A JUBENSHA STUDIO FUNCTION?

As official medias report, jubensha studios have become a major phenomenon in Chinese social interaction (Liu and Bi 2020; Zhao 2021). The first core component driving this popularity is game content, which relies on scripts and environmental design. While jubensha draws features from other studio games and larps, it offers greater flexibility and thematic freedom. Thousands of different scripts prevent monotony and enhance replayability of the game format so that players can enjoy different stories by changing scripts. Script classification remains inconsistent: Liang et al. (2025) list three types—Detective-Focused, Affective-Focused, and Social-Focused—whereas interviewees identify four: Murder, Immersion, Horror, and Fun.

Murder scripts cover diverse themes, such as ancient China or Sherlock Holmes, and resemble Murder Mystery Games (MMG), requiring players to solve puzzles to identify a hidden murderer (Fang 2023). Liu (2023) considers murder the core of jubensha. Immersive scripts emphasize storytelling and character-driven conflicts—family, workplace, or relationship disputes—that require players to resolve them and produce a reasonable ending. Horror scripts combine haunted-house and escape-room elements, using narrative design and performance to create a chilling atmosphere, often in abandoned hospitals or haunted schools. Players solve puzzles while navigating fear-inducing scenarios, with horror content disclosed beforehand for sensitive participants (Perera 2024). Fun scripts prioritize humor and entertainment, involving cooperative storytelling through lighthearted scenarios like treasure hunts or adventures, providing relaxation without murder, conflict, or horror. The confusion caused by classification reflects flexible boundaries between types. Scripts often combine elements, with one as the core and others integrated to enhance complexity and appeal. For example, a murder script may include horror narratives to heighten tension, and an immersion script may incorporate fun elements for relief. This flexibility expands the definition of jubensha and addresses replayability challenges common in studio games. Mixed

scripts mitigate monotony, extend appeal, and reduce resource waste, though classification remains subjective.

The second core component of a jubensha studio is providing customers with a suitable play space. Given the wide range of script styles and topics, studios must create immersive physical environments tailored to the chosen themes. A typical jubensha studio features themed rooms, costumes, and props, along with well-crafted narratives for players to role-play. Players are assigned specific roles with scripts, collaboratively creating a role-play drama. Liang et al. (2025) mentioned the interaction between jubensha players and their environment multiple times. Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) stated:

We offer at least 20 uniquely themed suites, such as traditional Chinese family settings, abandoned hospitals, and Japanese inns. These spaces are not static; studio owners frequently analyze customer preferences and adjust suites based on trending script topics. Each suite typically comprises multiple rooms with specific purposes. The preparation room is where players read scripts, practice, select costumes, and dress as their characters. The evidence room serves as the setting for searching for objects or clues relevant to gameplay, such as crime scene evidence in murder scripts. The gaming room is the primary play area where players interact and act out the story. For popular or rare scripts, studios may provide audience seating for spectators.

Perera (2024) agrees that room design is crucial to enhancing the player experience in jubensha. Fernández-Vara (2011) argues that environmental storytelling enhances immersive experiences. Room design in jubensha studios exemplifies this concept, bringing narrative elements to life and transforming abstract imagination into tangible experiences. Additionally, rooms are not limited to a single script; suites can serve multiple scripts with similar themes. For instance, a traditional Chinese family suite can be used for narratives about historical family life or horror stories involving ancient ghosts. The rooms not only serve as suggestive environment but also sometimes are used for gameplay, as players need to use objects in the room to progress story. Pepera (2024) describes a round of gameplay where she was locked in a room and needed use objects to hide and escape from people. This dynamic use demonstrates how the meaning of objects and environments adapts to changing storylines, reshaped by players' perceptions, while also reducing the cost of redecoration.

The third core component of jubensha studios is the service provided by professional staff. According to the interviews, owners serve as founders and managers, overseeing daily operations. Makeup artists assist players in embodying their characters, aligning appearances with both personal preferences and script requirements (Shuting, personal communication, May 2024). Dungeon Masters (DMs) are the cornerstone of jubensha studios, though the term may confuse. As Andrew Smith (2015) defines, "Game Master" refers to the host who leads the narrative, while "Dungeon Master" denotes explicitly the GM in Dungeons & Dragons. Interestingly, jubensha players and studios show little concern about terminology— "host," "GM," and "DM" are used interchangeably. Liang et al. (2025) also note this ambiguity. In this paper, "GM" will be used.



Figures 4 & 5. Room decoration.

Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) emphasizes that a GM's performance and problem-solving skills significantly influence gameplay quality. She states that their role extends beyond guiding players; they also participate as non-player characters. GMs manage the narrative flow and bear additional responsibilities, such as acting and adapting to unforeseen developments. Besides, they monitor gameplay, guide players in following the narrative, and subtly steer the storyline back on track when deviations occur. As Haahr (2018, 34) states, "the act of re-composing the narrative becomes not only an intellectual but also a physical act". A skilled GM must deliver an engaging experience while seamlessly resolving issues, serving as the interpreter of the script's narrative design and re-composer of the story during gameplay. By embodying characters, they help players understand and advance the storyline. GMs can also modify gameplay or scripts on the spot, provided the adjustments maintain narrative coherence and player engagement. This role bridges the gap between players and jubensha scripts, enhancing the gaming experience and distinguishing studio play from home play.

Jubensha studios and GMs are also responsible for selecting quality scripts. Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) explained that studios often collaborate to host script trading exhibitions, where owners seek engaging and marketable scripts. Script authors also participate, showcasing their work to potential buyers. The scripts price may vary; boxed scripts are cheapest and usually sold nationwide, while city scripts and unique scripts are expensive because owners can buyout them for specific cities or studios. After purchasing scripts, studios must adapt them for local use. This pre-sales adaptation is recognized as necessary in general game design. Liu (2023) points out that role-playing is a practice of cultural heritage, while Dong and Mangiron (2018) note that localization is often required to align with regional sensitivities. For instance, in China, a script about the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression might be inappropriate in Nanjing due to the historical context of

the Nanjing Massacre. Such modifications ensure scripts respect local sentiments and preserve immersion. Therefore, GMs must thoroughly understand scripts before gameplay, reading, analyzing, and rehearsing every dialogue and scene to deliver a convincing performance.



Figures 6. A player responded to a GM's question.

During jubensha gameplay, scripts outline players' actions, dialogues, and expressions, requiring adherence to preserve narrative immersion. Each role's script includes detailed narrative descriptions and dialogue. Unless otherwise restricted, players may act according to their interpretation. Thus, strict adherence applies only to fixed narrative elements, while players retain freedom within the storyline. Players encounter challenges, dilemmas, and choices that directly influence narrative progression. The GM's role is to balance players' self-directed actions with the preset narrative direction, correcting deviations when necessary. This explains why GMs are considered the core of jubensha studios—they are trained to maintain a smooth and coherent gameplay experience.

5. STUDIO GAMES, JUBENSHA AND GFI MODEL

The Design-Dynamics-Experience framework used by Liang et al. (2025) for analyzing jubensha is an upgraded version of the Mechanic-Dynamic-Aesthetic framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004). While their work provided a close look at jubensha games, this framework focused primarily on game mechanics and paid less attention to narrative design. The Goal-Feedback-Interpretation (GFI) model, first proposed by Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020), offers a precise framework for understanding narrative design in games and is considered a valuable complement to the MDA framework. Ganeli et al. (2021) argue that the GFI model extends MDA by bridging gaps in narrative design. Multiple scholars treat it as a core model for game narrative analysis (Atmaja et al. 2024; Klintö 2024). This paper uses the GFI model to examine whether jubensha studios reinforce the narrative design of jubensha games and enhance players' overall gameplay experience.

Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020) define goals as conditions players are expected to meet to succeed, distinguishing between ultimate goals (end conditions) and imperative goals (actionable milestones). These goals can be observed in all studio games. For example, in a

haunted house, the ultimate goal is to find the exit, and the imperative goal is to avoid ghosts. In an escape room, players' ultimate goal is to escape, with imperative goals to solve puzzles. In *Werewolf Kill*, players must survive until the end, and their imperative goals involve convincing or deceiving other players. While these studio games are commercially successful, the connection between ultimate and imperative goals may be fragmented. Players lost in haunted houses or escape rooms require staff intervention, which abruptly alienates game narrative content. In *Werewolf Kill*, low-skill players struggle to achieve imperative goals, as no facilitator intervenes to improve their experience. Unlike these games, jubensha studios employ GMs to guide, smooth, and correct the achievement of goals.

Jubensha studios effectively integrates ultimate and imperative goals to enhance gameplay. When players receive roles and scripts, their ultimate goal is to represent the narrative and achieve story objectives. In a murder script, players may need to hide or uncover the truth, with multiple possible endings based on their actions, such as finding the murderer, the murderer escaping, or discovering the murderer without sufficient evidence. Because jubensha players collectively reconstruct a predesigned script through performance and reasoning, personal connection to the players or interpersonal knowledge cannot violate its fixed script and a deductive structure. Most players are not professional actors and may struggle to accurately portray roles, and home-based GMs lack the skills to maintain narrative coherence. Thus, there is not much space left for the advantage of home-based gameplay. jubensha scripts break ultimate goals into actionable, imperative goals that align with the story's progression, while professional studio GMs help ensure smooth execution and fix plot holes. By following instructions and performing scenes as described, players achieve smaller goals that collectively fulfill the ultimate goal, ensuring a structured, engaging, and accessible experience.

Sellers (2017) emphasizes the importance of the feedback loop in game design strategy. Similarly, Fischer-Lichte (2008, 8) describes feedback in performance theory: "As a self-organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created work of art, it continually receives and integrates ... newly emerging, unplanned, and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop." In games, feedback is integrated with dynamics: the system reacts to player input through mechanics, and dynamics communicate responses back to players. Player actions provide designers with feedback to refine narrative design and create a responsive, evolving experience.

In jubensha, GMs provide real-time feedback on player progress (Perera 2024). Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) gave an example: if a player portraying an emperor announces a bad policy instead of the intended good one, the GM will notice and address the deviation, either by persuading the player to align with the script or adjusting the narrative to accommodate the choice. GMs manage immediate feedback and guide players through the story, maintaining engagement. Players' decisions—such as selecting murder methods or missing evidence—can influence narrative outcomes. This feedback loop, while common in digital games with multiple endings, is represented in jubensha through live dramatic interaction.

Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) claims that jubensha studios offer a novel application of Sellers' loop by making feedback multidirectional. She thinks GMs and studios are not the original scriptwriters but act as intermediaries during gameplay, which breaks the barrier between players and designers, making feedback a critical communication tool among players, GMs, and studios. Besides, studios also gather long-term feedback after gameplay to refine scripts and improve GM training, ensuring iterative improvement of the gaming experience. However, though these new feedback loops can improve players' gameplay experience, Yodi's claim is not accurate because it is a key element of all RPG game

mastering. Jubensha studios only expand its directions, such as a new one among studio, GM, and players, instead of a novel application.

Interpretation is a core concept in jubensha, placing players in the role of deriving meaning from the narrative. According to Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020, 5), "Interpretation is both: (a) the situated process of deriving meaning from enactment, and (b) the outcome of that process." At home, balancing fixed narrative design and player agency is challenging, and scripts can be misinterpreted, potentially derailing the story. Jubensha studios and their GMs effectively address this limitation: In each scene, for principal roles, scripts provide detailed dialogue, while for minor roles, second-person narration allows player interpretation under GMs' supervision. Together, the structured environment and professional guidance ensure a more coherent and immersive experience than home-based play. Players interpret storylines through their characters and personal cognition. For example, if a script instructs a player to laugh loudly but does not specify the detail, the player may decide how to express the laughter. Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) admits GMs are trained to maintain balance, enabling agency while preserving narrative coherence.

Multiple endings exist in digital RPGs but differ fundamentally from jubensha. Juul (2001) once noted, "There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or 'prior' of the narrative. You can't have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story" (sec. Conclusion, para. 1). Juul's argument is not accurate both in the context of digital games and jubensha. Digital RPGs often feature preprogrammed outcomes, such as *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream 2018), which presents over 40 predetermined endings before released. However, MMORPGs with big rpg guilds keep producing interactive stories between players. Besides, jubensha emphasizes continuous interaction and emergent storytelling, transforming players into active participants within the narrative. By allowing unexpected narratives while guiding roles and facilitating engagement, studios maintain a balance between subjective interpretation and overarching narrative, enhancing the player experience. Studios interpretation is refined further when assisting players in role identity, including cross-gender role-playing, and provide appropriate costumes and makeup (Perera 2024). This inclusive approach fosters gender equality, breaking traditional limitations, and supporting immersive gameplay. Players focus on embodying roles rather than themselves, presenting a valuable case for research on player identity.



Figure 7. Dressed players in a jubensha studio

6. CONCLUSION

Jubensha studios integrate game content, environmental design, and professional staff to create a distinctive analog gaming experience. Carefully crafted scripts and flexible narrative structures provide players with meaningful interpretive space, while immersive environments transform studios into experiential stages that blur the line between play and performance. Professional staff, particularly GMs, sustain narrative flow and social engagement by mediating between individual player agency and collective storytelling. These elements address the weaknesses of home-based jubensha—such as inconsistent feedback and unstable narrative control—while elevating the format into a common, commercialized cultural experience that redefines analog gaming in contemporary China. From the perspective of the GFI model, jubensha studios reinforce the goal–feedback–interpretation loop, ensuring coherence between gameplay objectives and narrative progression, and enhancing the overall player experience. However, as a commercial facility in public, jubensha studios are more controlled by the Chinese government than jubensha in a home setting because script contents, gameplay process, and service should not violate policies. For example, though underage jubensha players are free to play any script at home at any time, studios are not allowed to serve them during weekdays, and served script are strictly limited (Cheng 2023). Thus, jubensha in a home setting still has advantages over the studios in some ways.

The rise of jubensha studios reflects the evolution of Chinese studio games, building on haunted houses, escape rooms, and Werewolf Kill while leveraging market gaps through strong localization, social alignment, and a commercialized studio model. Beyond its domestic success, jubensha studios offer both scholarly and practical insights: academically, it provides a rich case for studying narrative design, role immersion, and the intersection of performance and play; practically, it demonstrates the global potential of studio games as immersive, narrative-driven analog experiences. By combining scripted storytelling, environmental immersion, and professional facilitation, jubensha studios show how studio-based games can transform social play, inspire new entertainment industries, and expand understanding of analog games worldwide.

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