1

ANALOGUE PLAY AS AESTHETIC ENCOUNTER

REVISITING THE AURA EXPERIENCE IN THE GAMEBOOK MIGONG SERIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the *Migong* gamebook series (Forbidden City Publishing House, 2019-2022) as a case study to explore how analogue games generate *aura experience* in the post-digital age. Building on three analytical frameworks: representation, ritualization, and reciprocity, the study demonstrates how aura emerges through the interplay of material reproduction, embodied practice, and the projection of player identity. *Migong* represents historical artifacts and sites to create a "here and now" atmosphere; it ritualizes play through performative reenactment and

use-value reenactment; and it fosters reciprocity by establishing a responsive relation between players, objects, and cultural sites. Together, these mechanisms show that aura is not confined to originality or authenticity but continually arises from processes of interaction and embodied engagement. By situating analogue games as dynamic fields of cultural experience, this paper argues that they offer a vital aesthetic of encounter, allowing aura to be concretized and reanimated as a quotidian practice.

KEYWORDS

analogue game, gamebook, aura, *Migong*, game as art

INTRODUCTION

"Are games art?"

The question has sparked ongoing debate in both public discourse (e.g., the Ebert Debate) and academia (Thomas, 1988; Holmes, 2003; Smuts, 2005; Gee, 2006; Tavinor, 2009; Sharp, 2012; Parker, 2013; Sharp, 2015; Chen, 2023). Felan Parker (2018) outlines several main approaches adopted by scholars to defend the artistic legitimacy of games. One of the most common ways of defending this position is alignment with established art forms (90), which involves drawing analogies between games and other classic forms of art, such as comparing visual, sound, and narrative factors in games with painting, music, or cinema. Smuts (2005) refers to a similar strategy as a "deductive fashion," which involves applying a preferred definition of art to demonstrate that the medium fulfills its conditions and thus qualifies as art. However, because games are a highly experience-driven medium, the game-art comparisons should not be confined to the ontological level, that is, to the formal or structural properties that might qualify games as art. They must also extend to the epistemological level, attending to how games generate aesthetic experiences (Folkerts, 2010; Kirkpatrick, 2011), particularly in terms of body perception (Keogh, 2018), emotional resonance (Isbister, 2016), and

meaning-making processes (Gee, 2003), and how these experiences compare to those elicited by other art forms.

This paper refers to such an approach as comparative argument and focuses on the latter type of comparison to contribute to this ongoing discourse. It poses the following question: when games generate aesthetic experiences that are immediate, situated, ritualized, and irreproducible, do they thereby transcend their nature as commodities and mechanical/digital reproductions, and thus qualify as art? To address this question, this paper turns to analogue games which are fundamentally grounded in physical materiality and bodily engagement. Specifically, it focuses on *Migong*, a series of museum-based puzzle-adventure gamebooks published by the Forbidden City Publishing House since 2019. The *Migong* series invites its players to closely observe and physically touch replicas of historical objects, requires them to use the specific functions of these artifacts to solve puzzles, perform ritual tasks, and become involved in on-site exploration within the Palace Museum.

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura* (1931; 1936; 1939) and studies on the materiality of analogue games (Wake and Germaine, 2023; Arnaudo, 2023a; Wilhelmsson et al., 2021), this paper seeks to offer a new interpretation of how games may be experienced as art. In Benjamin's articles, aura refers to the unique presence of an artwork in time and space marked by distance, authority, and historical embeddedness. Yet the mechanical reproduction of artworks erodes this presence by displacing them from their original (ritual) context. This paper argues, however, that analogue games constitute an aesthetic experience shaped by materiality, embodiment, and cultural tactility, wherein aura can be reimagined, reactivated, and reconfigured through *play*. It first delineates the seemingly paradoxical experience of aura in the era of mechanical and digital reproduction, then adopts a three-part analytical framework: (1) *representation*, in which the analogue game constructs a "here and now" through its tokens and an illusion of historical authenticity that is both situated and distant; (2) *ritualization*, where the act of playing through touch, manipulation, and puzzle-solving restores an embodied relationship

between player and object; and (3) *reciprocity*, where the player projects identity, emotion, and cultural meaning onto the game, thus becoming a co-contributor to the aesthetic experience of aura.

AURA IN THE AGE OF MECHANICAL, DIGITAL, AND HYBRID MEDIA

Walter Benjamin's most influential description of aura is: "a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be" (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 23). For Benjamin, aura constitutes the core aesthetic quality of traditional art (Liu, 2024, 214), emphasizing the uniqueness, historicity, and irreproducibility of the artwork. Yet aura is never a stable essence. Benjamin's account carries a sensuous hesitancy. Across three works, he explores different manifestations of aura through photography, cinema, and lyric poetry respectively (1931, 1936, 1939). Each discussion takes place at a transitional moment between one medium's representational practice and another's.

Aura has been endowed with multiple denotations in different contexts: it is the shadow a cloud or branch casts over the observer (Benjamin, 1972 [1931], 20); it is a bond with the original ritual value of the artwork (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 24); and it is the cluster of associations gathered around an object of perception through *mémoire involontaire* ("involuntary memory", Benjamin, 1968 [1939], 337). It is also a relation, practically activated through feeling, affinity, and the flow of existence (Vassiliou, 2010, 158); at times it appears as a sentimental or romantic attitude, or even as the mysterious fragrance surrounding a photograph (Bolter et al., 2006b, 135). It has further been understood as the intersection of cultural meaning, rooted in shared history and collective memory, and personal meaning, rooted in individual associations and memories (MacIntyre et al., 2004). In short, aura oscillates between distance and proximity, perception and association, cultural memory and personal attachment, forming an unstable negotiation shaped by media forms, cultural practices, and experiential relations.

Although the definitions discussed above may appear fragmented and abstract, they consistently describe, from different perspectives, an aesthetic relation of experiential perception. If aura is persistently transferred across historical and technological conditions, it necessarily becomes disembedded from specific objects, media forms, or viewing practices, and is reconfigured as a perceptual and interpretive structure within new conditions. The remainder of this section therefore outlines a series of displacements of aura in evolving media contexts, to examine how it is comprehended at the intersection of mechanical, digital, and hybrid media.

Benjamin's claim that mechanical reproduction weakens (even destroys) aura (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 22) is widely recognized as a cornerstone of media theory (Bolter et al., 2006a, 21). The spread of reproduction eroded art's uniqueness and ritual value, diminishing the core forms of aura. Yet Benjamin also acknowledged the possibilities opened by reproduction—the mass dissemination and new perceptual modes. The anxiety over the aura's decline has nonetheless persisted, and not surprisingly, prompted recurring efforts to revive and reconstruct it. The early debate between Benjamin and Adorno exemplifies this tension: for Benjamin, the loss of aura reflected the social aesthetic transformation, while Adorno argued that aura resurfaced within the cultural industry and commercial logic (Adorno et al., 1999, 128). Simanowski (2002) further critiques Benjamin for confining aura to artifacts, noting that non-art objects (such as a weathered vessel) may also possess auratic qualities (6–7). Aura, therefore, is not an intrinsic quality of art but a projection of cultural expectation. Its emergence depends as much on the observer's identity and mode of perception as on the object *per se*.

The age of digital media has profoundly altered the conditions under which aura is regenerated. Digitality negates the aura based on physical presence, since it denies "presence" altogether (Vassiliou, 2010, 165). Digital products have no "original," because each copy is, in effect, an original; they often lack physical form and circulate instead as images, sounds, or networks (Blythe, 2001, 146). Therefore, digital aura detaches from the "original" and becomes embedded in

the networks of production and circulation that sustain it. Through this process, digital products generate a new mode of originality. Groys's (2016) account is particularly instructive here: since what exists in digital media are image *files* or data (not images), which remain invisible until they are rendered through acts of copying and display, a digital image cannot merely be reproduced but must be simultaneously enacted or "performed" (143). In this sense, digitalization turns visual art into performing art. However, the visual "identity" of each performance cannot be guaranteed (e.g., it may vary depending on terminals or formats), so that every display constitutes a singular and irreversible event. This constitutes a form of "event-based originality" in terms of operation and manifestation, one that is absent from mechanical reproduction. Each digital copy is thus endowed by its users with its own "here and now," thereby acquiring a manually produced, "return-to-nature" originality of aura (144).

It should be noted, however, that what Groys describes as the *regeneration* of aura in the digital age already departs from the classical structure of aura in Benjamin's sense. The aura regenerated through digital media relies heavily on momentary acts of performance: while it can be continually generated as an experience, it also loses certain structural elements of historical authenticity and a sense of distance that once stabilized aura in its classical form. As Amorim and Teixeira (2020, 7) argue, even when digital experiences can produce aura, they cannot substitute for the full experience grounded in physical space and the artwork itself. Therefore, *regeneration* does not imply a full restoration of aura from its attenuation.

At this juncture, hybrid media environments may offer a possible middle ground. The distinguishing feature of hybrid media is that it is not purely virtual; rather, it situates users in unique experiences through the convergence of physical and virtual installations. While such installations may undermine historical irreplaceability, this does not preclude the aura experience: by drawing upon the material and cultural characteristics of specific sites, they relocate historical aura to a contextual and experiential resource (Bolter et al., 2006b, 140). For example, as Blumenthal and Fisher (2021) note, a cemetery

may be transformed into a site for catching Pokémon in an AR game, a dangerous bicycle path may be reshaped into a gamified racing route, and a historic financial district may become a gathering place for political protest (200). In such scenarios, the historical meanings and cultural weight originally attached to a site do not disappear but overlap with new digital narratives and interaction, thereby reshaping how people perceptually relate to objects and spaces within specific situations. With this logic, aura becomes a design parameter; designers may even determine whether a digital experience is *crafted* as auratic (Bolter et al., 2006a, 35). Aura in the era of hybrid media could thus be understood as an experiential construction embedded in design practices and creative control. It is no longer an ontological quality tied to the artwork or the natural landscape, but has been reconfigured as an aesthetic relation generated at the intersection of the physical and the virtual.

Following MacIntyre et al.'s definition, if all systems that merge the physical and virtual worlds can broadly be called "mixed reality", then a popular medium has yet to be closely examined in discussions of aura, namely analogue games. Many contemporary analogue games not only refine their material components (such as tokens, miniatures, maps, and boards) but also integrate online iterations and site-specific, offline play. This hybrid form stages real-world interactions while preserving the materiality of the game, thereby producing aesthetic experiences that are both mimetic and realistic. Furthermore, one of the aesthetic qualities of analogue games emerges from how materiality, through embodied player interaction, generates a ritualized sense of "here and now" that resonates with cultural memory and identity. As Blumenthal and Fisher (2021, 202) have shown, aura is often mediated through multiple media relations: when museum visitors gaze at a painting while listening to an audio guide, their perception and aura experience of the work are redefined through the interplay of individual perception and technological mediation. Similarly, analogue games utilize materiality, ritualized practice, and embodied perception to reactivate the aura experience within the multilayered aesthetic field.

Here it is necessary to clarify what is meant by aesthetic experience and how it relates to art. Following John Dewey (2005 [1934]), aesthetic experience is understood as emerging from the fulfillment of experience: when experience becomes intensified, relational, rhythmic, and complete, it contains "the promise of that delightful perception which is aesthetic experience" (24–25). Art, therefore, is one possible site in which such experience is stabilized and sustained. This distinction is particularly important for understanding games, which "furnish particular kinds of experience", especially through their temporal form, rhythm, and embodied interaction (Kirkpatrick, 2011, 1-3).

It is in this sense that the next section proceeds: by analyzing the museological puzzle-adventure gamebook series *Migong*, it demonstrates how the analogue game product, within a hybrid-media context, reactivates aura through a threefold framework of representation, ritualization, and reciprocity. These are understood as three interrelated mechanisms in the formation of aesthetic experience: *representation* establishes the perceptual field by organizing objects, symbols, and historical references so that they become available to experience; *ritualization* structures action by differentiating and intensifying practices, transforming ordinary actions into experience-bearing forms; *reciprocity* completes the experiential structure by articulating a responsive relation between players, the game system, and its cultural context, within which aesthetic experience is realized. Taken together, these three perspectives align with the distinctive features of *Migong* and constitute an analytical trajectory that moves from representational form, through operative practices, to relational structures.

REPRESENTATION, RITUALIZATION, AND RECIPROCITY IN MIGONG

Imagine receiving a lost work from a Qing Dynasty court painter in

1766. Hand-bound in the traditional four-hole stitching method[1], with the book corners wrapped in silk and the text written in the *Wuyingdian* movable typeface[2], maintaining the conventional top-to-bottom, right-to-left layout. It is accompanied by a collection of identifiable historical items, some of which are exhibited in the Palace Museum, including court paintings (such as architecture, ritual vessels, and portraits), a former hand-drawn map of the Forbidden City, a Qianlong Tongbao coin[3], and a Yanpi ancient method Xuan Paper[4].

Now, it invites its receivers to observe and touch the texture of these artifacts closely and requires them to use the unique functions of these miniatures to solve puzzles, conduct rituals, and enact performances. This is the puzzle adventure gamebook *Migong: Ruyi Linlang Tuji* ("Mystery Palace: Map of Treasures in the Palace", hereafter "*Migong I*"), the first of the series published in 2019. The crowdfunding event for this project was launched on October 24, 2018, with a goal of 100,000 CNY. By November 30, it had raised 20.2 million CNY and pre-sold 122,000 copies, approximately 200 times the original goal (modian.com). It was awarded the 2019 Annual Grand Prize of the *Jin Zhu* Award for China Cultural Intellectual Property (huanqiu.com). As of 2024, the Forbidden City Publishing House had published three *Migong* gamebooks, achieving significant sales in China and through international e-commerce platforms.

The history of gamebooks (also known as "puzzle adventure books") dates back to the 1940s and flourished in the late 1970s, as

1. The "four-hole stitching method" (sì kǒng zhuāngdìng 四孔装订) is a traditional Chinese bookbinding technique, standardized in the Ming and Qing dynasties, in which four holes are pierced along the spine and sewn with thread.
2. The "Wuyingdian movable typeface" (武英殿活字) was a Qing dynasty typeface developed under the imperial Printing Office of the Wuying Hall, reflecting both technological refinement and cultural authority.
3. The "Qianlong Tongbao" coin (乾隆通宝) refers to copper-alloy cash coins minted during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1736–1796) of the Qing dynasty. Cast in multiple imperial and provincial mints, the coins bore the inscription "Qianlong Tongbao" in regular script.
4. "Yanpi ancient method Xuan Paper" (雁皮古法金宣纸) is a high-quality handmade paper renowned for its durability, fineness, and suitability for calligraphy and painting.

exemplified by the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series (1979–1998) and the *Fighting Fantasy* series (1982–1995). In China during the 2000s, gamebooks typically appeared as supplements or paratexts rather than as standalone publications, such as the paper-based mini role-playing game *Naiqi De Damaoxian* ("Naiqi's Big Adventure," 2003–2006) serialized in *Kids Cartoon* magazine, and the detective game comics *Xiaodangjia Zhentan Youxi Manhua* ("Xiaodangjia Detective Game Comic", mid-2000s) distributed in instant noodle packages. Since the advent of the digital age, the rise of online literature and visual novels has greatly constrained the living space for gamebooks. It was not until after 2010, when "digital interconnectedness had become so pervasive that a sense of fatigue had begun to seep in" (Arnaudo, 2023a, 15), that analogue games made an unexpected comeback. At the same time, game studies has witnessed a "material turn" (Jayemanne, 2017), with growing attention to the relations among the material infrastructures of digital games, technology, and the body, as well as to games as situated cultural practices (Wake and Germaine, 2023, 1).

Within this context, the *Migong* series has emerged as a rare analogue game product in China that has achieved widespread acceptance and commercial success. This study posits two reasons for its popularity: first, the proliferation of interactive/visual novel mobile games and the surge of *Jubensha* games (Xiong et al., 2023) since 2015 have familiarized audiences with the gameplay and fun of gamebooks, building a considerable user base; and second, the trend of *Guochao* ("national chic") aesthetics (Kong, 2024), particularly the historical-themed cultural merchandise of the Palace Museum, has also attracted many enthusiasts. Similarly, *Migong* embodies such a unique "cultural fragrance" (Iwabuchi, 2002) of Chineseness, which has become its core attraction.

This study examines how *Migong* employs historically-themed physical artifacts as analogue props to invite players into performative acts of puzzle-solving, blending online iterations with site-specific offline play to generate an immediate sense of "here and now," while simultaneously responding to the player's gaze and

expectations. It argues that Migong's significance does not lie in the ontological originality of its artifacts, nor in any attempt to replace the aura of original objects preserved in the Palace Museum. Rather, its stakes lie in how playable objects function in aesthetic experience.

This distinction is crucial because originalist positions tie aesthetic value firmly to material continuity: what Riegl (1996 [1903], 73) terms "age value" depends on the "perceptible traces of the passage of time on the material surface" that cannot be reconstructed through reproduction. Similarly, Ruskin (2015 [1849], 185) characterizes restoration or replication as "a lie from beginning to end," as the historical life carried by the original work cannot be transmitted. Within this framework, reproductions are excluded from aura experience because they are presupposed as substitutes for the original.

A different theoretical approach, however, redefines the aesthetic function of reproduction in terms of how it (re)organizes experience. Grundy and Panofsky (2010 [1930], 333) emphasize that the task of facsimile reproduction is not to replace the original, but to convey the "artistic intention" and experience embedded within it. This becomes even more pronounced in the context of digital media, as Davis (1995, 381) argues that "there is no longer a clear conceptual distinction between original and reproduction," and that aura is generated in "the originality of the moment when we see, hear, read, repeat, revise" (386). Latour and Lowe (2011, 275-277) likewise conceptualize this process as the "migration" of aura, whereby reproduction redistributes attention and interpretive labor.

From this perspective, whether reproductions can generate auratic experience depends on whether they reorganize modes of seeing, understanding, and participation. The following analysis of *Migong* proceeds accordingly: rather than treating the gamebook as a discounted substitute for the original artifacts, it examines how the analogue game design enables the generation of aura experience.

REPRESENTATION

The unique experiences afforded by analogue games are grounded in their materiality: the weight of miniatures, the textures of paper, the spatial arrangement of dioramas, and the tactility of tokens—all these physical details collectively construct an aesthetic field (Arnaudo, 2023b). Drawing on Laura U. Marks's notion of "haptic criticism" (2002), which foregrounds multisensory engagement over vision-dominant perception, this section takes the *Migong* series as a case study to show how analogue games activate aura experience through *representation*.

A reproduction, when encountered by an audience in a particular situation, can reactivate the reproduced object (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 22). Here, *reactivation* does not imply the restoration of the original object's physical presence or historical authority, but refers to the re-engagement of its perceptual experience and interpretive structures within a new situation. A representative instance is *Migong I*'s incorporation of the *Huangchao Liqi Tushi* (1766), an important Qing-dynasty illustrated manuscript that systematically documents ritual vessels, such as sacrificial implements, musical instruments, court attire, royal regalia, and military equipment. Each item's dimensions, materials, decorative schemes, and associated rank hierarchies are meticulously recorded; the original manuscript is preserved and exhibited at the Palace Museum (Figure 1). *Migong I* also includes eighteen attached artifacts (Figure 2), such as a Qianlong-era map of the Forbidden City, a *Qianlong Tongbao* coin, a traditional writing brush, and the calligraphy *Kuaixue Shiqing Tie* ("Letter about a Snowy Day"), some reproduced at 1:1 scale (Yu & Zhang, 2020, 103).

Beyond material reproduction, *Migong I* heightens historical immersion through multisensory design. The texture of Xuan paper, the weight of copper coins, and the fragrance of ink collectively evoke a historical atmosphere—recognized not as knowledge but as sensation. This resonates with Benjamin's later discussion of *mémoire involontaire* (2008 [1939], 337), suggesting that aura can surface through affective arousal triggered by material objects. In addition,

each chapter's scene is paired with setting-appropriate background music: during the Lantern Festival, one hears fireworks and silk-and-bamboo music; and outside *Xihua* Gate in the morning, the hawking of street vendors. The visuals likewise accurately reconstruct historical scenes. For instance, a church near the Forbidden City in the Qianlong period was redrawn based on preserved photographs (Chen, 2020, 71).

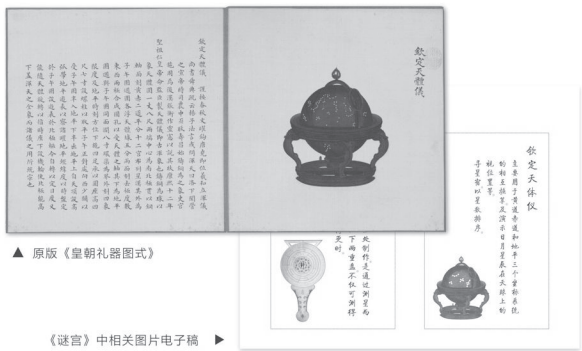


Figure 1: Huangchao Liqi Tushi's *Original and its Reproduction in the Gamebook. https://zhongchou.modian.com/item/36001.html*

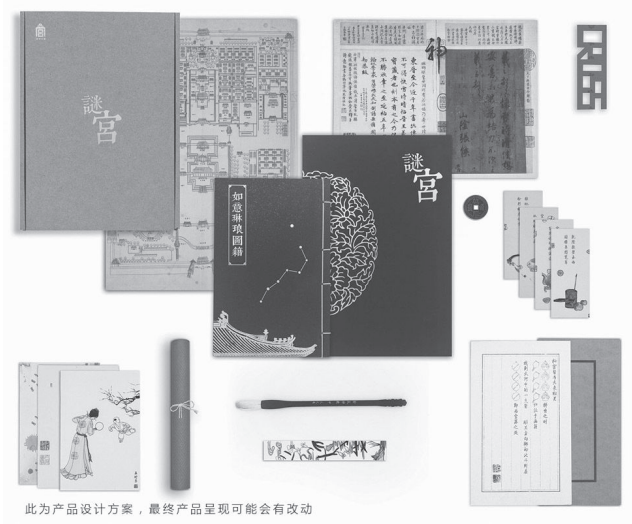


Figure 2: "Migong: Ruyi Linlang Tuji" *Gamebook, Forbidden City Publishing House, 2019. https://zhongchou.modian.com/item/36001.html*

In the game, players are first required to enter a slowed-down, highly concentrated mode of looking, and carefully examine the reproduced items to find clues. For example, one puzzle is designed as a Chinese era wheel: the underlying logic of construction must be apprehended to find the meaning. Players must attend to the different textual systems and gradations inscribed on each ring to find the solution through rotation and alignment. This process parallels the typical museum experience of encountering a historical object, in which viewers move from watching its appearance ("what it looks like") to grasping its functionality ("how it originally worked"), and to understanding the meaningful correspondences between its components ("which part signifies what").

Further, the game guides players into a comparative and inferential process of interpretation. For instance, in *Migong II*, the conclusion that a candidate's examination paper was swapped requires players to establish connections across multiple sets of discrete materials, including stylistic features and writing formats evident in the paper, documents indicating examination procedures, and proofs of

personal identity. It is through the comparison of these materials and the testing of competing hypotheses that "the candidate was impersonated" emerges as the most convincing judgment. This process also resembles the experience of interpretive synthesis in museums, where audiences reconstruct a historical event by navigating interconnections and discrepancies across materials. As players traverse the game world, a polyphony of aura emerges from the interplay of auditory, haptic, and visual elements.

Vassiliou (2010, 165) observes that contemporary art museums may be the only places where any object, device, or installation is presented with the same artistic aura. Yet the dynamic processes of play unsettle such "de-stylized eternity", as they regenerate a sense of uniqueness through embodied action and constructed narrative. In this sense, *Migong I* simulates the act of visiting a museum: players contemplate the (reproduced) artwork through a multisensory apparatus, while the narrative furnishes a historical frame that wraps these artworks in a mysterious, solemn, and distant atmosphere. Crucially, this museum-like encounter establishes an enactable aesthetic relationship (Greenblatt, 1991; Alpers, 1991) between player and artifact through the orchestration of distance and the disciplining of haptics—a gaze completed only through body, action, and practice. Specifically, *Migong* externalizes the interpretive processes of art appreciation into an embodied, rule-based script, constructing a game world through reproduced proportions, materials, and landscapes. Within this framework, actions such as identification and comparison disperse the visual task, which now works in concert with the tactile, auditory, and olfactory senses.

In Benjamin's terms, aura is "the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be" (1972 [1931], 20). The closer the viewer gets to an artwork, the more aware they become of the distance between themselves and that artwork. Even if a painting could be marred, its historical connotations remain intact (Bolter et al., 2006a, 24). This seemingly paradoxical "proximal distance" is precisely the distinctive expression of analogue games: players can form an intimate relationship with the analogue replica (game

props), yet they simultaneously highlight the historical inaccessibility and distance between themselves and the original artifacts (Palace Museum exhibits) that span centuries. *Migong I*'s representation of the Qianlong-era Forbidden City seeks to craft a historical atmosphere and a "cultural fragrance" (Iwabuchi, 2002) for contemporary players, while situating their engagement with reproduced objects within an interpretive framework of historical contextualization. It does not, however, attempt to restore the aura of lost spaces or objects in their original contexts; rather, it conceptualizes aura as a mode of present-tense experience (Blumenthal & Fisher, 2021, 204). On this view, the gaze gathered before the artwork becomes a contemporary source of aura, and the deliberate construction of distance is the very procedure by which aura gathers around the artwork (Pitman, 2023, 80).

In sum, the aura experience generated in *Migong* arises from a continuously sustained series of actions: a tension is produced between the proximity afforded by tactile, usable, and operable items and the persistent marking of these objects as historically inaccessible referents. Within this tension, players' attempts to approach these objects are frustrated by historical distance, yet reactivated through present interaction. Aura thus no longer appears as a static attribute surrounding an object, but as an enduring experience generated and maintained through interaction. Resonating with Benjamin's definition of aura as the appearance of distance in proximity, *Migong* further demonstrates how such a relation can be organized through rule-based practices, embodied participation, and representational design.

RITUALIZATION

Ritualization structures how players act within the game. Reception aesthetics reminds us that the meaning of a text is only completed through the reader's engagement (Jauss, 1982). Likewise, the "text" in analogue games is not a static collection of symbols, but is activated through the player's actions, performances, and uses. As Aarseth

(1997) emphasizes in his theory of *ergodic literature*, the player/reader must expend effort to traverse the game's cybertext; these actions place the player in a cyclical relationship between bodily involvement and interpretive labor, making them co-creators of narrative and meaning. Aura emerges when players transform the symbolic meaning of representation into performable meaning through their embodied, ritualized play.

Although art does not originate from ritual, it is continually constituted through designed and performed ritualistic practices. Benjamin argues that the earliest works of art originated from magical or religious rituals, and their existence has "never entirely separated from its ritual function" (2008 [1936], 24). Ritual, as Huizinga (1998 [1949], 25) notes, is itself performance, representation, drama, and the realization of imagination. The aesthetic appeal of analogue games lies in their capacity to generate ritualistic experiences through reenactment. Such experiences are not merely symbolic but also functional: players must rely on these objects to solve puzzles, trigger responses, and thereby create meaning through their use. This section examines the *Migong* series from two dimensions: performative reenactment and use-value reenactment.

Performative reenactment can be understood as the invocation of distant times. In analogue games, ritual practices such as sacrifice, pilgrimage, and ceremony are translated into structured mechanisms of performance, through which players access a temporality that "recalls" history via simulated and procedural actions. This experience unfolds in three ways. First, the very act of opening a thread-bound book and reading from right to left, top to bottom, invokes a ritualistic retrospection of historical patterns[5]. Second, the identities players assume (e.g., archivist of Qing court manuscripts, treasure-map tracker, or detective of mysteries) each align with specific ritual

5. Reading from right to left and top to bottom has been a long-standing convention in classical Chinese textual culture. As this orientation is no longer used in most modern Chinese reading practices, it now functions as a recognizable semiotic cue for "the historical" in contemporary cultural production.

scripts and role-bound actions. Third, the game requires autonomous, embodied *play*.

A representative example can be found in *Migong II*. The game is based on the historical *Wuwu* Examination Scandal of the Xianfeng reign in the Qing dynasty and centers on corruption in the *Shuntian* provincial examination, the case of an opera performer passing the exam, and the chain of related investigations that followed. Players are required to intervene as investigators and to engage in a series of concrete bodily operations through which historical procedures are realized. For instance, clues instruct players to place paper materials in front of a light source so that concealed traces can be revealed through backlighting. This action simulates the procedural gestures of historical document inspection and evidence verification, in which paper texture and ink marks are subjected to physical scrutiny. At the same time, the game requires players to cross-reference clues and archival materials, and assemble paper models to gradually reconstruct the crime scene. In this process, the action sequences required of the investigator and the institutional relations embedded within them are incorporated into the gameplay, allowing historical investigation and bureaucratic procedures to be enacted performatively. The process is a quasi-theatrical, ritualized reenactment of a historical role grounded in the execution of procedural acts.

Use-value reenactment manifests in the game's purposeful touch. The unique value of "authentic" artworks is rooted in their ritual, that is, in their "original use-value," and even in the most secular forms of aesthetic worship, this ritual foundation persists (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 24). Here, the game's props are functional tools that must be used correctly. In *Migong I*, this becomes evident through several features:

- *Yanpi Ancient Method Xuan Paper*: Known for its high cost and intricate craftsmanship, players must use its semi-transparent texture to overlay text and reveal hidden answers.

- *Qianlong Tongbao Coin*: By peering through the square hole, the coin becomes a lens through which players can observe the Chinese characters and solve the puzzle.
- *Hand-drawn Map of the Forbidden City*: Players are required to continuously fold, unfold, and piece together the corners of the map to reveal "hidden paths." This action is both a tactile and spatial re-interpretation of historical space.
- *Heart Sutra ("Xin Jing")*: Players use a water-dipped brush to erase certain radicals of Chinese characters, gradually assembling the puzzle's solution.

These examples show how analogue games reactivate the functionality (use-value) of reproduced artifacts, that is, the authenticity in practice. These cultural artifacts are wielded as keys, lenses, codes, or paths. Aura arises from their dual role as both cultural symbols and operative game mechanics. Although players are not physically wandering the Forbidden City, through ritual enactment and role-play, they fashion an illusion of identity. In donning this "mask" of what Huizinga (1998 [1949], 38) describes as both "a purely aesthetic experience" and "an artwork", players encounter aesthetic emotions that mix beauty, fear, and mystery, transporting them beyond the sphere of ordinary life.

In sum, performative reenactment and use-value reenactment together constitute the operative mechanisms of *ritualization* in analogue games. Ritualization does not merely refer to the execution of ritual acts but to an experience that differentiates certain practices from others (Bell, 1992, 7). In *Migong*, rituality emerges from the way players assume specific identities and their corresponding scripts of action, thereby situating themselves within prescribed postures, rhythms, and perceptions. Through this process, the sense of history and mystery is embedded in the logic of action, giving rise to an experience distinct from everyday life.

In the context of modern art, exhibition value has increasingly displaced ritual value (Benjamin, 2008 [1936], 27), and artworks have

accordingly shifted toward modes of viewing and consumption. *Migong*, however, adopts a reverse operation. Through its ritualized game structure, reproduced objects are inserted into practices centered on enactment and use. Reproduction becomes an experiential process that is jointly sustained through embodied and ritualistic engagement. It is through this process that aura is further released.

RECIPROCITY

Reciprocity completes the experiential structure of aesthetic experience by establishing a relation of response between player and game. In *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire* (1939), Benjamin proposes that the "reciprocity of the gaze" constitutes a core element of the aura. We do not merely gaze at the artwork; the artwork, in turn, gazes back at us:

> Inherent in the gaze, however, is the expectation that it will be returned by that on which it is bestowed. Where this expectation is met (which, in the case of thought processes, can apply equally to an intentional gaze of awareness and to a glance pure and simple), there is an *Erfahrung* ("experience") of the aura in all its fullness. (Benjamin, 2008 [1939], 338)

Here, *Erfahrung* refers to a cumulative and enduring experience that can sediment into memory, in contrast to the fleeting and shocked experiences (*Erlebnis*) characteristic of modernity. What distinguishes such experiences is not the intensity of perception, but their capacity to form a coherent temporal and relational whole: the viewer projects attention toward the object, the object responds in a certain manner, and this reciprocal movement is consciously apprehended and integrated as experience – through which aura is activated and experienced. Based on this understanding, this section takes the "on-site exploration" mechanics of the *Migong* gamebook series as an example to demonstrate how, in the process of analogue play, players and artworks establish a reciprocal relation of gazing and response, and how players, through embodied participation and symbolic re-creation, become co-conspirators in the aura experience.

As previously discussed, analogue games share a similar logic

with mixed reality media: they draw upon the physical and cultural specificity of particular sites to generate a unique "here and now" experience (Bolter et al., 2006a, 23). This experience maintains a tangible connection to place through the embodied actions of players. In *Migong I*, after completing the main storyline, players discover hidden clues pointing to real-world locations in the Palace Museum. Players are required to carry a flashlight as well as several items attached to the gamebook, such as a waist tag and a foldable map, to interact with on-site installations: at the sundial near the *Xiehe* Gate plaque, players must adjust the angle and distance of the light so that shadows are cast onto the stone surface, rendering otherwise inconspicuous engravings legible; the waist tag must then be placed over symbolic diagrams and aligned through its perforated openings to reveal a clue indicating the next location; and the foldable map is unfolded and refolded while walking, allowing markings on the paper to overlap and form new intersections that correspond to actual routes within the palace grounds, guiding players toward the next installations.

These practices complete a cyclical relation between gaze and response. Gameplay compels players to re-enter buildings and artifacts that were previously encountered through detached viewing, reconstituting them as operational spaces in which physical structures and functional properties are mobilized as clues and keys for puzzle-solving, and acquiring new symbolic meanings through players' observation and action. In short, players enact a gaze charged with the expectation of response: through concrete actions, they pose questions to the site and await its answer. Watching, interpreting, and performing are no longer endpoints. Play proceeds only when the site responds and that response is successfully apprehended.

Migong also fosters an embodied playership. In the game, players "write themselves in" through the traces they leave behind, such as the creases in the paper, fingerprints, and the contours of cuts. As discussed earlier, the efficacy of ritualization lies in the ways a practice differentiates itself from others (Bell, 1992, 7); these traces mark the irreversible distinctions generated in each participation. More-

over, *Migong*'s site-based exploration gameplay further encourages players to embed their personal identities within the game experience. In *Migong I*, the final puzzle leads to the *Dongchangfang* Image Shop in the Palace Museum. Upon arrival, players receive a commemorative booklet and may print a personalized cover featuring their portrait and name, thereby embedding their identity within the material form of the text. In *Migong II*, players must carry the *Dianshi Ce* (imperial examination paper provided with the gamebook) to the *Chizao* Hall to claim their reward. There, players inscribe their names and receive the *Jinbang Timíng* ("accepted to the golden list") seal in a simulated ceremony. Through such designs, personal identity is overlaid with cultural ritual, transforming individual gameplay into symbolic material and process. As a result, the game experience does not dissipate with the end of play but is stabilized through material inscription, extending into broader relational chains and becoming integrated as "long experience" (*Erfahrung*).

Whether in the form of *procedural* responses that advance puzzle pathways, *material* responses that register traces left through operation, or *symbolic* responses in which personal identity is inscribed into the gamebook, *Migong* demonstrates its affordances as a media apparatus that enables responsive gazes. Although Benjamin understands aura as arising in the moment when a gaze is returned, he nonetheless conceives it as a residual form of experience—one that is fading, fragmentary, and only momentarily reactivated. Such experience presupposes the disintegration of *Erfahrung* under conditions of modernity and is therefore marked by contingency, fragility, and nostalgia. By contrast, analogue games reorganize and encode this relational structure as an operational mechanism that can be anticipated, verified, and repeatedly activated. Under these new media conditions, the "responsive gaze" no longer functions merely as an echo of a vanishing experience, but serves as an apparatus through which the reciprocity of aura becomes perceptible. Therefore, reproduction can be incorporated into the construction of aesthetic experience under specific configurations. Game space thus becomes an environment that "actively creates culture and contextualizes mean-

ing" (Penix-Tadsen, 2016, p. 178). Cultural sites and historical symbols are reactivated within the game world, continuing to operate as dynamic fields in which meaning is produced through reciprocal play.

CONCLUSION: THE AURATIC AESTHETICS OF ENCOUNTER

This study has examined the *Migong* gamebook series through the lens of Benjamin's theory of aura in conjunction with analogue game studies, exploring how analogue play generates aesthetic experience in the post-digital age. Drawing on the three analytical frameworks of representation, ritualization, and reciprocity, it has demonstrated that within the analogue game medium, aura is continually generated through the interplay of material reproduction, ritualized practice, and the collusion of player identity.

Representation shows that reproductions do not necessarily diminish aura but instead contribute to the construction of a situated "here and now" through gameplay. By representing historical artifacts and sites, the game generates an immersive atmosphere in which players experience temporal distance through acts of touch, gaze, comparison, and juxtaposition. This cultivated "distance" operates as a positive aesthetic strategy: the tension it generates reveals that even within highly reproducible media environments, aura may emerge in novel ways.

Ritualization reveals that the generative mechanism of aura is rooted in the player's embodied operations. Through performative reenactment and use-value reenactment, players engage in solemnized actions—transcribing, assembling, folding, and overlaying—that transform gameplay into a theatrical ritual experience. In this process, play itself becomes *art-in-action*.

Reciprocity highlights the responsive relationship among players, objects, and sites, foregrounding embodied play as a distinctive aesthetic mode. Game space is not a static container of meaning but a dynamic field in which meaning is continually generated through

interaction. Through the projection of identity and the re-creation of cultural contexts, players become co-creators of aura. Embodied play thus constitutes a form of cultural production in which responsiveness and collaboration together shape the distinctive aesthetic mechanism of analogue games. Aura no longer belongs exclusively to the work or the site; rather, it emerges through the interrelation of player, object, and space.

As Vassiliou (2010) has argued, to rethink Walter Benjamin's concept of aura cannot be limited to evaluating its "validity" in contemporary media, since such an approach already operates within an instrumental rationality that treats aura as a conceptual object to be verified or deemed obsolete. Nor should aura be reduced to a mere conceptual adjustment designed to fit the critical discourses of digital culture, for we can no longer position ourselves *outside* media in order to judge whether aura "exists" or not: the relationship between media and subject has itself shifted toward a highly entangled, increasingly "atmospheric" condition (158). What matters instead is to trace how aura continues to migrate across regimes of representation. As MacIntyre et al. (2004, 39) note, the experience created within a place or object imbued with aura partakes in that aura. If aura is always in a state of permanent crisis and renewal (Bolter et al., 2006a, 21), then inquiry must shift from abstract definitional updates to concrete cultural practices and modes of experience. This paper has argued that analogue games provide precisely such a supplement – they allow aura to be perceived not only as an aesthetic disposition but also as a quotidian practice.

Migong thus directs us toward an auratic aesthetics of encounter, an artistic engagement that is intimate, sustained, and profoundly processual. It offers a pathway grounded in materiality, rituality, and relationality, allowing aura to be concretized and experienced in the post-digital age. The redefinition of art today is increasingly concerned with how unique experiences are created, and games, as media and cultural products, distinguish themselves in that they can be not only *presented* as art but also *played* as art. As Huizinga (1998 [1949], 38) reminds us, the moment one dons a mask, one is trans-

ported into a world beyond everyday life. Games return us to the world of the "barbarian, child, and poet"—a world suffused with ritual, imagination, and aura experience.

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