



Pete

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Pete Jiadong Qiang's latest work *Maximalism HyperBody* (or shorter *HyperBody*) is a virtual reality (VR) game that features a series of non-linear levels designed in the Unity game engine alongside various iterations on Mozilla Hubs online platform and as hybrid installations. There is a level of complexity to *HyperBody* that exceeds the logics of a typical VR game and unfolds as a world of its own, which partly defies the strategies of simulation in traditional game design. It builds on the imaginary potential of virtual spaces that aren't understood in isolation, but as interconnected with our physical experiences. Developed over several years (2017-2023) and recently completed as part of his practice-based PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London, *HyperBody* consolidates Qiang's body of work and takes you on a journey through an assemblage of spaces, cultures, technologies, bodies, and affection.

Online game fandom, particularly in the context of ACGN (anime, comics, games, novels) communities across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, is one of the key aspects of Qiang's artistic exploration. His work delves into the multi-fandom of ACGN communities, emphasizing the role of fans in consuming and generating content, challenging norms, and forming connections that transcend traditional political and cultural boundaries. Furthermore, combined with Chinese state censorship, capitalist consumerism, and the Western projection of technological determinism, practices originating through ACGN fandom communities such as modding (user generated enhancements), crossover (bridging characters from different fictional worlds), and shipping (desiring romantic relations between fictional characters) are imbued with radical, liberating potentials.¹ Whether it's imagining how the main character in a Chinese BL (boy's love) novel cultivates immortality by reprogramming himself through infinite algorithmic loops and object-oriented programming, or by shipping characters in Liu Cixin's *The Dark Forest* or C-Pop boys group ONER, modding oneself in the World of Warcraft, or by remixing physical and virtual personas, these communities showcase how ACGN genres can serve as platforms for boundary-pushing narratives, reinterpretations of lived experiences, abstract identities and expressions of desire.

Qiang's approach to causality between technology and fandom could be understood through the ideas of Yuk Hui's cosmotechnics (where technology is understood as being deeply influenced by the cosmological beliefs, specific moral frameworks, and the cultural contexts in which it arises) and Karen Barad's concept of intra-action (which highlights the indivisible, dynamic relations between entities that are not separate nor distinct, but that emerge and exist through their ongoing interactions with one another). By interviewing and collaborating with various fandom members and drawing inspiration from Daoist cultivation novels, Qiang not only generates a unique blend of sounds, texts, 3D paintings, and architectural modifications in the construction of his virtual game spaces, but also fosters a complex interplay of ideas and influences. This intra-action of cultural elements, technologies, ACGN fandom communities and personal experiences forms the foundation of his multi-fandom game-based cosmotechnics, where boundaries between virtual and physical blur, and new narratives emerge in the ever-evolving digital landscape. It's what he calls 'queer tuning'; "a performative practice that creates new forms of intra-action of culture, technology, and queerness, resulting in new modes of intimacy, affect, and subjectivity."²

Pete Jiadong Qiang's approach to narrative construction through virtual worldbuilding emanates a deliberate sense of incompleteness, existing in a state of intriguing fluidity, drawing from various physical spaces, histories, and cultural influences. With some spaces being maximalist in color

and form, others are unusually black and white; monumental. In *HyperBody*, you hover with monstrous limbs and a flashlight through virtual spaces without having a body, encountering and exploring fragments, uncanny and disproportionately enlarged NPCs (non-player characters), patchy 3D scans, ruins, floating texts, glitched canvases, soundscapes, and architectural structures. Moreover, he employs mist, fog, and rain, to amplify these spaces, reminiscent of *Silent Hill's* Fog World, a supernatural phenomenon in a monster-filled fictional town of a video game, or cinematography of '90s Hong Kong horror films, which is propelled with hauntology of regional political complexity, social suppression, and dystopian deregulated capitalism. You hover through Qiang's virtual worlds the same as you would in RPG (role-playing games) video games but with no collision; like being in an aestheticized trance.

Each of the six levels of the *HyperBody* virtual reality game (Pinkray, Seventeen/Sixty-One, Vampyrotheuthis Infernalis, Stratholme.GoStop, Typhoon Lionrock, and Garden Portal) have a strong picturesque architectural dimension, influenced by Qiang's education at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA). This extends to his approach to drawing, where a distinct performative methodology is employed through an iterative process of drawing, scanning, modeling, reshaping, coloring, desaturating, composing, and sampling, resulting in a final virtual environment that serves as the residual artifact of his performative artistic practice. While his virtual environments can be experienced in isolation, they are also exhibited in hybrid installations. Recently as part of exhibitions Hyundai & Rhizome's *World on a Wire* (2021), and KIBLIX festival's *Virtual Worlds Now* (2021), the latter of which I had the pleasure to curate together with Živa Kleindienst, Qiang's installations were designed as immersive interactive portals, drawing inspiration from the unboxing culture of gaming, incorporating a variety of physical materials and media formats directly referencing the content of the game.

Pete Jiadong Qiang's virtual worlds therefore unfold as complex studies of digital cultures, where the virtual and the physical seamlessly intertwine. This occurs not solely due to technological augmentation, but also through an understanding that the collective imagination within online communities serves as a means of ideological emancipation through virtual worldbuilding rather than merely a form of market creation. *HyperBody* thus emphasizes the simulation-driven phenomenological experience of the very nature of being in a world that's increasingly harder to define.

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1. Huang, B. (2022), *Artist Profile: Pete Jiadong Qiang*. Available at: <https://rhizome.org/editorial/2022/dec/02/artist-profile-pete-jiadong-qiang/> (Accessed: 30.8.2023).

2. Qiang, J. (2023), *HyperBody: An Experimental VR Game Exploring the Cosmotechnics of Game-Fandom through a Posthumanist Lens*. PhD thesis. Goldsmiths, University of London.



Dungeon: Maximalism HyperBody, 2021, installation view, HYUNDAI x Rhizome of the New Museum: World on a Wire, Hyundai Motorstudio Beijing, 2021 Photo: Han Ukman Courtesy: the artist, Hyundai Motorstudio Beijing and Rhizome (pp. 290–291)



