

**Immersion without Mimesis:
Games as Virtual Worlds in *Jin Ping Mei*
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Let me begin my talk with a quote from a *sanqu* 散曲 song, supposedly composed by the famous Yuan dynasty author Guan Hanqing 關漢卿 (ca. 1241-1320). The coda of the song “Not Giving in to Old Age 不付老” reads as follows:

The moon of Liang’s park is what I enjoy,
Kaifeng wine is what I drink,
Luoyang’s flowers are what I like
Zhangtai’s willows are what I pick.

Me, I can

Recite poems,
Write ancient script,
Play all stringed instruments—
Woodwinds too!

And I can:

Sing “the Partridge,”
Dance “Dangling Hands,”
I can hunt
Play soccer,
Play chess,
Shoot craps.

You can

Knock out my teeth,
Scrunch up my mouth
Lame my legs,
Break both my hands;

But Heaven bestowed me this gift

For vice in each assorted kind,

So still I’ll never quit.

我玩的是梁園月，飲的是東京酒，賞的是洛陽花，攀的是章台柳。

我也会围棋、会蹴鞠、会打围、会插科、会歌舞、会吹弹、会咽作、会吟诗、会双陆。

你便是落了我牙、歪了我嘴、癩了我腿、折了我手，

天赐与我这几般儿歹症候，

尚兀自不肯休！¹

In the song, a dizzying tension is built between a complete loss of control on the one hand and an absolute mastery on the other. On the one hand, the implied singer presents himself as

¹ Quoted in Liu Shancheng 劉善程, ed., *Zhongguo weiqi shi* 中國圍棋史 (History of Chinese go), (Chengdu: Chengdu shidai chubanshe, 2007), p. 459. The song turns out to be quite famous and parts of it have recently been discussed by Xinda Lian. See Xinda Lian, “*Qu* Poetry: Song Poems (*Sanqu*) of the Yuan Dynasty,” in *How To Read Chinese Poetry: A Guided Anthology*, edited by Cai Zongqi, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 329-353. Apparently, Stephen Owen has a translation and discussion of the song in his *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, unfortunately locked behind Covid-bound doors in my study in Princeton.

thoroughly lost, supposedly unwilling, but maybe just plain unable, to let go of a hundred different kinds of worthless but thoroughly enjoyable pursuits. Moving through a bewildering list of lively distractions—the reciting of songs, the performing of slapstick, and the playing of the game of *go*—the singer drags his audience with him into a disorienting landscape of dubious imaginary pleasures—willows of Zhangtai, peonies in Luoyang, liquor of Dongjing, and the moon at Liangyuan.² The singer may not use the terminology we would use in our contemporary world, addiction, but the Yuan dynasty poet leaves us little doubt that his “indulgence” in these pleasures is every bit as harmful. The song ends with the image of a man half-way to death, with lost teeth, crippled legs, broken hands, and a battered mouth, but still proudly proclaiming to be unwilling to let go of his “vices.”³

And yet, as we as readers/listeners follow the singer into his long list of debilitating afflictions, we cannot help but note the singer’s absolute mastery of these playful pleasures. When the poet tells us, in a long, breathless list of achievements, that he *can* recite poems, *can* hunt, *can* play kickball, and *can* play backgammon, we might not be entirely convinced that the speaker is quite the master he claims to be, but one thing is beyond doubt: the man sure *can* sing a song. In fact, in a virtuoso performance that highlights technical skill as the only thing that matters, the only thing that authenticates, the song actually instantiates the theme of masterful expertise. The singer may claim that he has lost himself in a world of dubious distractions, but when it comes to creating neatly repetitive, tightly regimented, carefully constructed, and perfectly balanced lines, he is without any doubt fully in control.

A Yuan dynasty song is not the same as a Ming dynasty novel.⁴ Still, I have chosen to quote this song because it is useful to highlight the theme of my talk today, “immersion without mimesis.” The first of these terms, “immersion” has, in recent years, gained quite a bit in popularity. Kindled by the rise of the internet and the evermore widespread production and appreciation of virtual worlds, scholars have become ever more attuned to a variety of cultural objects in which players/viewers/readers can lose themselves. Such immersion may often be associated with the contemporary world of digital illusions, but as a variety of scholars have pointed out, the literary works of the early-modern era allow the reader to get lost in the carefully crafted illusion of artificially constructed worlds in similar fashion.⁵ In an early pathbreaking study, Wai-ye Li, for instance, explains how the reader can easily lose him or herself in the enchantment offered by the Grand View Garden of the mesmerizing 18th-century masterpiece *Dream of the Red Chamber*. And, as a way of showing that such illusions need not solely be spun from the dense vernacular narrative of totalizing 120-chapter fiction, Judith Zeitlin has shown how even brief tales written in classical Chinese can draw the reader into the work of art,

² In the terms of game studies, most scholars would call this form of play *ilynx*, that is the simple physical play of losing control by wildly spinning around and falling to the ground, the modern adaptation of which would probably be the roller coaster. *Ilynx* is one of the four forms of play identified by Roger Callois in *Man, Play, and Games* (1958). Given the song’s celebration of life in the face of aging and death, the way in which *ilynx* offers a celebration of life through near death experiences seems fitting. There is obvious irony in the various pursuits which spur the singer only more quickly towards death, not unlike a game in which you spin faster and faster until you finally, and gloriously, fall to the ground. I imagine the song speeding up in similar fashion until finally, dramatically coming to an end.

³ Note how, rather ironically, the song here ends on the word “quit/stop.”

⁴ I have no doubt that the logic of the song, in particular the prosody associated with the music, lends it some of its decidedly non-mimetic qualities. *Sanqu* are famously associated (like *ci* poetry before it) with musical performance.

⁵ Marie Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and interactivity In Literature and Electronic Media*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015).

the reader as lost in the pages of the text as the protagonist is absorbed in a painting plastered on a wall.

Such explorations of the “virtuality” of early-modern Chinese literature are important, but, I argue, only too often do they emphasize an approach that relies on and limits itself to visual verisimilitude. The dizzying attraction of *Dream of the Red Chamber* for instance is most easily likened to the moment Jia Rui gazes longingly in a mirror and chases the life-like image of his lethal object of lust, the cruel mistress Wang Xifeng. Similarly, it is no coincidence that the story chosen by Judith Zeitlin to end her book centers on a beguilingly “realistic” wall painting. As these examples show, more often than not, premodern literary texts represent the idea of losing oneself in a virtual experience as visual (even if such texts are fully aware that the experience is constructed out of language). And, as an extension, such a visual experience is most often represented as depending on mimesis. That is, we are supposedly fooled into entering a virtual world because that secondary world is carefully constructed to resemble the primary world (even if it is clear that a literary text constructed out of linguistic signs can never really “look” like anything but, well, a literary text constructed out of linguistic signs).⁶ We scholars, perhaps as beguiled as the likes of Jia Rui, only naturally follow this penchant for visual immersion in the story with our own analysis.

Hence my opening with the *sanqu* by Guan Hanqing which arguably offers a neat antidote to this dependence on visual verisimilitude. Clearly the man is lost in an illusory world of evanescent pleasures—sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll or their 13th century equivalent, courtesans, alcohol, and *sanqu* song. And clearly the reader happily follows the piped piper of these pleasures into a verbal and virtual recreation/recitation of such pleasures. Yet it is also clear that at no point the immersion into the virtual world of evanescent entertainments looks like the “real thing.” The poem does not depend on thick description, visual, acoustic, olfactory, or otherwise. The phrase “liquor of Dongjing” does not taste like said liquor and I doubt that the simple referent “Dongjing” (if it refers to a particular liquor to begin with) would allow even those readers familiar with the original to imagine the taste. The courtesans of Luoyang are undoubtedly alluring, but they are not in any form or manner visually described; the playing of stringed instruments is evoked, but there is nothing in the line that would allow us to imagine hearing the tune. Simply put, like the singer, we as readers find ourselves lost in an experience, but not because that experience somehow “resembles” the real. We are experiencing virtuality without mimesis.⁷

It is worthwhile to think of the various elements that allow this sense of virtuality without mimesis—skill, scale, calculation, indexicality, abstraction, to name but a few—but in the brief talk that follows I want to use one simple, overarching theoretical framework to think through the issue, that is the notion of “play.” It is not coincidental that Guan Hanqing mentions several games as part of his exhaustive list: kickball, go, and backgammon—because, I would argue,

⁶ Note that I am not accusing either the consumers or the scholars of such visual verisimilitude of naivety. It is clear that the readers as well as the scholars of such visual verisimilitude are fully aware of the artificiality of the illusion. Indeed, as Shang Wei has beautifully shown in his analysis of the notion of *zhen* and *jia* in the case of “fake gem stones” in 18th-century China, the appreciation, both in terms of literary and material culture, was precisely the ways in which a fake artefact could be produced that seemed to be real. Simply put, my critique is not of a simplistic belief in the reality of the experience (naïve mimesis), but rather in the idea that emphasizing that such moments depend either on visibility or on resemblance is limiting our understanding of the range of possibilities.

⁷ It is interesting that one of the most prominent scholars of *sanqu*, J.L. Crump, characterizes many of these Yuan dynasty songs as “play.” See J.L. Crump, *Song-Poems from Xanadu*, (Ann Arbor: Center of Chinese Studies, University of Michigan Press), 1993).

play is central to the non-mimetic immersive literary experience Guan Hanqing offers us. Indeed, as each of the games listed by Guan Hanqing reminds us, we completely lose ourselves in games—whether as players *or* as spectators—even though games in no form or fashion resemble the “real” world. No player of chess would ever mistake a horse on the board for an actual horse. Nor need the game-piece be represented by anything resembling a horse for it to function. A piece of paper with a “Q” on it would do just as well. And yet this absence of verisimilitude in games does not diminish the mesmerizing attraction of the game. As the game theorist Johan Huizinga reminds us, for as long as the struggle between black and white lasts, the sixty-four squares on the board represent the only real world and the player is caught inside the pleasurable illusion of this magic circle, this virtual irreality.

The theme of this paper then is the way games produce an illusory sense of immersion without relying on verisimilitude. To do so, I will focus not on 13th-century Song, but instead on one early-modern text filled with an encyclopedic number of games, the late-16th-century erotic novel *Jin Ping Mei*. The novel has often been praised for its remarkable interest in depicting everyday life. Building on the remarkable presence of games in the text, I want to suggest that we do not read this interest in the seemingly superfluous everyday detail as mimesis, but instead, through the lens of games, as a way of shedding new light on the way late-Ming Chinese vernacular literature might produce imaginary worlds. As part of the almost encyclopedic enumeration of games in the text—*go*, dominoes, kickball, and pitch-pot, to name but a few—and by reading these games in the broader context of an ever growing number of Ming-dynasty game manuals, strategy guides, and rulebooks, I will show how games not only represent miniature worlds within the fictional world of the novel, but also how the logic of these virtual worlds can be used to question some of the terms associated with this text, most notably verisimilitude.

Games in Jin Ping Mei:

Though the novel *Jin Ping Mei* is filled with a variety of games—backgammon, kickball, swings, chess, dominoes, and pitchpot, to name a few—for a short paper like this it would be too much to explore all of these.⁸ Instead I will focus on one game in particular, the emblematic game of *go*, and only one scene in which the game appears briefly, Chapter 97.

⁸ For a slightly longer analysis of different games, see my forthcoming article in *How To Read Plum in the Golden Vase*, edited by Andrew Schonebaum. Yet to get a sense of some of the games espoused by the novel, just note the way its protagonist Ximen Qing is introduced in list-like fashion, not unlike the singer of Guan Hanqing’s song, “he also liked to gamble and there was little he did not know about backgammon, elephant chess, and the various word games played by breaking characters down into their component parts.” As Stephen Owen suggests, the singer of Guan Hanqing’s song is perhaps the first true anti-hero in Chinese literature, a role not unbecoming Ximen Qing. See Owen, *Anthology of Chinese Literature*, p. 728. Referenced in Linda Xian.



Illustration 7: Chapter 97, “The Spurious Cousins Resume their Clandestine Affair”

For the reader interested in games, a small detail in the illustration that accompanies Chapter 97 of *Plum in the Golden Vase* cannot help but draw the attention. While most viewers will be distracted by the two naked lovers in the middle of a pavilion, the reader studying games will note that in the lower-left corner the illustrator has included two stools flanking a table on top of which we see a go-board and two jars holding the game pieces. The game is of course a mere detail. The chapter only mentions the game three times, very briefly, and, amidst events that include an important military commander being hoodwinked by his newly-wedded wife, two old lovers engaging in a secret and illicit tryst while pretending to be cousins, and the novel slowly working its way to its dramatic end, that is the fall of the Northern Song dynasty, a few games of *go* seem to matter little. The game is a mere descriptive, superfluous detail that seems to serve no purpose.

That said, *Plum* is a text that enjoys its details. Indeed, when some scholars praise the novel for its unprecedented “realism,” what they often mean is that the novel lavishes an overwhelming amount of detail on objects and events belonging to the realm of everyday life for what seems to be little reason. Material objects—interior decorations, the fabrics of clothing, even the architectural lay-out of the garden—all are described in such detail that the reader can almost visualize the scene. Similarly, though the novel ends eventually in the fall of the Northern Song dynasty, it never really depicts battles at the frontier or intrigues at court. Instead the narrative prefers the humdrum detail of wives chatting in bedrooms, husbands going on excursions to the pleasure quarter, or servants stealing silver from inattentive masters.

The interest in such seemingly insignificant, everyday detail can of course be read in different ways. As Ding Naifei has pointed out, the novel’s dense visual descriptions do not represent so much a love of reality as they testify to a fetishization of language. Conversely, as Shang Wei has shown, the rich patois of everyday language is often drawn from a variety of late-Ming encyclopedia and hence should not be understood as a simple mirror of everyday vernacularity but rather as a pastiche of previously published materials. Elsewhere, Sophie Volpp argues that the novel’s interest in depicting sartorial choices in such detail is the result of Ming-

dynasty sumptuary laws and the ways in which a merchant such as Ximen Qing breaks each one of the minute legal strictures of Ming society. Scholars clearly disagree on why and how the novel espouses details, but they all do agree that the novel seems to care about such trivia.

The textual detail of the game board in Chapter 97 serves as one of those minutiae that at first seem insignificant or merely descriptive, but which on closer examination actually suggest deeper meaning. In fact, the detail of the go-board arguably presents a kind of meta-commentary on detail itself. Precisely because games seem so unimportant at first and precisely because here the game of *go* is presented as a mere detail easily overlooked, the novel ends up admonishing the reader to pay attention to precisely that detail, to find meaning amidst what seems mere indolent insignificance. Or, to paraphrase Roland Barthes, the French literary scholar who famously theorized what he called the “reality effect” of the seemingly superfluous detail in French realist fiction: the novel challenges us to find the significance of the insignificant.

Notably the novel finds such significance by emphasizing the game as the first, seemingly unimportant step in an extended sequence that eventually ends in full-blown adultery. Indeed, like the illustration, the narrative does so by placing the playing of the game and act of adultery right next one another. Within a few lines, we read how the foreplay begins when the two lovers first exchange cup for cup (“first a cup for you, then a cup for me”), then play one game after another (“first a game for you, then a game for me”), until, before long, girdle pendants are untied, jade bodies are disclosed, and ruby lips extended. “Realism” is arguably an effect here, but it seems merely a side effect. By including the detail of the game, the novel creates a convincing causal sequence of events where adulterous sex seems a logical result of a series of smaller moral missteps leading up to it. For a novel which, for the most part, depicts the domestic life of a mere merchant in the provinces but ends with the fall of a dynasty, to include an insignificant game of *go* as a first small step towards moral disaster seems somehow appropriate.

This reading of the novel, which, through a long causal chain, intimately ties the behavior of the everyday to larger questions of (political) life and death, is generally associated with the orthodox philosophy of the neo-Confucian school of thought. As Zhu Xi’s 朱熹 (1130-1200) influential commentary to the Confucian classic *The Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) reminds its reader, those who want to enlighten the world first have to order the affairs of state; those who wish to order the affairs of state better first regulate their family life; the regulation of family life is dependent on the cultivation of oneself, which in turn is preceded by rectifying one’s heart and making one’s thought sincere. Family life, the individual, indeed, even one’s personal inner thoughts, none of these are irrelevant in Zhu Xi’s totalistic account. Through a finely-woven net of synecdochal connections these details come to represent the basis of a well-ordered or, conversely, truly chaotic state.

Plum is, of course, not a work of philosophy. Yet as a literary work the novel offers a similar chain of cause and effect, though in a different form, that is plot. By carefully painting each link in the causal chain from a game of *go* to full-blown adultery, from provincial household to imperial capital, the novel illustrates with captivating detail how the morally dissolute life of a seemingly insignificant merchant is in fact tied to a larger, political dissolution that in the end causes the fall of the Northern Song. Like a set of Russian dolls, the novel suggests a series of ever more miniaturized worlds, but obviously, with one striking difference: none of the nestled world need to visually resemble each other the way Russian dolls do. Rather, as the go board and the two lovers show us, they need to do so structurally.

The game of *go*, which requires constant pain-staking attention and in which the key to win or loss is often found in an early, seemingly insignificant move, is of course the perfect metaphor for this philosophy of nestled narratives. Played on a grid of nineteen by nineteen lines, the game serves as a neat microcosm that emphasizes how events, whether on the board or in life, are governed by a series of small decisions that have large consequences. Indeed, this is how the game, with its seemingly infinite variety of moves, has often been understood throughout imperial history: as an abstracted and miniaturized version of the real world that can strategically guide its player to a better understanding of the infinite intricacies of the battlefield, life, and arguably the universe itself.⁹

In turn, when writing about such a game, pre-modern scholars often neatly embraced the minute yet at the same time ever-expansive nature of the game. For instance, the Song-dynasty neo-Confucian philosopher Shao Yong 邵雍 (1011-1077), in trying to capture the significance of the game of *go*, could not help but write poems of unprecedented length and complexity. At one hundred eighty couplets, three hundred sixty lines, and one-thousand-eight-hundred characters, the scholar's "Great Ode to Observing the Game of Go (*Guan qi da yin* 觀棋大吟)" stands as the longest poem produced in pre-modern literature.¹⁰ *Plum*, a novel of one hundred chapters, with countless characters, and innumerable events, all told in the most exquisite detail, offers a similar, minutely-constructed virtual world. Like the game of *go*, the novel represents a microcosm whose very complexity challenges us to make out the rules.

Yet if the game of *go* teaches us that one should pay attention to detail, it also teaches us that we should not lose ourselves in such detail. Indeed, when emphasizing how the game of *go* should be understood as a guide to understanding the cosmos, scholars also tended to carefully emphasize that the game's most valuable lesson was perhaps learned by not getting distracted by the game to begin with. Look back, for instance, at the title of Shao Yong's poem just mentioned, but this time pay attention to every word. The title is "The Great Ode on *Observing* the Game of Go." (emphasis mine) The point is not *playing* the game of *go*, it is *observing* it, preferably from a careful and critical distance.¹¹ Or, as one influential late-Ming author of moral scripts, Hong Yingming 洪應明 (late-sixteenth century), summarized the popular idea in his educational tract, *A Discussion of Bitter Roots* (*Cai gen tan* 菜根談), "The affairs of the world are like a game of chess; those who do not make a move are its true masters."

⁹ Early myths about the genesis of the game contribute its invention to the mythical emperor Yao who sought to instruct his middling son in the art of political rule. In later poetry, philosophy, and *go* manuals, the game-board is often likened to the world or the universe. Lo, Andrew, and Tzi-cheng Wang. "Spider Threads." McKenzie and Finkel, pp. 186-201.

¹⁰ Understandably this particular poem has not been translated. However, a translation of a shorter poem by Shao Yong on the game of *go*, "Long Ode to Watching the Game of Go (*Guan qi chang yin* 觀棋長吟)," is offered on the Wikipedia page dedicated to the man. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shao_Yong (accessed October 13, 2017) For a study on the role the game of *go* plays in poetry, see Lo, Andrew 盧慶濱, "Tang Song weiqi shige de ya yu su 唐宋圍棋詩歌的雅興俗 (The vulgar and elegant of Tang and Song poems about the game of *go*," in *Ya su xiangcheng: Chuantong wenhua zhixing de bianyi* 雅俗相成：傳統文化質性的變易 (The material changes of the interplay between elegance and vulgarity," edited by Wang Cicheng 王次澄 and Guo Yongji 郭永吉, (Taoyuan xian Zhongli shi: National Central University Press, 2010), p. 217-259.

¹¹ Of course merely observing the game could also pose risks. One of the names for the game of *go*, "rotten handle" (*lanke* 爛柯) is derived from a popular anecdote from the fifth century. Ren Fang's 任昉 (460-508), *Tales of the Uncanny* (*Shu yi ji* 述異記) tells of a woodcutter who, while watching a game of *go* played by immortals, lost track of time. When he awoke from his reverie he found his axe handle had rotted away. The idea remains the same: do not get lost in the game.

Simply put, when the novel juxtaposes the game of *go* with the pleasure of sex, the text suggests that in both it is best to be strategic, not lose oneself in the moment, but instead pay careful attention to each and every move. Such a message is lost, of course, on the two lovers depicted in the illustration. Chen Jingji and Pang Chunmei are so captivated by their pursuit of pleasure that they fail to pay much attention to where their moral missteps might lead. Not surprisingly such inattention soon leads to the lovers' demise. In Chapter 99, Chen Jingji, whilst once again finding himself in the embrace of Pang Chunmei, fails to notice that his intimate whispers are overheard by Zhang Sheng who avenges himself on the hapless Jing-ji by decapitating him. In similar fashion and one chapter later, Pang Chunmei, having failed to strategically conserve her life-force, dies of sexual exhaustion. Perhaps the two would have been better if they had paid more careful attention to the abstract lessons taught by the game of *go* instead of regarding it as a mere, insignificant game.

Conclusion:

Let me conclude my talk with a quote from the introduction to a manual of the game of *go*, “The Dark and Mysterious Classic of the Game of Go 《玄玄棋经·序》,” from the Yuan dynasty period by the hand of the “Old Man of Shao’an 邵庵老人.”¹²

Now as far as the system (*zhi*) of *go* is concerned: it has the images (*xiang*) of Heaven and Earth, square and round; it has the principles (*li*) of *yin* and *yang*, moving and stillness; it has the order (*xu*) of the heavenly bodies laid out; it has the opportunities (*ji*) of the transformations of wind and thunder, it has the power (*quan*) of spring and fall, life and death; it has the advantages (*shi*) associated with the protrusions and hollows of mountains and rivers. In this, the wax and wane of the *Tao* itself, the rise and fall of human affairs, are all housed in it.

夫棋之制也，有天地方圆之像，有阴阳动静之理，有星辰分布之序，有风雷变化之机，有春秋生杀之权，有山河表里之势。此道之升降，人事之盛衰，莫不寓是。

In the preface, the author defends the game of *go* as the most superb of arts (“how could any of the other regular arts ever deign to look down on it 夫乌可以寻常他艺忽之哉！??!!”) by arguing that an entire universe is “included/housed” (*yu* 寓) in the game.¹³ Mountains and streams, heaven and earth, the entirety of human affairs, the eternal *Tao* itself, all this is included in the virtual space of the grid of the *go* board. Given the imagistic language and cosmic pretensions of the description, it might be tempting to imagine the game as somehow a “simulation,” or, even more seductively, a “likeness” of the real world.

However, when we carefully look at the preface’s language, we should note that at no point the author seems to try and convince us that the virtual world constructed on the board of *go* is ruled by notions of visual resemblance or any other form of verisimilitude. Rather, the relationship between the virtual universe of *go* and the “real” world is based on, what the author in his first line calls, “principles of construction” (*zhi* 制). Though “outward” impressions and

¹² For a discussion of this text and a translation of its main body, see Paolo Zanon, “*Qijing Shisan Pian* (The Classic of *Weiqi* in Thirteen Chapters)—Its History and Translation,”

[http://www.go.hvalur.org/knihovna/Go%20\(Weiqi\)%20Philosophy%20And%20Playing%20Strategies.pdf](http://www.go.hvalur.org/knihovna/Go%20(Weiqi)%20Philosophy%20And%20Playing%20Strategies.pdf)

¹³ Note that the term “*yu*” can be employed as “allegorize,” but this allegorization process is based not on verisimilitude, things being like one another, but rather on containing one another, synecdoche.

images play a role in the author's language, note that the crucial noun at the end of each of the "descriptive" lines is a decidedly non-imagistic abstract principle, the *advantage* made possible by the lay-out of the land, the *opportunities* provided by the transformation of the weather, the *order* of the constellations in heaven. Even the word "image" (*xiang* 像) employed by the author in the first phrase refers not to an image that employs verisimilitude, but rather the decidedly non-mimetic straight and broken lines of the *Yijing*'s hexagrams.¹⁴ In short, the world is out there to be observed and the *go* board might reproduce that world in a virtual setting, but it does so in a fashion that is decidedly non-mimetic.

To be sure, the author of the preface ascribes to a particular brand of abstract philosophizing, a brand which, in the world of early modern Chinese painting at least, strategically employs its anti-mimetic principles as a way of constructing its tasteful elitism. As such, the play espoused in the prefaces is only one possible way of reading games (and novels) and other more mimetic imaginations of the game are assuredly out there. Of course, we should also caution ourselves that the game of *go* (or a preface to an introduction to its rules) is not the same as a vernacular novel, *Jin Ping Mei* or otherwise. Finally, a few brief references to the game of *go* (or any other game) in such a novel do not necessarily represent a hidden key that somehow magically unlocks the one and only true meaning of such an early-modern text.

That said, I would argue that in trying to understand the multiple attractions of the early-modern vernacular novels of the late-Ming age, it is at times useful not to look solely for those notions that confirm our own modern predilections. Instead, we might want to look for those elements that willfully depart from our pre-conceived ideas, long-established ideas of mimesis born out of the philosophies of Aristotle, reaffirmed by the realist aesthetics of the 19th-century novel, including even the anti-mimetic modernisms and post-modernisms of the 20th-century.

One such willful departure, or at least the model thereof, can be found in the many games played in *Jin Ping Mei*, games such as *go* that emphasize principles of appreciating the virtual world of the text in a fashion that is not mimetic, but instead rule-based, abstract, relational, transformative, grid-based, and governmental. The world produced through such an aesthetics can be every bit as absorbing and mesmerizing as the ones constructed on the basis of mimesis. Indeed, who has not lost a precious few hours in the distractions of a late-night card game? But, I would argue, such moments of intense immersion obey a decidedly different logic from our delight in verisimilitude. Indeed, by carefully observing and analyzing such play-based aesthetics, we might find something strikingly different, that is immersion without mimesis.

¹⁴ For a nice discussion of the trigrams and the way in which writing and painting, at least according to one 14th century author, Song Lian 1310-1381, share their origins, see Craig Clunas, *Pictures and Visuality*, p. 109. There is also a nice painting by Guo Xu (1456-c. 1529) that illustrates this moment. See Clunas, *Chinese Paintings and Its Audiences*, p. 7.