Dress to Impress: Exploring Clothing Mechanics and Gender Performance in Mobile Game *Empress's Choice*

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This study investigates how game mechanics influence gender performance through clothing choices in *Empress's Choice*. The game was first launched on mobile devices, chromebook, and tablets in June 2022. Players would be able to enjoy the game on a variety of platforms. This study employs content analysis to explore game mechanics and in-game elements, specifically focusing on how they affect the players' construction of their characters' gender. The analysis is limited to chapters featuring dressing-up and destiny event stages, where clothing choices are central to gameplay. Judith Butler's theory of performativity is a framework to examine whether the game reinforces traditional gender norms or encourages players to subvert them. The findings reveal that, despite the game's emphasis on player choices, the mechanics, especially those related to clothing and its associated features, still largely adhere to conventional gender expectations. The main character (player) is constructed to be female by repeatedly donning feminine clothes in mostly bright colors and elaborate accessories. All categories of clothing (type, color, and accessories) in the game have a particular bias towards traditional feminine elements. Therefore, during dress-up stages, players have limited choices in gender expression besides the feminine style dictated by the mechanics. However, the in-game actions, part of destiny events, show a contrasting experience. These events give players choices that impact the story without imposing specific gendered behaviors. This complexity indicates that limitations and opportunities to challenge gender norms exist in *Empress's Choice* through its game mechanics.

Keywords: Empress's Choice, Gender Performativity, Clothing Choices, Game Mechanics, Actions

INTRODUCTION

Empress's Choice, released by TAG-GAMES Entertainment Limited in 2022, is a mobile game where players take the role of a daughter of a noble family and enter the Imperial Place. They would climb the ranks from a lowly concubine to a mighty Empress. As the title suggests, players must navigate the story by choosing and leveling up their destiny value. Choosing the wrong options would result in a lower score (in destiny value), slows the story's progress. Like other role-playing games (RPG), *Empress's Choice* encourages players to build their power by making allies, managing the harem, dating confidants, completing quests, and choosing the perfect outfit to impress. With over 100K downloads in Google Play, the game has expanded into over 70 servers. It is categorized as an RPG with dressing up, simulation, empire building, single-player, and stylized experience.

Figure 1. *Empress's Choice* Promotional Material

(Source: *Empress's Choice*, Google Play)

Set in a historical context (ancient China) where women traditionally held limited power, *Empress's Choice* seems to empower, presumably female, players with extensive decision-making power, according to its target audience. This power extends to shaping the story according to their choices and designing their character's identity and performance. The Contradiction—a game set in a patriarchal era offering a seemingly liberating experience—presents a curious case study. Historically, women in many ancient societies, including China, were limited in their agency; they had little choice or control over their destiny (Hinsch, 2018; Sangwha, 1999). However, this game allows the main character (players) to enjoy

autonomy in shaping her destiny, which would have been unimaginable for women of that era.

This raises a vital question: Does *Empress's Choice* challenge traditional gender expectations, or does it ultimately reinforce them? This study aims to determine whether *Empress's Choice* encourages players to embrace performative femininity that aligns with traditional gender expectations as prescribed in history or lets players redefine these expectations through their choices in the game. It analyzes this paradox by examining the game mechanics, specifically how clothing choices and related gameplay elements affect the players' construction of their character's gender. After all, clothes work as a way to show and follow traditional ideas of femininity and masculinity (Jestratijević, 2015). For example, in the Indonesian context, clothing is an important determinant in marking and enhancing women's femininity in the singers of *goyang Karawang*. Clothing is employed to elevate and attract a woman's sensuality on stage. Aryandari and M.S. (2017), in their discussion on *Goyang Karawang*, highlight clothing, among other elements, such as hairdressing, makeup, and footwear, as ammunition to win the hearts of the audiences. This engagement between the audiences and *Goyang Karawang* singers with their clothes is similar to audiences and female characters in *Empress's Choice*. This is why analyzing clothing choices in *Empress's Choice* helps us understand gender performance within the game world. Since clothes are often connected to established gender norms, exploring how players interact with these features in the game would reveal whether they are encouraged to conform to the existing expectations or try to redefine them and perform their idea of femininity through their clothing choices.

As an RPG mainly targeting the female demographic, *Empress's Choice* does offer an exciting opportunity to explore gender performance through the lens of Judith Butler's theory. Butler (2006) argues against the notion of gender as an essence, an inherent identity determined by biological sex. Instead, she proposes gender as a performance, a repeated 'doing' of gendered acts. This performance may not necessarily be a conscious choice; societal expectations and norms largely influence them. In short, gender is not about who you are but what you do, and the performance that determines one's gender is shaped by the cultural and historical context in which it occurs (Hershatter, 2020; Niedda, 2020). Thus, Butler's theory suggests that gender is a social construct shaped by cultural norms and expectations. It is not fixed but quite fluid as it constantly changes

according to the context. In the context of *Empress's Choice*, through their choices, players are likely to explore different gendered performances, possibly challenging traditional gender roles and expectations.

The premise of *Empress's Choice* aligns with Butler's ideas of gender as a performance—a constant enactment through actions and behaviours within a cultural context (Butler, 2006). Every in-game action, from choosing outfits to building relationships with other characters, contributes to performing a "gendered body" within the game (Salih, 2007). In *Empress's Choice*, players do not have a pre-defined gender identity. Instead, they must perform actions—cultivating relationships with allies and confidants, defeating enemies, choosing clothes, completing chores and missions—as dictated by the game's script. All must be completed to fulfil the target to be an Empress—the highest-ranking woman in the harem—and conform to a particular idea of femininity in the game.

While previous studies have discussed gender portrayals in games, focusing on underrepresentation, sexualization, and limited roles as well as opportunities for female characters (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Castillo & Doral, 2016; Friedberg, 2015; Rennick et al., 2023), a gap exists. They have overlooked a crucial aspect—the role of game mechanics in shaping gender construction. This current study aims to bridge that gap. This study takes a different approach by employing content analysis similar to previous studies. It focuses on how game mechanics, specifically clothing choices and related elements, affect how players construct their character's gender identity in *Empress's Choice*. In analyzing the mechanics, this study aims to understand whether the game empowers players to defy traditional gender expectations or subtly push them towards performing traditional notions of femininity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study applies content analysis to explore how game mechanics, specifically clothing choices and related elements, in *Empress's Choice* affect the gender performance of the main character (players). The primary data source includes the in-game textual and visual narratives extracted from selected chapters featuring dressing-up stages and destiny events, where choices are pivotal to the gameplay. Screenshots, gameplay recordings, and textual elements are all gathered to capture the relevant information. In this case, the data collection encompasses playing through the game, selecting appropriate chapters, and documenting available actions related to the clothing choices and their associated features. Furthermore, the consequences of different choices are considered in each chapter.

Next, the data collected is coded based on two categories. First, clothes; each clothing item is categorized based on type, colour schemes, and accessory options. Second, actions taken during destiny events following the game mechanics are categorized based on gendered behaviours such as submissive-dominant, gentle-aggressive, weak-strong, or other stereotypical gendered traits. After sorting clothing and action data, the next step involves assigning masculine and feminine labels to these categories. It would help us see whether the clothing choices and actions lean towards or away from traditional gender expectations. Butler's theory of performativity serves as a guiding framework for this analysis. It sets out to find out whether the game reinforces traditional gender expectations or lets players challenge them through their choices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses content analysis results, focusing on clothing choices and related elements in *Empress's Choice*. Since the game targets the female demographic, this study assumes players mainly navigate gender performance through expressions of femininity within the game. To understand how clothing choices and following actions shape this performance, this study investigates the array of available outfits and the in-game features associated with them.

Clothes and the Performance of Femininity
Despite having over a hundred outfits in its gallery, *Empress's Choice* appears to lean more heavily towards traditional feminine style (Figure 2). The game offers a comprehensive customization system, letting players choose their preferred looks and style. In the outfit interface, players can see a collection of hairstyles, clothes (tops, bottoms, and overskirts), socks, shoes, makeup, vibes, and sets, as well as a vast array of accessories, including headwear, face, earrings, neckwear, pendant, bracelet, handheld, and back ornament (Figure 3). However, the clothing choices are biased towards feminine garments. For instance, the overskirt category features dresses, *qipao*, *kimono*, *sari*, gowns and dresses.

In contrast, the top category has a variation of blouses, tank tops, and shirts in feminine colours and designs. The same thing happens to the bottom section, filled with skirts of varied lengths. Almost 80% of the items displayed in the game are feminine.

McNeil and Riello (2005) argue that clothes like skirts, dresses, blouses and corsets are designed for females as they are intended to emphasize feminine figures and create feminine silhouettes. They add that this gender construction based on the types of dresses one wears can be traced back to the division between how Aristocratic men and women dressed during the Victorian era and probably even long before that. Across many cultures, feminine clothing is typically associated with dresses, skirts, and bright colours, whereas masculine clothing includes pants, suits, and darker tones (Green et al., 1985). Additionally, high-heeled shoes frequently appearing in the game are traditionally seen as feminine features, while their absence indicates masculinity (Jobling, 2014; Paoletti, 1987).

Figure 2. Robe Ministry Overview

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 3. Outfit Interface

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Nevertheless, it seems that the game also offers clothes that hold the potential to defy traditional gender expectations. A limited selection of clothing items typically associated with masculinity, such as pants, boots, armour, and weapons, are available in the game (Figure 4). There are also bold and striking outfits like the Battlefield Elite (Figure 5), Sea Sailor, Lady General (Figure 6), and Guard Suit sets, signifying an assertive or aggressive character. Though limited, such choices show that the game mechanics might not entirely restrict players from defying the dominant narrative of femininity through their character's appearance. There are still some possibilities to challenge it, even if the options are negligible, considering the sheer volume of feminine items completely overshadowed the other types.

Figure 4. Masculine Items

(Source: *Empress's Choice,* Google Play)

Figure 5. Battlefield Elite Set

(Source: Empress's Choice Game)

Figure 6. Lady General Set

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

In addition to the types of clothes, the colour scheme in *Empress's Choice* also reinforces a sense of femininity. While the game offers a broad spectrum of colours for the clothes, including dark and bright tones, there is a clear bias towards softer hues. Pink, pastel and other light colours dominate the selection, whereas the bolder and darker options like black and purple appear less frequently. This emphasis on softer colours resonates with previous findings on the connection between colour and gender associations. Prior studies consistently identify that pink and soft colours are traditionally associated with femininity (Grisard, 2017; Hess & Melnyk, 2016; Zhang, 2015). Ria Miranda, a well-known Indonesian female designer, selected soft colours such as dusty pink, salmon, and beige for her clothes designs – aimed at producing "soft, polite, and calm" images of Muslim women (Nurcahyanti & Septiana, 2018). These colours enhance Muslim women's feminine image, distinguishing them from other women. Clothes in their colours, in this case, are significant and determine the shaping of the perspectives of the wearers. According to Dewayanti and Andhini (2023), clothes influence how people value others and, most importantly, how others see the wearers. Moreover, Jose de Medeiros Dantas et al. (2021) explain that societal norms, historical trends, and cultural expectations influence colour preferences. This colour bias, combined with the focus on traditionally feminine clothing choices, might subtly push players to portray their character within the confines of established gender norms and stereotypes.

Empress's Choice presents a detailed character customization system, allowing players access

various clothing types, colour schemes, and accessories. After choosing the combination of hairstyles, clothes, socks, and shoes, players can equip their character with a vast selection of accessories, ranging from practical everyday items like glasses, umbrellas, books, bags, and fans to elaborate jewellery like crowns, tiaras, bracelets, pendants, and headdress (Figure 7). These accessories are often adorned with florals, lace, damask and chinoiserie designs, traditionally associated with femininity.

Figure 7. Accessories

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

This focus on feminine accessories aligns with historical trends. Accessories have historically significantly shaped and reinforced gender roles

(Beaujot, 2007; Braizaz & Marion, 2019). From parasols, shawls, and fans in nineteenth-century France to handbags, shoes, and hats in Victorian-times England, these accessories do not simply serve their purpose as clothing items, but they also function as a tool for both social distinction and the performance of ideal femininity (Beaujot, 2007; Braizaz & Marion, 2019). By displaying such accessories in the game, with the notably feminine items dominating the selection, it implies that wearing them would make them an ideal picture of womanhood. It can be concluded that the game's emphasis on traditionally feminine clothing, colours, and accessories can strongly influence how players express their character's gender identity. It may send them to follow a particular portrayal, potentially limiting the possibilities for exploring gender expression beyond the established norms.

In addition to primarily feminine items, the clothes in the game do not provide stats that can improve the character's abilities unless a complete set is collected. Hence, as a piece, it seems that the clothing items simply exist to make the character's appearance look visually appealing and not for other purposes. This finding reflects the traditional gender expectations, where women are expected to focus on their appearance and care for their husbands rather than pursue other abilities and activities (Cui, 2023; Gan, 2023). Cui (2023) further elaborates that in ancient China, women did not have strong thinking and abilities; they existed simply as men's accessories. The game has created a system that might nudge players to perform established gender norms in their character's appearance. In the context of *Empress's Choice*, the focus on feminine items and the lack of stats provided by clothing choices could reinforce traditional gender roles–those women are expected to prioritize aesthetic (appearance) over skill development. The matter in the game, where the main character does not have the power to fight for herself but has to send her allies instead, also proves this. By focusing on clothes that make the character look beautiful but do little to power them up, the game subtly encourages players to focus more on their appearance, aligning with the belief that women only pay attention to their looks over other skills. This, along with the limited options for masculine expression, restricts how players can construct their character's gender identity in the game.

Limited Choices, Reinforcing Femininity

Each item in *Empress's Choice* possesses at least two characteristics from a set: gentle, royal, luxury, traditional, casual, formal, elegant, court, fresh, simple, classic, racy, refined, deluxe, and many more (figure 8). Dress-up stages challenge players, requiring them to mix and match clothes according to the characteristics listed in the stage requirements (figure 9). With such an extensive collection of clothes in the gallery, players would expect a diverse and personalized experience in creating outfits based on their preferred style. However, while a vast array of feminine and masculine clothes would allow players to choose their preferred style, the clothing choices in the selected chapters featuring dressing-up stages present a fascinating paradox.
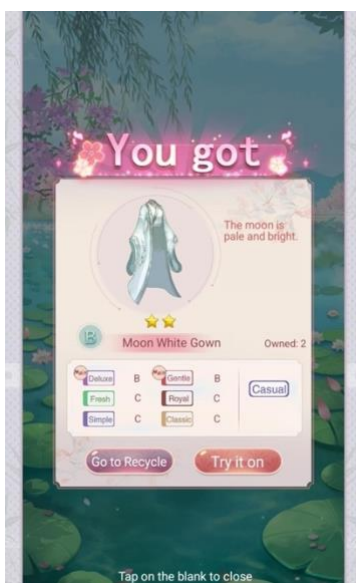
Figure 8. Clothing Stats/ Characteristics

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 9. Clothing Choices

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 10. Style Requirements

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Although the dress-up stages in *Empress's Choice* appear to offer players an opportunity to express themselves through clothing choices, a closer examination reveals a subtle push towards specific styles. High scores, crucial for story progression, are awarded for assembling outfits embodying traditional femininity—elaborate gowns, flowing skirts, and sparkling accessories. These stages assigned players a predetermined set of clothing categorized by characteristics such as 'elegant' and 'gentle' or 'fresh' and 'simple' (figures 9 and 10), pushing them towards specific styles. An elegant outfit, usually a flowing dress combined with elaborate headwear and various accessories, is linked with positive points (a success) in the game and a chance to proceed to the next chapter (figure 11). On the other hand, choosing outfits that deviate from this prescribed femininity can result in lower scores and hinder progress within the main storyline (figure 12). The mechanics within these dress-up stages suggest a possible limitation on player agency regarding their gender expression. The repeated act of choosing these 'correct' feminine outfits during the clothing choices may lead players to internalize these expectations, associating them with success both within and outside the game.

Figure 11. Success during Dress-up Stage

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 12. Failure during Dress-up Stage

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 13. Free Customization

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Players might have access to various clothing outside the stages (figure 13). However, the focus on the assigned characteristics within the dress-up stages creates a limitation for exploring gender expression beyond established norms. The 'correct' choices undoubtedly enhance the character's beauty and elegance, yet they subtly direct players to believe it is their most desirable style. They must agree, therefore, with the notions of femininity designed by the game mechanics. Furthermore, the early chapters of *Empress's Choice's* main story involve the main character (players) having to clear the dress-up stages and impress a figure of authority—the head maid, other noble ladies or concubines, and eventually the emperor. This reinforces the notion of femininity being linked to submissiveness and pleasing others, especially those in positions of power and authority. The constraints imposed by game mechanics in the form of style requirements combined with the limited types of clothes beside the feminine ones make it challenging for players to construct alternative gender expressions. The parameters set by the clothing choices and dress-up stages largely influence how far players can diverge from traditional femininity. Despite the desire to express their individuality in the game, players must agree with the prescribed boundaries and follow the standard performance dictated by the game mechanics.

Actions Speak Louder than Clothes
In each chapter, players are supposed to follow the storyline–encountering potential allies and enemies, building connections, and scolding enemies. Sometimes, the chapters would get special stages like dress-ups or destiny events. Destiny events involve decision-making actions that can either direct players' character toward aggressive and dominant behaviors commonly associated with masculinity or push them towards passive or submissive behaviors of a feminine group. Unlike dress-up stages, which focus on clothing choices, destiny events prompt players to make decisions in response to problems or questions presented in the story (figure 14). Then, like the previous stages, choosing the 'correct' answer typically results in more points (figure 15), whereas selecting the other yields fewer points (figure 16).

Figure 14. Options in Destiny Event

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 15. Result of Destiny Event 1
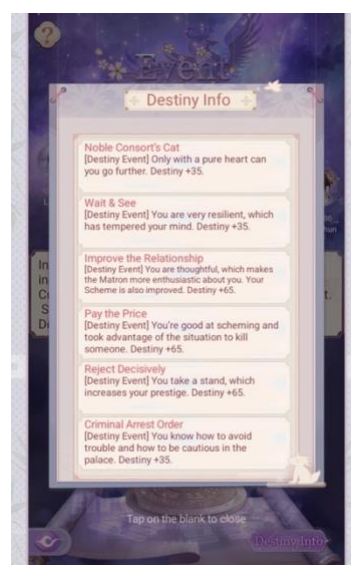
(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 16. Result of Destiny Event 2

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

In contrast to clothing choices, which tend to steer players towards traditional femininity, Destiny Event and its accompanying actions offer more flexibility for different gender performances. The actions players take, therefore, are not tied to specific gender portrayals or traits. Building the character to be aggressive or dominant in every option does not guarantee more points, just as being gentle or submissive would not necessarily result in a lower score. Figures 15 and 16 provide an excellent example of this. In figure 15, players are rewarded 65 points for having self-respect and long-term vision—traits commonly associated with masculinity. However, in chapter 12, players receive the same points for behaving courteously, which is usually a feminine trait. Similar happenings occur when players are soft and kind (figure 16) and exhibit caution towards a problem in their place. Both are feminine (soft and kind) and masculine (cautiously, not emotional) traits, yet they score only 35 points rather than the previous 65. The destiny info (figure 17-18) describes those different actions and decisions that can yield different outcomes. Achieving high scores (success) varies based on players' every choice and does not conform to specific gendered behaviors (figure 19).

Figure 17. Destiny Info 1

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

Figure 18. Destiny Info 2

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)
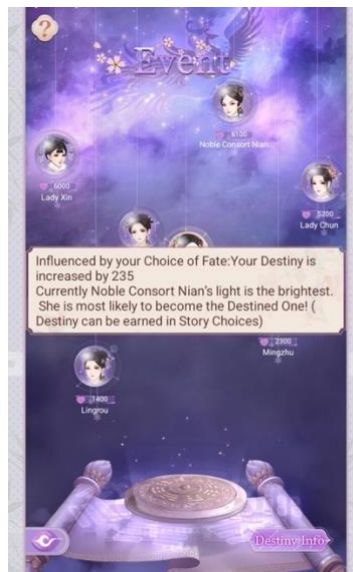
Figure 19. Destiny Event

(Source: *Empress's Choice* Game)

It is essential to consider masculinity and femininity as social constructs rather than inherent biological property (Stets & Burke, 2000). Society defines what it means to be female and male, associating masculinity with power, dominance, assertiveness, and independence (Ghilzai et al., 2023; Leaper, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000). Femininity, on the other hand, is typically portrayed with submissiveness, passivity, and gentleness. *Empress's Choice* breaks away from these stereotypes through actions and point rewards in its destiny event. It encourages players to explore many different courses of action and behaviors. This suggests that players would have the opportunity to navigate beyond traditional gender expectations in the game, aligning with Butler's emphasis on the fluidity of gender itself.

CONCLUSION

Empress's Choice subtly reinforces traditional gender expectations through its dress-up features while providing limited opportunities for players to defy these norms through its gameplay mechanics. The game emphasizes feminine clothing choices and style requirements, leading players to internalize these expectations and associate them with success. Nevertheless, the flexibility offered by the Destiny events lets players explore different courses of action and challenge traditional gender norms to some extent. As an RPG with dress-up features, *Empress's Choice* allows players to customize their character's appearance and make their own choices. However, a particular bias towards feminine elements emerges across all categories (style, color, accessories) in the game, subtly guiding to portray their character within the established gender norms.

The overwhelming number of female items in the game has overshadowed any possibilities for other kinds of gender expressions. During the dress-up stages, players must combine outfits according to the style requirements, which align with traditional femininity. Failure to do so would result in a low score and halt the storyline's progress. The style requirements in the dress-up stages, combined with the focus on feminine clothing choices, actually limit player movements, reinforcing traditional femininity associated with game success. No matter what kind of outfit combination players make, they would still not be able to defy the traditional femininity imposed by the game mechanics. This limitation can also potentially lead players to internalize gender expectations in the game, believing that their success in (and outside) the game depends on how good they look. On the other hand, in contrast to the clothing choices and the following dress-up stages, the actions involved in destiny events provide some flexibility as they are not strictly tied to specific gender portrayals. Players can make decisions responding to various problems and scenarios in the story without conforming to particular gendered behaviors or expectations. The scores in each event have been mentioned in Destiny info; they are not scared based on specific styles or traits, offering players opportunities to navigate beyond traditional gender expectations and explore different courses of action. The dynamic between the limitations of clothing choices and the flexibility offered by destiny events and associated actions implies the complexity of gender expressions in games. While the game may present limitations on clothing choices, players can still find ways to challenge traditional gender norms by selecting

appropriate actions in the gameplay. In doing so, players could somehow challenge and redefine traditional norms through the virtual environments of mobile gaming. Furthermore, besides analyzing gender issues, further studies on *Empress's Choice* and other role-playing games can involve exploring the game's cultural context through a postcolonial lens. It could focus on the power structure within the game. Additionally, investigating the narratives and language properties in the game can provide valuable information about the game's overall design and message.

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