

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: A Gay's Life
Platform: (Web) PC/Android
Genre: Interactive novel, Mini-game, RPG, Indie
Release Date: May 4, 2018
Developer: Tang Men Cao Ying
Publisher: 66rpg.com
Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Harry Huang

Overview

Being the first-of-its-kind web game that depicts Chinese homosexual's life, *A Gay's Life* tells an emotional and intimate story about a gay Chinese man's life in childhood, adolescence, middle and old age. Playing from a first-person perspective, the player experiences the struggles that a gay person has in the contemporary Chinese society: accepting his own sexual orientation, coming out to friends and family, finding the right person to spend life with, as well as enduring social biases towards LGBTQ community.

Utilizing dialogues, letters, text messages, and many other communication forms, this game tells a linear story of Ling Hao (凌浩)'s life through a series of brief chapters. Every choice the player makes will affect Ling Hao's life and eventually pivotal decisions will lead to different narrative endings. Besides these branching narratives, this web-game also incorporates mini-games such as puzzles, memory card matching and simulation to strengthen the player's understanding of a gay person's thoughts and

actions. One highlighted gameplay is the “self-acceptance score” that can increase or decrease depending on the player’s choices and beliefs. Currently, there are nine endings available and a single play-through takes roughly 90 minutes. The game is well-polished with a good amount of animation, gameplay and narrative choices.

Characters

Since this game is built around the main character Ling Hao’s life, therefore, besides his family, early childhood friends, and teachers, many adult characters are introduced depending on the player’s choices. After some key choices being made, the stories of the individual characters that belong to the specific narrative branch are revealed in different degrees. For example, if the player chooses to date a woman, hide his sexuality and have a fake marriage, the character would meet female characters, rather than other male partners who would be seen otherwise. Here I will introduce a popular narrative that seems to be the best ending for the character (if you consider marriage is good), which is “a marriage with my true love”.

Main Character:

- Ling Hao – The central character whom the player follows with throughout the game. From a small town in China, he is the only son of a traditional Chinese family, which has lots of expectations towards him. Graduating as the best student in his class and also hoping to escape from a restricted life in a small town, Ling Hao moves to the capital city Beijing and starts his college/professional life as well as personal life as a gay. To make up for his absence as a son, Ling Hao continues studying and gets his Ph.D. degree. Always being a promising young man, Ling Hao is well-educated, artsy, sensitive and reticent; he is very devoted to his family and traditional values, he loves his parents and family. On the other hand, he is active in making changes to his life, and he has been struggling between his sexual identities and family expectations.

Other Important Characters in the narrative “Marriage with my true love”:

- Chen Yu – a doctor working in the emergency department. He is an active social worker and volunteer for an LGBTQ center in Beijing. He hopes to educate the

public about homosexuality and helps other LGBTQ members. He firmly believes in diversity, inclusiveness and equal rights, and he has been an activist to speak about homosexuality, AIDS, feminism in the open forum. He is Hao's final choice and they get married happily in a foreign country.

- John Bili – a fashion elite, social influencer and an open gay with fame in the circle. He has some impressive interpersonal connections with the entertainment and fashion industry. He is very sociable and kind to the people in the LGBTQ community. However, he was deeply hurt by others in a personal relationship and he seems to be able to provide useful guidance for Ling Hao.
- Xiao Long – a government civil servant who lives in the same apartment as Ling Hao does. He is a Beijing native resident with a big family. Secretly being a gay, he dares not to tell his family about his sexuality and he seems to like Ling Hao from the first meet.

Supporting Characters from Ling Hao's family:

- Ling Hao's grandma – Ling Hao's beloved grandma in her 80s who has played an important role in Ling Hao's life. Her biggest wish before passing away is "to witness Hao getting married". However, what she truly wishes for is her grandson's happiness; She encourages Hao to find his true love and she gives a handmade red scarf to Ling Hao as a blessing to him, no matter who he is and whom he loves.
- Ling Hao's mother – A supportive mother who has always taken care of her son. At the beginning of Hao's coming out, she is extremely depressed and holds some misunderstandings towards his son's choice. Unlike other family members, she blames herself for not taking care enough of her son and worries about her son's future; later on, she gradually learns about homosexuality and eventually supports her son's decision. She is a typical mother who is willing to sacrifice everything for her children. I respect her a lot.

- Ling Hao's father – Similar to Hao's mother, he doesn't speak too much with his son, but all he does shows his deep love. Comparing to other conservative family members, he is not so harsh on his son and he even helps Hao's mother demystify the issues around homosexuality.

Breakdown

A Gay's Life is an interactive narrative game with mini-game elements interweaved in individual branching narratives. The player is first introduced to Ling Hao's current life and knows the family – a big traditional Chinese family that holds lots of expectations to him. During his lively family gathering, Hao is obviously gloomy. Then the game starts in a flashback narration: how was his homosexuality discovered and **how he has grown up**. Up to this point, his family is unaware of his sexual identity.

In the chapter about his childhood, questions about “what is love” are raised in a “memory card matching game” format. We as players get to know the life he grew up, it was a typical happy life since he received lots of love from his family. However, the extent he loved being with his best friend A Lei was beyond pure friendship. Ling Hao realized something different about him; using beautiful hand-drawn animation, we follow Hao's emotional journey throughout the game. He had been doubtful, worried and even depressed about his queerness. First time hearing the word “Homosexual” from TV, Hao's self-acceptance score increased as he believed himself to be gay. Feeling helpless, Hao came out to A Lei and lost his friend forever. Without any support and understandings, he grew up alone and isolated. Realizing the choking life he would have if staying at his hometown, Hao studied hard and went to a prestigious university in Beijing. In college, Hao went to a school counseling service and through conversational dialogue, he himself corrected some common misunderstandings about homosexuality, which benefited his self-acceptance. Up to this point, the player has to make the first major decision “**coming out to friends**”.

Coming out to friends didn't seem to be that hard. Ling Hao's friends were open-minded and supportive. One great thing about this game is that the player gets to explore Hao's inner thoughts and think in his perspective. As Romain Rolland once said, “There is only

one heroism in the world: to see the world as it is and to love it”, Hao doesn’t lose hope facing the pressures, instead, he embraces his true identity. In this period, the player also helps Hao in making various choices: reject other girls and being firm to his belief. The second major event in Hao’s life was **meeting his first love**, Xiao Hu. The player gets to play a “dating simulation game” and helps Hao navigating in a homosexual relationship. After this unsuccessful relationship, Hao is more experienced in the personal relationship and the player also gains “keywords unlocked” that would lead to certain narratives.

The narrative goes more intense in the following chapter “**coming out to the family**”, and the decision the player makes will affect the storyline. Through “text message”, Hao faced more direct pressure from the relatives, who urged him to meet a girl. Going home for the traditional holiday is a joyful custom, however, might be a difficult time for Hao. Stepping into his late 20s, Hao’s relatives and parents all demanded him to get married. This scene is perhaps the scene that appeared at the beginning of the game. In this narrative, the player chooses to come out directly to Hao’s whole family and has to debate with a group of relatives. This might sound cruel and intimidating, but it is necessary and important. Through the “interrogation” that are presented in a “debate” with a time limit, the player also feels stressful and oppressed. Successfully persuading the family relatives would cause Hao leaving the family and pursuing his true identity. Fail to reach the level and to convince these relatives would cause a painful shock therapy that aims to “heal” the homosexuality.

Going back to his routine life, Hao keeps meeting other gays through social media and dating apps. Chatting with various people, Hao meets a fitness instructor Wu Wei and is thus introduced to an underground gay bar. In the same time, Hao’s grandma is about to leave this world. In this emotional scene, the player decides for Hao to **come out to his beloved grandma**. To his surprise, grandma accepts his honesty and blesses him to find his true love. The family has always been the biggest burden in Hao’s life and grandma gives him courage and stabilizes his sensitive mental state.

In the next few chapters, Hao meets Xiao Long, a secret gay living in his apartment complex; John Bili, a mature gay man, and fashion social influencer in the circle; and

Chen Yu, an openly gay and doctor who always volunteers for the non-profit LGBTQ center. Attending a public lecture about AIDS and homosexuality, Hao becomes close to Doctor Chen Yu. In order to help the community and to gain more social supports, Chen Yu invites Hao to a live entertainment talk show. The player chooses to go to the show and to be open about homosexuality, which helps to educate the audiences and clear some common bias. Knowing more about Chen Yu's endeavor to fight for the LGBTQ community and to speak out for basic human rights, Hao **falls in love** with Chen Yu. Dating with Chen Yu also increases Hao's "favorability degree". Although feeling unsecured from both gay's and public's criticism and worried about the future, Hao keeps dating with Chen Yu and their relationship eventually gets stabilized. Chen Yu gets busy because of his work and social activism, which gives Hao break to meet other people. However, the player chooses to be loyal to Chen Yu, so Hao **refuses an open relationship** with others.

Finally, Hao and Chen Yu move into one apartment and they watch movies together. The player gets to play a crossword puzzle game that includes movies with homosexual themes. Ignoring the strangers' cold look, the two holds each other hands firmly. They get married in a foreign country and Hao finds his happiness.

The game is made beautifully and poetically. The background piano music feels smooth and calm, like the personality of the central character. The educational components have been implemented quite effectively. Through the game, the player gets to know some "first-hand information" on the subject. The game designer intentionally uses social media and gay bar to reveal Chinese gay men's personal and private life; by psychological counseling service, public lecture and even live talk show, this game provides plenty of details on the history of homosexuality in China, the challenges LGBTQ community has been facing, the prevailing homosexuality demonization. The creators of this game have done comprehensive research about the topic, issues such as AIDS, political activism, heteronormative standards, feminism, sex-love separation are also discussed.

What's more important, this game gives the player a sense of agency. In the beginning and throughout the game, the player is informed about the impacts each choice would have. Because each choice matters, the player feels more serious playing the game. If not choose well, the stake of losing family or losing someone's self-acceptance is high. Thus, this game has really strong narrative elements to engage the audiences, to keep the audiences think critically.

In addition, the family relationship has been an essential part of this game. No matter it is the amiable grandma, the loving mother, the kind father or the overtly nosy relatives, the game depicts various characters vividly. For any young Chinese player, regardless of their sexual orientation, traditional family value has been clashing with those more liberal modern views. Women, as well as men, are often questioned in dining table by their families if not getting married by their mid-20s. The oldest son from the family should take responsibility to continue the bloodline and glorify the ancestors. Therefore, this game becomes relevant to a larger audience. On the other hand, we are also connected to Hao's parents and feel more understandable in their perspective since parents mostly worry about their children not getting accepted by society.

Strongest Element

The strongest element from this game is the creative use of mini-games. In general, it is difficult to design an interactive narrative game that balances the gameplay and narrative well, and at the same time, creates meaningful gaming experiences for the players. The mini-games include not only drawing, typing, sending messages, but also have memory card matching, dating simulation, crossword puzzle solving, word choices game. All of these mini-games are interesting for the player and are meaningful in serving the narratives. They help the player to understand a gay's life better, to go deeply into a gay's emotional state and challenges, and some of them even stir the player's emotions. We feel more resonated with the central character Hao, and even straight people would feel sympathetic toward him.

Unsuccessful Element

The game is mostly an outstanding piece of its kind; however, the narrative of the game sometimes can be a drag on its pace. The various scenes about public lecture or psychological counseling are a little slow. The player often feels being preached by the game creator's ideology. I think it is great to educate the player through a game, to clear some misunderstanding towards others and to express certain opinions. Therefore, it is recommended to design the theatrical scene in a more effective way. By improving the pace, the word choices and the tone of the dialogue, or even by establishing vivid characters, the player would feel more comfortable accepting the political messages.

Highlight

The best and my favorite moment comes to the scene Ling Hao goes to see his grandma in the hospital. Seeing grandma lying on the bed, I feel as sad as Ling Hao. What's more heartbreaking comes to the "coming out to grandma", while we normally think that grandma would be hurt if she knows her grandson being homosexual. Like Ling Hao, as a player, I feel it is the most difficult thing to do: a dilemma between either lying to grandma and hiding who "I" truly am to my beloved grandma, or revealing my true identity which would possibly hurt grandma's feeling and impair her mentality. Before this scene, the whole family has requested Ling Hao not to tell grandma anything about his sexuality; so it becomes a great twist while grandma not only accepts Ling Hao's coming out but also encourages him to be brave and true to himself. Ling Hao's Grandma passed away after the scene, however, her spirit stays with Ling Hao and her gift – a handmade red scarf has been a symbol to Ling Hao's happiness.

Critical Reception

Since the game is released a few months ago only on a Chinese website, very few reviews from reputable sources can be found. The game has gained popularity in China and has been played nearly 1 million times on the web. In the most popular review website "Douban.com", the game has a score of 9.2 (10 being the highest).

The game caught attention from Ken Wong, the acclaimed game designer behind Monument Valley and Florence. He tweeted about “A Gay’s Life” and thought the story seemed “awesome” although he can’t understand Chinese. Having a very similar artistic design, A Gay’s life looks inspired by the game Florence but tells a Chinese gay man’s life.

The one and only English review I find useful is by Frankie Huang from supchina.com. She thinks highly of the game, which is “comprehensive, intimate and deeply moving”; and after playing the game, she thinks “the power and impact of this game cannot be understated”.

Lessons

- Lesson 1: Gameplay and mechanics should be designed to support the narratives and thus to enhance the interactive experience.
 - The various kind of mini-games has its meanings there. For example, the cross-word puzzle games in the scene that the couple watches movies together not only inform the player what movies they are watching, but also convey the subtle loving atmosphere between the two since all these movie titles are romantic homosexual movies. If the player happens to have watched any of the movies, it is easy to connect the plots and feels the characters’ lives and struggles.
- Lesson 2: Narrative games should plan dialogue effectively to avoid lengthiness. (The art of storytelling!)
 - Many narrative games have too many unnecessary dialogues, some of the dialogues are lengthy and uninteresting. A Gay’s Life has tried a great extend to educate players about Chinese gay man’s life and challenges, while sometimes it gets drag on its narratives. During the public lecture scene, the player has to click every time when a sentence is spoken. For games that have educational components, it would be better to try more forms rather than just the conversation.

- Lesson 3: It is very helpful to understand the target audience during the design process. A game can be expressive and personal, it can also be political and educational. Game designers should know what they wish to achieve.
- This game has incorporated lots of information about homosexuality in China and has tackled these issues from different angles. Some players feel a bit reluctant to choose certain options. For example, the life of some “deep closet” gays are negatively portrayed, which reinforce the stereotypes of gays that are not serious about a relationship. Thus, some players may not feel comfortable to agree with the ideology or belief this character holds. The game encourages people to come out and feels overly optimistic about the degree of social acceptance, while the reality might hurt people deeply if they choose to reveal their deep secrets.

Summation

A Gay’s Life is an emotional and engaging interactive narrative game that brings the player on a unique life journey. It is very rare to see a game with a homosexual theme in China, and it is even rare to see it gains popularity. The political messages and the pursuit of equal rights are clear and powerful. Being gay is hard, being gay in the traditional Chinese culture with less social supports could be extremely hard. In this homosexual simulation, the player gets to know a gay person’s inner thoughts since childhood and to make meaningful decisions on a person’s life. This is brilliant work, I hope more serious games like this would be made.

The game can be found here: <http://www.66rpg.com/game/1175832>