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Industry Logic of Chinese Mobile Game Reskins in the Global App Empire

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Abstract

Through the case study of the mobile title *Game of Sultans*, this article examines the proliferation of iterative and copycat games through the practice of reskins in the mobile game industry. Based on year-long autoethnographic fieldwork working in a Chinese mobile game company, I provide an on-the-ground perspective of how Orientalist representations in reskinned games are instrumentalized through the roles of "cultural brokers" and the work of localization for Western markets. By taking a theoretical and technological understanding of reskins, I argue that reskinned games, as a form of industrial mimicry, while an important aspect of standardized game production, can also serve as means of subversion against seemingly totalizing control of the US-dominated app economy. This article addresses the dearth of studies in theorizing the industry practice of game reskins beyond just a monetization tool but also its extractive labor process within the global app empire.

Keywords

Game reskins; Orientalism; app economy; mobile game industry; localization; cultural imperialism

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A simple search for "palace games" on the Google Play or Apple App Store will result in dozens of similar-looking games set in different eras, such as ancient China, medieval Europe, and feudal Japan. Palace games can be loosely classified as empire-building simulation games where the player takes on the role as an emperor or king to defeat enemies, court maidens, and conquer new lands. The proliferation of palace games reflects the widespread industry practices of reskinning, whereby near-identical games are made using the same general mechanics with only thematic differences. Unlike in-game skins, which are assets sold and exchanged within the game, reskinned games involve the cosmetic overhaul of entire games incorporating different visuals, settings, and storylines while maintaining the same core mechanics. Beyond palace games, there are countless other imitation games on the

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app stores, spanning multitudes of genres and categories, many of which are reskins of other games. Game reskins are widely adopted within the global mobile game industry as low-risk and cost-effective means of game development, particularly among smaller game studios lacking resources to produce standalone games (Chong, 2018). Many of these games are inexpensive adaptations of popular titles from China, featuring new aesthetics and themes to better suit global markets. Unsurprisingly, nearly all palace games are created by Chinese developers.

Palace games, also known as *gongdou* (palace struggle) games in Chinese, refer to stories of court intrigue, backstabbing, and romances popularized across Chinese literature, film, and television. Among the multitudes of palace games, *Game of Sultans* (2018), published by Mechanist Games in China, stands out as one of the most notable examples. According to game analytics firm Niko Partners, *Game of Sultans* ranked among the top ten most profitable Chinese mobile games in markets such as Russia and Indonesia (Niko Partners, 2019). Such successes are just one of the many examples in a mobile game landscape increasingly dominated by Chinese companies, where, in 2023, 39 out of the 100 highest-grossing mobile game publishers were from China (Astle, 2023). In recent years, Chinese tech companies have invested heavily in "going abroad" due to regulatory crackdowns, release quotas, and domestic censorship (Huang, 2023), with popular titles such as *Genshin Impact* (2020) and *Honor of Kings* (2015) being among the most profitable mobile games globally.

Yet, existing literature on mobile gaming in China tends to focus on top-down perspectives such as regulatory policy (Fung, 2017; Tai & Hu, 2017), gaming addiction (Szablewicz, 2020), piracy/copycatting (Liao, 2016), player reception/resistance (Davies, 2022; Huang & Liu, 2022), and nationalism/representation (Liboriussen & Martin, 2020; Li & Li, 2023). Comparatively few scholarly works address the actual labor and everyday production practices within the industry in China. Nieborg (2021), for instance, called for more research regarding the "meteoric rise of Chinese game developers on the app store". This article, therefore, offers an insider account into the production logic of a typical mobile game from a grounded perspective behind the corporate veil. Here, my own working experiences and autoethnographic inquiries provide much-needed empirical perspectives of the mobile game industry to fully unravel its often-opaque production processes. I advocate for the need to decenter the focus on gameplay and instead turn to the underlying labor, operational logics, and platform infrastructures in governing what is accessible to gamers worldwide.

Set during the Ottoman Empire, *Game of Sultans* is an illustrative example of a reskinned game where the original Chinese setting is swapped for other cultures. Such strategies are frequently employed by Chinese game companies to adapt local titles by replacing existing art assets to quickly sell to different overseas markets. The Google Play Store page for *Game of Sultans* offers this vivid game description (Figure 1):

Game of Sultans is an exciting new empire simulation RPG game in which you get to experience the life of a Sultan – a king of Europe and the Middle East! Every detail has been attended to so that players can immerse themselves in brutal wars, military strategy, flirtatious romance, empire management, political intrigue, and more! This exciting RPG and build game is developed by Mechanistgames and has enlarged its market from Arabic countries to worldwide countries.

Key Features:

– Become a Sultan – Experience an empire at your command!
– Assemble your harem – Romance beautiful and influential queens!
– Recruit warlords – Rally a fiersome council of historical viziers!
– Raise a family – Lovingly raise your children from childbirth to young adults!
– Join PvP – Marshal your armies against other players worldwide!
– Forge alliances – Make friends and enemies, join the good fight!
– Turkish Coffee – Drink, chat, then listen as the fortuneteller interprets each cup!

Figure 1. Google Play Store description of *Game of Sultans*. © Google Play Store

These myriads of Oriental tropes divulge the curious decision made by Chinese game developers to reimagine palace games in the Middle East. However, as this paper will demonstrate, game reskins are not simply a form of localization to be more marketable to Western audiences;[1] they also underscore the extractive industry logic of the global game production process.

Drawing from my own experiences working in the Chinese mobile game industry, I examine the contentious production of Chinese mobile games and their Orientalist depictions of the Middle East—made for Western audiences but produced in China. In doing so, I approach the understanding of game reskins through both theoretical

[1] I use the term Western audiences based on the target market of the game company I worked for, which includes North America, Europe, and Middle East.

and technological frameworks. I use the case study of *Game of Sultans* to advance two intersecting interventions. First, I unravel how the localization of palace games complicates notions of Orientalism where the tropes of palace intrigue, erotic harem, and Eastern mystique are (re)produced through the Chinese production of game reskins for international markets. Second, I explore how the production of reskins is instrumentalized through the exploitation of Global South laborers, manifesting in the tensions between prevailing Western platform dominance and a rising Chinese game industry. Here, I argue that while reskins—as a form of industrial mimicry—are an important aspect of standardized game production, they can also be potential forms of subversion against the seemingly totalizing control of the US-dominated app economy. This article addresses the dearth of studies theorizing the industry practice of game reskins beyond just a monetization tool, but also as part of the exploitative labor process within the transnational app production. The success of palace games demonstrates the complex entanglement of representation, labor, and technology, all caught up within the imperial circuits of digital commodity exchange that are part of the global app empire.

This article is based on 13 months IRB-approved ethnographic fieldwork from August 2019 to September 2020, working as a localizer at a small Chinese mobile game company in the city of Guangzhou, China. As a full-time employee of the company, I was responsible for determining whether elements of a game (textual, technical, and artistic) were appropriate or inappropriate for Western audiences. I was directly involved in reskinning several palace games in various settings for the US and European markets. While this article is primarily autoethnographic, I conducted semi-structured interviews with seven members of my localization team outside of the workplace or during breaks.[2] Because of the nebulous nature of corporate institutions, I had to sign a non-disclosure agreement ensuring the anonymity of the company, its employees, and its intellectual property (IP). I was, however, free to observe and document everyday office interactions and game production processes. This NDA is also written in conjunction with the IRB approval process to protect my interlocutors and ensure they cannot be traced back to the parent company. Additionally, my employment within the company also addresses some of the ethical concerns associated with an outside academic, but rather, as a colleague working within and alongside my informants.

By combining autoethnographic and ethnographic approaches, I also channel what corporate ethnographers consider as the need to move away from participant observation to observant participation (Moeran, 2009). Becoming a worker, therefore,

[2] My sampling size is composed of the entire localization team at the company, consisting of seven individuals. The gender composition is three women and four men, hailing from China, Russia, US, Spain, France, and the UK. Their names are anonymized to protect their identity.

provides the immersion needed to dissect the symbolic interplay between structures of power and individual agency in the game industry. Although working in the industry brings about its own sets of power dynamics via my background as an academic, being a full-time employee allowed me to gain the trust from my interlocutors as a colleague as opposed to an outside researcher. Developing strong working relationships with my interlocutors also meant that personal ties evolved and strengthened over time, which often elicited more candid and personal responses that helped in levelling some of the asymmetry associated with my positionality as a worker/researcher. As such, I not only gained intimate insights into the innerworkings of how games are reskinned, but also experienced working realities within the game industry, especially during a time of increasing precarity, austerity, and layoffs within the game industry.

Here, my methodology is manifested in a rather roundabout way. Due to the existing NDA, I cannot disclose the actual game I worked on, but it is a palace game set in medieval Europe that shared the same target market as *Game of Sultans*. Since *Game of Sultans* shares a similar production process with nearly all other palace games, it presents a representative case study for examining how different types of palace games are reskinned. In other words, my own experiences making reskins can offer insights into how other palace games are made. My methodology is, therefore, reflexive of my wider argument that the proliferation of reskins is predicated on subversive use of mimicry as a standardized practice within mobile game companies in China. This, in turn, allows me to make broader claims about how game reskins are produced (and reproduced) on the industry level as imitations games. Moreover, the labor of mobile game production is often a complex and layered process involving multitudes of intervening interests and actors. Chinese developers and gamers alike are often at the mercy of the intersecting oppression of platform limitations, corporate control, and state policy. My work channels what Consalvo (2016) considers as the roles of "cultural brokers" negotiating the contentious cultural schisms in an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan production process. For Consalvo, what makes games culturally unique lies not within national origins but in the interaction between the industry, market, and the specific social context in which the games are created. Likewise, my dual identity as a Chinese American positions me to negotiate the often conflicting and contradictory process of adapting games from Chinese contexts to different national contexts.

Labor, cultural translation, and the imperial logic of game reskins

Existing scholarship on game skins mainly focus on its role as cosmetic microtransactions (Reza et al., 2022) or their relationship to gambling and loot box mechanics (Macey & Hamari, 2019; Perks, 2020). While in-game skins are a highly visible form of monetization that are largely self-contained within a given game, reskins, as the main focus of this article, represent an industry practice that remains largely hidden.

Unsurprisingly, little work has been done theorizing game skins as an industrial practice beyond in-game assets but how entire games are reproduced through thematic and cosmetic overhauls. The use of game reskins is nothing new; their origins can be traced back to early game imitation and clones when hits such as Atari's *Pong* (1972) and Namco's *Pac-Man* (1980) were quickly copied by other companies to capitalize on the booming game market at the time (Larson, 2022). The Coca-Cola company even went as far as producing a *Space Invader* (1978) clone called *Pepsi Invaders* (1983) as a marketing ploy against its rival, PepsiCo (Wills, 2019). Scholars even attribute this mass production of cheap and poor-quality games as one of the contributing factors leading up to the video game crash of 1983 (Wolf, 2012).

More importantly, in the global context, reskins are a valuable tool for localization, as they allow games to be adapted quickly or *reskinned* with alternate content for different markets. For example, the Japanese game *Super Puyo Puyo* (1993) was localized as *Kirby Avalanche* (1995), featuring different sets of characters, while the Western release *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988) was adapted from the game *Yume Kōjō: Doki Doki Panic* (1987) because the original was considered too difficult for American gamers (Ryan, 2012, p. 88). Kong (2024) also notes that reskins contributed greatly to the localization of early game imports into China as a low-cost strategy during a nascent industry in the 1980s. Localization in this regard is not merely about textual translation but also the adaptation of cultures in ways players can understand. Reskins, as a type of localization, also obscures their national origins in what Iwabuchi (2002) considers "culturally odorless" (p. 27), where aspects of the original game are replaced with elements deemed suitable for Western audiences. The need to mask the source of production due to the long-standing stigma against Chinese products labeled as low-quality, fake, and inferior in the global market (Yang, 2015). The strategy of hiding local signifiers is especially salient during a time when Chinese tech companies' global influence is under increasing scrutiny over issues of privacy and national security. Chinese developers, for instance, have increasingly relied on the distribution of parallel apps as the means of not just localization but the distancing of ties to China itself, with apps such as TikTok being an alternate version of the original Chinese app Douyin.

Here, the prevalence of reskins in mobile games requires theorizations that extend beyond industry practices to encompass their symbolic and cultural implications. I utilize the term *skin* in the same way Tu (2021) posits: as both "material and metaphor" (p. 8). Skin can serve as a marker of identity and a container by which one is "sealed into thingness" (Fanon, 1952, p. 170)—a site of objectification where skin becomes fetishized and commodified. This echoes how Ahmed (2013) considers skin not only in terms of intimate encounters through the "economies of touch" (p. 155) but also a "border that feels, functions as a mechanism for social differentiation" (p. 45). From a technical standpoint, reskins also act as an interface that can be "reprogrammed" through cosmetics and augmentations (Flanagan & Booth, 2009). At the same time, reskins are not merely gamic objects but what Sterne (2006) describes as a "cultural artifact". Just like file formats, reskins embody both technological and

social systems of power. In other words, *skin* in the context of reskinned games is not simply a cosmetic digital commodity, but it is also deeply woven into the contending depictions of race, gender, and sexuality. Game reskins are thus simultaneously products of representation and objects of desire, materialized through extractive labor, where reskinned games are often created by racialized workers in Asia as part of the asymmetrical flow of global software exchange.

This articulation of game reskins demonstrates how technology, labor, and race are integral to the "Games of Empire", where the game industry is enabled through the hegemonic dominance of US-led global capital and the exploitation of Global South workers (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009). Similarly, scholarship related to cultural imperialism explicates the totalizing control of Western media institutions, technological standards, and intellectual property that work to govern global media flows and to create a system of dependency that further enfeebles local media (Mirrlees, 2013). Additionally, Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009) note the "absorption of China into the apparatus of empire" through extractive outsourcing and profiteering from Chinese "gold farmers" (p. 182). Likewise, Patterson (2020) highlights the decidedly "Asiatic" dimensions of games that are inevitably connected to its "transpacific imperial contexts" (p. 37). At the same time, the labor of the global game production is deliberately rendered opaque and invisible through "ghost work" and offshoring (Gray & Suri, 2019). This conforms to what Roh et al. (2015) consider as techno-Orientalism that frames "Asians as the cogs of hyperproduction … [that] maintains a prevailing sense of the inhumanity of Asian labor" (p. 5). Game reskins follow a similar production logic by which signifiers for Asianness are repackaged, or *reskinned*, for consumption in the West.

While China has long been exploited in global ICT manufacturing, the explosive growth of Chinese game companies in recent years has also challenged the perceived power asymmetry relative to the West. Liao (2016) alludes to how China's own strict regulatory control over its domestic game industry, such as the decade-long console ban and game import quotas, has created the condition for the proliferation of clones and copycats, which in turn have indirectly contributed to the development of its domestic game industry. Bhabha (1994), for instance, points out that "mimicry does not merely destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire … [it] raises the question of the authorization of colonial representations", which in turn subvert the oppressive systems of control (p. 90). Likewise, Kim (2021) argues that the process of mimicry of dominant culture can disrupt the distinction between original (dominant) and copy (subordinate). In the case of China, scholars have long noted how China's *shanzhai* culture of copycats can often upend the notions of authorship and authenticity associated Western intellectual property laws (Austin & Sloan, 2022; Pang, 2012). Copycats and *shanzhai* instead work to redefine what constitutes innovation based on China's own definition of the original (Bosker, 2013).

Palace games are just one of the many genres popularized through reskins, where games are replicated using the same UI/UX, mechanics, and monetization models to fit different market demands. In this context, the process of imitation through reskins has become increasingly standardized in the mobile app ecosystems, designed as a one-stop shop for the production, distribution, and consumption of mobile games. While app stores provide developers with ease of access to consumers on a singular platform, they also limit creativity in catering to small-scale, casual titles designed with monetization in mind. At the same time, mobile games present an interesting vantage point for examining global media flows dominated by the Google/Apple duopoly, where both producers and consumers become wholly dependent on digital platforms. Thus, it is critical to analyze game reskins not merely as monetization tools, but also in terms of how the consumption of Otherness is entangled within the imperial logic of the global app production. Building on the concept of Games of Empire, the platformization of the app economy ushered in a new form of hypercapitalism that intensifies the mechanism of control and accumulation in constituting what Nieborg (2021) consider as the "Apps of Empire". Here, mobile games as an integral part of the app economy also reflect a critical departure in the ways digital software is distributed, where apps generally require constant connection, facilitating persistent control and surveillance of user data. Game reskins therefore crystalize sets of connections between platform infrastructures and extractive labor processes where both the production and consumption of mobile games are intermediated through US-dominated platforms.

Orientalism, erotics, and the reproduction of empire(s)

Palace games such as *Game of Sultans* are essentially remediations of existing titles based on themes set in dynastic China. Notable examples of palace games include *Be the King: Judge Destiny* (2018) and *Call Me Emperor* (2019), both featuring settings focused on the Ming and Qing Dynasties (AD 1368–1911) in Chinese history. Reskins of palace games offer a myriad of locales, such as *The Royal Affairs* (2019) set in medieval Europe and *Golden Empire* (2020), set during the Roman Empire, as well as the focus of this paper, *Game of Sultans* set in the Ottoman Empire. Despite the vast differences in settings, palace games all share many common features, gameplay, and mechanics. Upon entering any palace game, players are greeted with an interface showing a sprawling palace complex with different areas such as the feast hall, king's council, tower gate, and training grounds. The main objectives of these games are to collect resources, build up armies, and recruit heroes so that the player can gain more land, prestige, and power in expanding their empire. Many of these features borrow heavily from *gacha* mechanics where players must accrue virtual resources (either through payment or grinding) to obtain in-game items through randomized loot boxes and other forms of gambling (Woods, 2022). Indeed, as Mukherjee (2019) notes, the game mechanics of resource extraction and control are rooted in the imperial logics, which affect how colonial histories are remediated.

Figure 2. Side-by-side comparison of the *Game of Sultans* and *Be the King*, a local Chinese palace game. © Chuang Cool Entertainment

On the surface, a reskinned version of a game simply replaces the Chinese Forbidden City with the Ottoman imperial serail, the court advisor with the royal vizier, and the concubine with the consort (Figure 2). This ease of adaptability of palace games highlights how tales of courtly romance and heroic quests are already endemic parts of popular culture writ large. Much of the art, dialogue, and storylines in palace games are intentionally borrowed from popular palace dramas that dominate the Chinese media landscape. Palace dramas function as a form of prestige television, incorporating huge casts, massive set pieces, and elaborate costumes. Zhu (2008) argues that the proliferation of these dynastic palace dramas represents a sort of "authoritarian nostalgia" leveraged by the Chinese government in promoting Confucian Neo-conservatism as an alternative to Marxism and Western liberalism (p. 32). The Chinese state actively employs revisionist histories to bolster its political legitimacy by harkening back to glories of former empire. Similar dynamics apply to reskinned palace games that take place outside of the Chinese cultural context. One

of the Russian localizers at my company, Julia[3]—who previously worked on *Game of Sultans*—confided to me that many of the game elements, such as characters and storylines, are carefully siphoned from the popular Turkish period drama *The Magnificent Century (Muhteşem Yüzyıl),* which depicts the life of the Ottoman Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent.

Palace games are, therefore, sites of contending historicities, or what Dirlik (1996) considers as a form of "self-Orientalism", in which images of China's past become distorted, conflated, and romanticized. This transmedia adaptation of palace dramas to palace games is often executed with little to no deference to any authentic historicity and instead relies on sets of images, characters, and stereotypes. For instance, *Game of Sultans* incorporates a mix of historical and semi-historical figures that players can obtain as either "viziers" or "consorts" in the game. While some of these figures are based on real Ottoman individuals, such the 15th-century corsair/explorer Dragut and Piri Reis, most of the characters in the game are amalgamations of different historical archetypes and legends of Turkish heroes. The co-optation of the Oriental palace, the courtly intrigue, and the exotic stories resonate with Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism, whereby discourses of Asia are imagined in ways that justify further Western domination over the East. Orientalism portrays the East as a timeless monolith enabled through the erasure of history and denial of agency to Asian people, who are framed as passive objects of desire. As such, palace games, as empire-building simulation games, seemingly conforms to this reproduction of Western fantasies about the Orient, perpetuating the uneven power relations between the East and the West.

Central to all palace games, however, is the imperial harem, where players can court consorts to sire children and perpetuate the royal line. Women, or consorts in the game, serve the primary purpose of producing offspring (Figure 3). In fact, the palace in palace games refers specifically to the harem (*hougong*), and it is a defining feature of the palace struggle (*gongdou*) genre across TV, film, and games. The harem theme in palace games also resonates with many *gacha* games, where virtual odalisques are depicted in highly sexualized manners as rewards and in-game commodities that can be collected. Indeed, the harem, as a veiled site of forbidden desires, has long served as the source for Orientalist imaginations. Lewis (2004), for instance, points to how the "the harem and the veil set the terms for their interventions into Western discourse, providing their unique selling point of exoticized difference" (p.168). The intersecting discourses of the erotic and exotic reflect the wider fetishization of the Orient under the subjugation of the West gaze. The harem, like the process of veiling, not only masks but also justifies the subjugation of the feminine Orient. Game reskins are, in many ways, also processes of veiling, where cosmetic or surface layer changes are used to signify Otherness and objectification. Just as

[3] The names of the interlocutors are pseudonyms used to protect their identity.

the harem reflects a site of fecundity and sensuality, palace games are a form of media reproduction predicated on the replication of Oriental desires and sexuality.

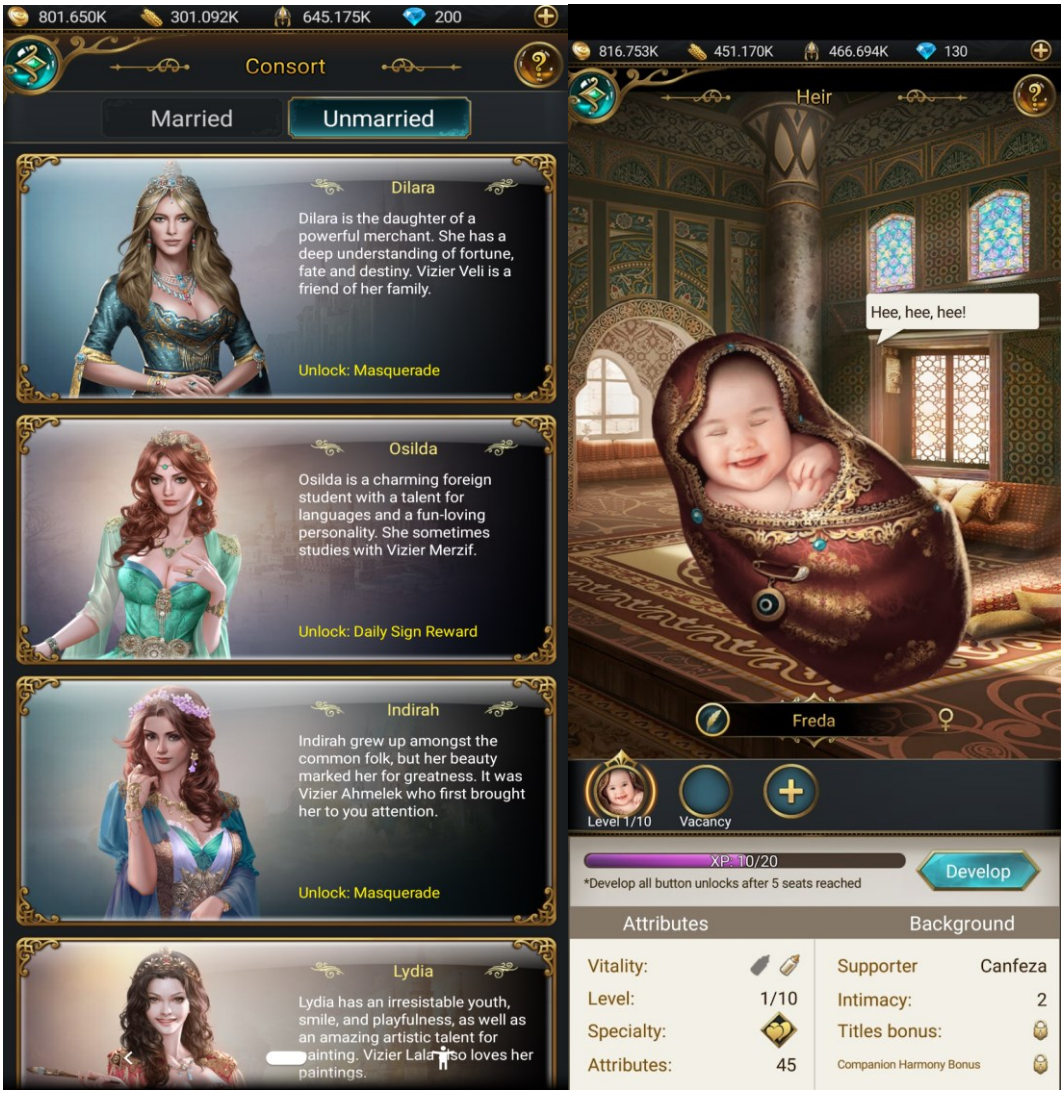

Figure 3. *Game of Sultans*' harem system where players can court different consorts to produce offspring. © Mechanist Games

However, critics of Said have problematized the East/West dichotomies that fail to account for the economic ascension of China, which complicates Western hegemony over the East (Vukovich, 2010). Game reskins challenge the pre-existing conceptions of Orientalism as a European project, when a significant portion of global game labor is outsourced to Asia. The development of *Game of Sultans* does not simply reflect an East/West binary but rather a ternary relationship among the West, Middle East, and Far East. Specifically, the circuits of global game production predicated on the Orientalist depictions of the Middle East made in China but marketed to the West. Reskins of Chinese palace games such as *Game of Sultans* highlight the adaptation of a distinctively Chinese genre of games that conveniently resonates with histories of the Ottoman Empire. The reskinning of palace games by Chinese game

developers, therefore, is not a process of cultural differentiation but rather the reorientation of Chinese cultural production in ways that are receptive to Western gamers.

At the same time, the reskinning of existing Chinese games to a Middle Eastern setting through self-Orientalism also perpetuates the oppositional binaries of the self/othering process (Feighery, 2012). The problematic representations of Eastern eroticism made for the pleasure of the Western player is only compounded by China's long-standing issues of islamophobia and ongoing suppressions of its Turkic-speaking Uyghurs in the country (Stroup, 2021). Yet many casual gamers in the West would hardly notice that *Game of Sultans* is a Chinese production as a reskin that substitutes Chineseness with Middle Eastern elements. Game reskins, therefore, not only conceal the origins of game production but also obfuscate the labor process that is subsumed by the apps of empire. Despite being produced in China, the success of palace games remains largely dependent on US-dominated app stores that control and regulate global software distribution. In other words, these empire-building palace games are predicated on Oriental imaginaries that not only reinforce hegemonic readings of the Other but also reproduce the power asymmetries between the East and the West. In this case, the authority over the interpretations of the Orient is not exclusive to a singular empire but rather multiple empire(s)—an inevitable contention between US-dominated media systems and a rising Chinese game industry. Indeed, as the following ethnographic and autoethographic accounts will reveal, game reskins are not simply an imposition of dominant culture but a deeply negotiated process within the actual production process.

Producing, contesting, and localizing game reskins

Having described the look and function of game reskins, it is also crucial to look at how they are produced within the industry. As mentioned, global game production is an intensely negotiated process where contending interests and cultural affinities collide. *Game of Sultans* itself is a joint production by Chinese companies based in the city of Xiamen, China: ClickTouch Co., responsible for the technical development of the game; and Mechanist Games, the publisher responsible for the localization and marketing of the game. ClickTouch Co. for instance already developed several successful Chinese-themed palaces games such as *Call Me Emperor* for the local market but needed a partner to reach global audiences. The publisher, Mechanist Games, was founded by a developer from New Zealand and is composed of a mix of Chinese and foreign employees (Sohu, 2018). Consalvo (2016) considers this a form of "corporate cosmopolitanism" that requires diverse personnel to recognize and resolve cultural fissures within the production process (p. 150).

The mobile game company I worked for also made deliberate efforts to present itself as an internationally minded company. In fact, I was hired alongside a seven-person team of localizers hailing from countries such as Spain, Russia, the UK, and France.

The localization team worked directly with the development and marketing department to reskin games for different local/regional cultures, all the while navigating the technical limits of conforming to the original palace game upon which they were based. Having a global and hybridized workforce resonates with Consalvo's (2016) notion of cultural brokers, who must "appropriate or create symbols that will travel across differences and render these as implementable practices" (p. 142). The work of localization seeks to negate certain differences to placate the Western market, while simultaneously reinforcing hegemonic readings of the Orient. This conforms to Hardt and Negri's (2001) description of how "empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command" (p. xiii). Yet, the increasingly cosmopolitan disposition of the mobile tech workforce did not liberate workers from the hegemonic order but merely diffused the loci of control in ways that maintained capitalist dominance. This sentiment is echoed by Sharma and Sharma's (2003) articulation of how contemporary Orientalism is now "inscribed in cosmopolitan culture", where the promotion of multiculturalism paradoxically sustains Western fetishization of the Orient.

Game reskins as a form of localization operates on not just the textual level (story, gameplay, graphics, etc.), but also in the logic of game production within the wider context of neoliberal capitalism. Kraidy (2006), for instance, draws on the example of the copycat show *Tele Chobis* to highlight the increasing standardization of global media production in creating hybrid texts "finely tuned in pursuit of profit" (p. 115). Reskins, much like TV formats, operate as interchangeable templates that allow for mass adaptation of culture across different local markets. Mr. Zhao, a product manager on my team, when asked about the proliferation of palace games, confided in me, "the barrier to entry for palace games is really low in terms of programming, and most of the time is spent on art assets to make it look different—the basic blueprint is already there which allows us to swap out any theme we want". In other words, reskinned games are never conceived as unique games but as modular frameworks that can be remediated into multitudes of copies with cosmetic variations. Game reskins, therefore, represent a hybridized process that allows for the proliferation of cultural differences through the standardization of mobile game production.

The popular gaming site *Kotaku* even labeled *Game of Sultans* as a "horny-looking game [that is] actually just a series of menus" (Jackson, 2019). Many of these features are interchangeable across all palace games. These menus boil down to a series of repetitive tasks set to cooldown timers that players need to complete each day to maximize resources and collect more assets. Speeding up certain features and characters often requires spending real money for in-game items, which reflects the trend toward pay-to-win mechanics in many mobile games. Additionally, characters in the game have their own skins in the forms of different outfits and designs that players must often pay to obtain, many of which are appropriated from other media tropes in TV and film. Mr. Zhao goes on to say rather bluntly, "palace games have nothing to do with making an accurate game; it is a vessel for monetization". In this

regard, the actual content of palace games, such as its history, story, and characters, is largely irrelevant for the developers as long as they are commodifiable for making profits on the app store.

Because all reskin games share the same operational logic, my experiences in making palace games offers me insights into the opaque process of how reskinned titles like *Game of Sultans* are produced. For instance, the company I worked for operates two palace games: one with an ancient China theme dedicated to the domestic Chinese market, and the other set-in medieval Europe, aimed at Western markets. Both games share identical source code and mechanics, which streamlined the processes of operations, design, and updates. Reskinning games involve the process of changing a game's appearance by altering its text and art assets, while keeping the original game mechanics and gameplay intact. My role in localization design therefore goes beyond simply translation and extends to the remediation of different aspects of the original game's art, storyline, and UI/UX design adapted in ways that Western players can understand. My typical workflow involves looking through side-by-side spreadsheets of translated (or mistranslated) game terms from each reskin to ensure both the quality of the translations and the cultural suitability of content in the newly reskinned version. Additionally, I offered feedback—both artistic and technical—for potential feature changes that address some of the more questionable and potentially problematic aspects of the game.

More permanently, my localization team frequently clashed with the development and design teams regarding the offensive depictions of race, gender, and sexuality in palace games. Such problematic representations are often the unintended results of the reskin process as opposed to deliberate efforts to make offensive games. Because *Game of Sultans* is directly adapted from a Chinese palace game, all the core mechanics such as harems and concubines are built into the source code and cannot be easily altered. In other words, the harem is embedded into the very genre of palace games that drives much of its story, dialogue, and mechanics; it inevitably gets carried over through reskins into other similar titles. These issues are even more apparent when palace games are localized into different historical contexts. For instance, *Golden Empire*, a palace game set in ancient Rome, also features a harem, despite the Roman Empire never having adopted a harem system like those of Asian empires.

Likewise, my experiences localizing a similar palace game set in medieval Europe faced the same dilemma, as we had to adapt a harem mechanic despite the lack of historical precedent for having harems within European nobility. The localizing team eventually decided to rename the harem as the "maiden's chamber" to reskin the game without compromising the core mechanics and gameplay of the original palace game. Herein lies one of the key contractions of reskins. On one hand, reskins as a form of game production process allows near infinite reproducibility of different themes. On the other hand, reskins through their standardize templates also create inflexibility in the design process that can be difficult to overcome. Such contentions

divulge the challenges in localization for a global market with different sets of cultural norms and sociopolitical taboos. However, in recent years, *Game of Sultans* has undergone several updates in response to backlash and negative media coverage of sexism. In response, the developers opted to give female characters more agency, introducing heroines in the game as opposed to passive consorts in the harem. For instance, the game introduced the option to select a female avatar for the player as a Sultana rather than a Sultan. But because the core mechanics remain unchanged, the game still features a harem of female consorts despite the change in player's choice of gender roles (Figure 4).

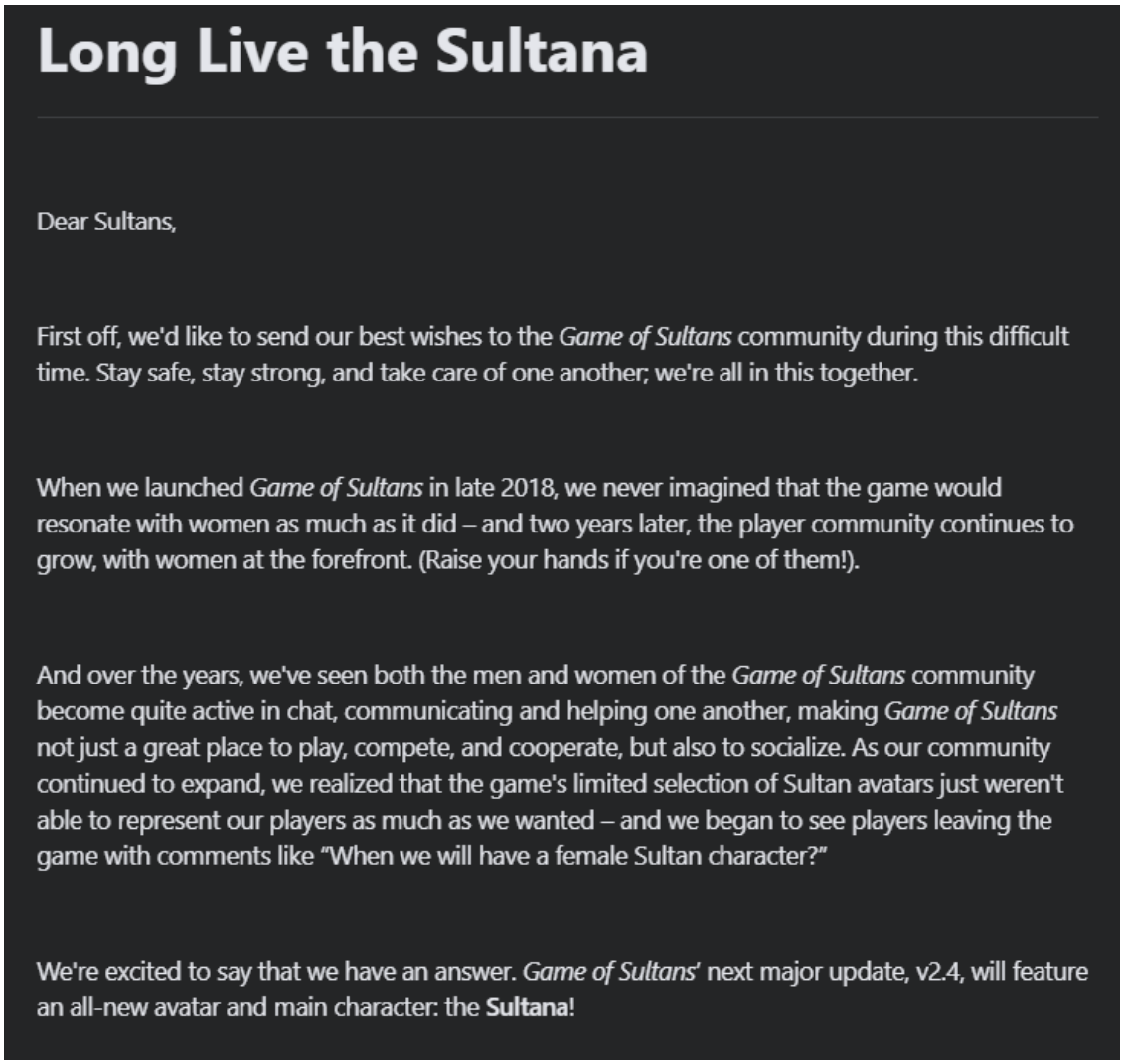

Figure 4. Changelog for version 2.4 of *Game of Sultans* that incorporated female avatars in the form of the Sultana. © Facebook

Here, localization serves the important process of "dubbing", which adapts and alters the original in ways that render different cultures legible to the player. For Consalvo (2016), dubbing "work[s] to create game versions that are neither faithful reproductions nor derivative products" (p. 182). In other words, game reskins, as a form of localization, are not merely acts of copying and cloning but rather a highly

contested and generative process. Rather than simply translating existing content, significant efforts were made to create new ideas, concepts, and designs that can better conform to local tastes. For example, my localization team was able to convince the design team to incorporate additional racial categories in the player character selection by providing characters with different skin tones. On one hand, such changes reflect the overall industry trajectory in promoting more inclusive game design given the historical lack of minority representations in video games (Iantorno & Consalvo, 2023). On the other hand, the interchangeability of racialized skins also presents the problems of "identity tourism" where players can perform minority representations that further Orientalize and fetishize the signifiers of Asian culture in palace games (Nakamura, 1995).

Such issues help to illustrate how reskins as localization is not merely a one-way street but rather a constant negotiation among cultural workers (coding, graphics, operations, marketing, localization, etc.) to generate meaning based on contingent institutional and infrastructural factors that lie both within and outside the media production process. Moreover, the industry pressure to create low-cost, mass-produced titles makes localization challenging, as games are often hastily converted to quickly turn a profit. This in turn, often results in problematic depictions and design choices that are increasingly done through an Orientalizing lens. Finally, workers also must operate under the persistent oppression of not just corporate but also platform-mediated forms of control. So, while reskins allow for certain cosmetic variations, they also confine workers within the framework of standardized production predicated on a singular distribution channel via the apps of empire. This paradoxical nature of reskins therefore both highlights the contentions between localizing divergent cultures but also the extractive labor of gamic production made for Western consumption.

Copycat, mimicry, and platform subversion

The proliferation of Chinese-made palace games in the app stores points to the increasing reliance on digital platforms—specifically, the duopoly of the Google Play and Apple App Stores that maintain US dominance over media distribution. Jin (2017), for instance, noted digital platforms as a double-edged sword that not only eases the spread of non-Western media but also intensifies the hegemonic control of US-based platforms. App stores have nearly complete control over the creation, distribution, and monetization of mobile software. Whether it involves high app store commission fees, strict app publishing requirements, or political censorship, the app stores have long been criticized for anti-competitive behaviors. Apple for instance, is notorious for its complicated approval process where developers are frequently at the mercy of strict design and regulatory guidelines. According to Apple's App Store Transparency Report, 1,679,694 apps were rejected for guideline violations out of 6,101,913 submitted. More ominously however, is the removal of 1,474 apps due to government takedown demands, of which 1,435 were from China

(Apple, 2022). The app stores are therefore not just instrumentalized through asymmetrical power relations, but also through complicity with illiberal regimes that maintain and maximize global capitalist extraction.

On a practical level, US-centric app platforms fundamentally reconfigure developer-publisher-advertiser relations where app stores dictate the rules of cultural production that is often obfuscated and subject to constant changes. For example, the app approval process can include specific design, accessibility, and moderation requirements that can be difficult for developers to navigate. More importantly, the means of discoverability on the Google Play Store is based on App Store Optimization (ASO), which, unlike search engine optimization (SEO), remains largely opaque as to how app search results are ranked. Compared to SEO, which can be easily gamed through tactics such as "Google bombing" (Tatum, 2005), ASO's ranking algorithms are more challenging to exploit, thereby limiting app discoverability. Instead, ASO relies on the implementation of app icons, game names, store descriptions, screenshots, and key terms as the barometer for success and visibility on the app store. For instance, during the beta testing of a new palace game, my company issued a poll to pick potential game icons for the app store. This was followed by numerous internal team meetings debating which icon would gain the most attention. One of the UX designer at the company, Ms. Lu, conferred to me, "our choice of app icons are based on the current app store meta of the types of games that are popular and whatever our competitors are adopting". The spread of copycat app icons has in turn led to what many game critics point to as the proliferation of near-identical shouting face or "action face" app icons (Jordan, 2015).

In other words, the saturation of copycats, clones, and various reskins on the Google and Apple app stores is not simply a cheap cash grab but also a form of subversion. The nebulous and seemingly totalizing control of app stores creates the conditions by which developers must find ways to game ASO through mimicry and imitation of other apps' successes. Such tactics are not unique as there are well documented cases of the manipulation of YouTube thumbnails to exploit search algorithms (Bishop, 2020). By engaging in these tacit forms of subversion developers can not only break the opaque rules set through ASO, but also exploit its failing to their own benefit. Accordingly, Morris and Morris (2019) contend that copycat apps are "a symptom of (and solution to) platformized software distribution" and that imitation can exploit the very failure coded into app store infrastructures. In this regard, the apps of empire operate within a double bind of invisibility where developers from China are both kept in the dark about the working logic of the app stores and alienated as global media laborers. Reskins, as an important aspect of game mass production, can thus challenge and destabilize information asymmetry imposed through "platform imperialism" and the continuing dominance of US-centric media industries (Jin, 2017). This dovetails with Noh's (2020) assertion that aesthetic mimicry in Chinese mobile games, such as NetEase's *Onmyoji* (2016), serves not only as a means of extending global appeal but also as a counter to dominant global media flows.

It is important to point out that game reskins and copycats are not direct imitations of the dominant texts. Nor does mimicry contribute to what Fanon (1952) considers as the sense of inferiority, subordination, and shame. In the case of reskins, palace games are not merely cheap, derivative products; rather they innovate in attaining validity despite the limitations imposed by the app stores. Indeed, these skins are designed from the inception to be easily adaptable, interchangeable, and malleable for various markets. They do not carry the baggage of cultural specificity and relies on hybridized production processes and cosmopolitan laborers. Here, mimicry as a byproduct of platform control conforms to what Bhabha (1994 calls "double articulation"—the simultaneous appropriation of "the Other as it visualizes power" and the repudiation of the disciplinary regimes of colonial powers (p. 151). Reskins as an industry practice reflect the collective mimicry of these empire-building games that instrumentalize empire not just through its textual localizations but also its proliferation and monetization on the app store. The popularity of palace games in the West shows how success can be attained by working against the operating logic of the app store duopoly. However, Kim (2021) also posits that mimicry can take on hegemonic forms, whereby the process of copying also further replicates the imperial logic of empire(s). In fact, Nieborg et al. (2020) suggest that China's rapid rise in the app economy follows the US as a "newly emerging game empire, but very much on its own terms". In the case of reskinned palace games, problematic representations further reinforce racist Oriental tropes vis-a-vis Western consumers. In this regard, game reskins divulge an industry practice marked by ambiguity and unease—one that can ultimately both uphold and upend the struggle for global media dominance.

Conclusion

This article provides an important vantage point to understand game reskins as not only hegemonic in-game representations of race, gender, and national cultures but also the contending issues of labor, control, and resistance in the US-dominated global app ecosystem. On one hand, the rising success of the Chinese mobile game industry disrupts the ideas of cultural imperialism where global media flows reverberate from dominant institutions to the periphery. On the other hand, the opaque operating logic of app stores further perpetuates the structures of inequality imposed on non-Western developers. Here the circuits of digital commodity exchange that are part of the global app economy also produce new sustained forms of oppression, whereby the violence associated with extractive labor is largely rendered invisible to Western audiences.

But game reskins are not simply cheap cosmetic commodities; they also serve as markers of race, gender, and national affinities. At the same time, the rising popularity of Chinese mobile games led to increasing scrutiny in relation to its problematic representations in titles such as *Game of Sultans,* frequently called out for its sexism, misogyny, and offensive depictions of other cultures. Reskins, as a form of

media replication, reproduce the same sets of objectionable material through Orientalizing gazes. However, game reskins also complicate the existing discourses of Orientalism within the unequal relations that allow the West to define the East. As my ethnographic experiences have shown, localizing palace games is a deeply negotiated and contested process, contingent on the critical roles of cultural broker in mediating differences. To be clear, this article is by no means a defense of the more questionable aspect of reskins such as *Game of Sultans,* but rather a nuanced understanding of how the labor of making palace games are co-constituted through both the fetishization and exploitation of the Orient.

More broadly, in recent years, there have been renewed efforts from both regulatory and corporate bodies to challenge monopolistic US tech companies and their control over global app distribution. A notable example is Epic Games' ongoing lawsuits against both Google and Apple for its anticompetitive practices (Allyn, 2023). Ironically, the Chinese tech giant Tencent, which conveniently owns 40% of Epic Games, has maintained its own domestic app stores in China and have themselves become a dominant player in the global game industry (Jia et al., 2022). But on the micro-level, the successes of Chinese mobile games also reflect how reskins, as a form of imitation and copy, can operate within and against the App Store duopoly. The proliferation of imitation games is indirectly the very byproduct of not just centralization and concentration of platform control, but also the casualization and capitalization of the monetization process. The singular point of distribution allows for the production and standardization of apps in ways that provide ease of access to global markets. But the nebulous App Store rules also inadvertently create the conditions by which recalcitrant practices can occur through industrialized mimicry. These strategies of imitation and copycats should not be dismissed as merely unimaginative and derivative commodities; rather, they represent innovative acts that can undermine and disrupt the power asymmetries imposed on mobile game developers worldwide. Just as the global app empire continues to reproduce itself through the logic of capitalist extraction, game reskins points to the reorientation of power and the hegemonic reversal of its authority.

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