A STUDY ON FOLK LITERATURE RESOURCES TO VIDEO GAME

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes the transformation of folk literature resources to a video game. It first outlines the significance of folk literature to video games and then discusses how folk literature adapts to them. Finally, regarding the existing problems in the transformation practices, three proposals are presented. 1) Player shall be prioritized to resources. 2) To counter the exploitation from playing mode, a well-done design should basically provide a possibility for players to improve life and a free expression of human nature, which also helps realize a sustainable development of video games; and moreover, by enriching folk literature genres, anonymous authority’s manipulation is expected to be offset, thus more game playing modes would be shaped. 3) The absorption of folk literature into video games helps break the magic circle of the misleading ethics in video games.

KEYWORDS
Video Games, Folk Literature Resources, Transformation

1. WHY VIDEO GAMES CHOOSE FOLK LITERATURE

Folk literature is a kind of language art collectively created by folks of a nation, which is not only a means for people to spontaneously express their feelings and understandings about daily life, but also the quintessence of history, science, religion and other life knowledge. It includes folk epics, myths, legends, folk tales, proverbs, and other oral traditions, typically featured by orality, collective creation, inheritance and variability, which mirrors a nation’s collective memories. Folk literature like a treasure house provides rich cultural resources to the construction of video game materially and spiritually.

Chinese video games sprouted in the late 1980s when Korean and Japanese video games overwhelmingly flooded to the Chinese market. To resist cultural colonization, Chinese game makers sought helps from traditions to unite players as a national community. Many impressive video games were published with “the image of China” from folk literature, such as Journey to the West-Monkey King, King Gesar, The Legend of Sword Man (Deng,2020).

In modern days, the game industry has become a new economic growth point and a novel platform to carry forward traditional culture and strengthen cultural sovereignty, Chinese government thus launched two supporting projects: National Video Game Publishing Project (2004-2016) and Original Video Game with Competitiveness Publishing Project (2016-2020), which help the game industry yield a rapid growth in revenue from ¥2.47 billion in 2004 to ¥280 billion ($43 billion) in 2020, and games adapted from folk literature of myths and legends contribute to 12.30% by revenue among the top 100 video games (China Gaming Industry Report 2020). Folk literature obviously works for video game production worldwide, for instance, the cultural archetype of Japanese Yokai leads to the popularity and financial success of Yo-kai Watch and Pokemon GO (Park,2016); Mexican traditional concept of Day of the Dead and the post-mortem worldview in Aztec mythology help Grim Fandango transmit a positive Mexican image to counter the denigration of Mexican culture (최명호,2016).

Moreover, folk literature meets people’s spiritual and cultural needs. For example, due to covid-19, the lockdown stopped people from celebrating new year in a regular way, Fight the Beast Nian Together creatively transformed traditional celebration ritual and amassed players to beat this evil beast Nian in Chinese mythology by clicks in the festive atmosphere of folk music in virtual game, which in a sense acts as an spiritual alternative
for traditional celebration practices, like setting off firecrackers and pasting spring poems to fight against Nian during lunar new year. Moreover, to satisfy people’s increasing cultural desire in the context of globalization, we could see Chinese video game actively absorbs folk literature both at home and abroad, like folk tales behind Chinese traditional festivals and Celtic mythology in Honor of Kings, Japanese Yokai in Onmyoji, and the medieval magical world in AFK Arena. In addition, game makers would alter the features of the characters in mythological allusions to video game if players express such a wish directly or implicitly in the community’s folklore (Eфимова, 2018). Video game also creates lots of online and offline game communities, like cos-play activities, platforms for fan art and game culture derivatives for players to get involved in the construction of game culture.

2. HOW FOLK LITERATURE ADAPTS TO VIDEO GAMES

The booming momentum of transforming folk literature resources to video games benefits from their similar structure in narration, and the same development process in a hero’s adventure and a player’s gaming journey. Furthermore, it also ascribes to folk literature’s role to realize player’s recognition to the virtual and factual world.

2.1 Structure Adaption

Regardless of genre differences and complex technology, video games show four decisive factors: goals, rules, feedback, and voluntary participation (McGonigal, 2012), which construct what and how player is playing. The structure by these four factors to some extent tallies with the fundamental structure of a tale Vladimir Propp proposed in Morphology of the Folk tale that all fairy tales are narrated by different combinations of several “functions” and “scope of action”. The names of the dramatis personae change, but neither their actions nor functions change (Vladimir, 1968). Similarly, video games are also narrated by different combinations of goals, rules, and feedback systems under player’s voluntary participation. That’s why mythic Irish hero Cuchulain and Medea in Greek mythology coexist in Japanese game Fate/stay night to find the holy grail. Chinese ancient creator god Pan Gu is fighting with the legendary heroine Hua Mulan for glory in Honor of Kings. Therefore, it’s common to find folk literature resources in different civilizations and periods have met in one game story.

Moreover, player’s exploration structure interprets the “monomyth” formula: departure—initiation—return (Campbell, 2008) that mythologist Joseph Campbell proposed in his work The Hero with A Thousand Faces, which display the same development process. Many video games often build an awesome and mysterious virtual world inviting players to explore, like the mysterious world intertwined with human and evil spirits in Onmyoji, the gorgeous realm structured by human, the spirits, and the immortals in Let him to be an immortal, the open-world brimmed with ancient beasts and scenes in Delusion in the Classic of Mountains and Seas. Akin to a heroic protagonist setting out from the known world to the unknown by undergoing transformative adventures and finally returning home, player leaves the earthly cares in real life to the game where he would overcome various obstacles to gain feedback rewards, to upgrade his level or equipment performance, and finally feels satisfied and pleased with transparent and immediately improvement and achievement. American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states by the hard work in the highly structured video games, players are self-motivated and regularly achieve the highest level of human happiness: nervously and optimistically get involved in the world around them (McGonigal, 2012).

2.2 Realization of Recognition

Inheritance, variability, and collective values of folk literature is conducive to the realization of recognition to virtual and factual world. Recognition to game space is the prerequisite to forge group identity and a sense of belonging, which further enables players to achieve recognition to the real life.

The inheritance nature ensures a series of stable factors in folk literature to pass on in game. Taking fan art activity which could maintain and enhance player’s group identity and a sense of belonging as an example, when Honor of Kings launched hero skin design activity for game character Chang’e, it clarified Chang’e is characterized by streamers symbolizing flying and a jade rabbit. Since these features align with the typical and stable features in the tale The Goddess Chang’s fly to the moon (Figure 1), who steals the elixir her
archer-husband asked from Queen Mother of the West and flied to the moon alone only with a fairy rabbit accompanied, they are easily recognized and accepted by players. Furthermore, the variability nature of folk literature largely reflected in language, plot, theme, image, and structure necessarily allow these features to mutate in game context where she is as a “Mage” hero, which empowers players to do creation based on their own understandings and aesthetic taste. Finally, the work “拒霜思” (Figure 2) won for transmitting a sense of loneliness and natural beauty, recognized and supported by 43.26 million players. Countless players are going to feel and imagine the beauty of Chang’e in folk mythology through the pure, ethereal, and alienated connotation of the new skin, and recall her lonely and bitter story in the moon.

![Figure 1. Tale of The Goddess Chang’s fly to the moon](image1.png) ![Figure 2. The Best Creative Award “拒霜思”](image2.png)

Nowadays, entertainment technology is influencing player’s game experience, like VR greatly extending players’ ability in vision, auditory, and central nervous system. However, it also has aroused concerns due to its high immersion and verisimilitude, where players akin to “brain in a vat” may fail to distinguish the virtual from the real, and what’s worse, if fragmented distorted information and concepts are reconstructed into our cognition, we will fall into the dilemmas of perceptual illusion, inversion of virtual world and reality, virtual “addiction” (Qian &Song, 2018).

Folk literature shows potential to solve these dilemmas for it helps players recall collective memories and values, which bridge their ego with the real life as a continuum. Korean scholar Dong-Il Oh (2011) from the perspective of Japan’s inherent animism culture discovered Japanese video games have a strong tendency to repeatedly remind players of the whole theme and story aimed at kami rather than making the ego of a player as a leading figure immersed in and identified with the game characters. He believes the reminder from game as well as player’s familiarity to their animistic culture lead players to maintain their realistic ego rather than totally get immersed in game. However, his finding seems not justified from the perspective of folk literature, instead it would be the nature worship behind kami as collective memories on coexistence with nature, humans, and super nature handed down from generation to generation that maintains player’s realistic ego and help them not lost in the virtual world. Individuals recall and represent the past based on specific collective environment (Halbwachs, 2002). When participating in specific game interactions with animism culture and other players, player recalls memories of nature worship behind kami, which keeps their recognition of the real ego in virtual world.

Specifically, in two sought-after Chinese video games Onmyoji and Tale of Immortal, the collective memories of predestination manifested by “unknown dangers” in unknown world is vividly presented to players and realizes their recognition. When logging in to Onmyoji, the player will get an oracle (Figure 3) with an interpretation (Figure 4), and when exploring in Tale of Immortal, the player will meet a diviner (Figure 5) in the way to forecast his future. If player gets an inauspicious oracle, but no worries, the interpretation will assure the player of some suggestion to avoid bad luck, and the diviner will provide a solution if the player pays some virtual game asset in exchange. However, an inauspicious oracle would frighten some players to follow these suggestions to behave carefully, or to “buy” safety. These two games, by creating a mysterious unknown world for players, would remind them that unknown dangers are awaiting them. This design in turn mirrors that even in a scientific and civilized society, ancient folk belief can still exert an impact on individuals when stepping into the unknown even for young digital Natives. This is because, in old days, traveling is difficult and dangerous due to poor transportation and long journey in the vast territory in China, the fear of the unknown world is gradually engraved in our memory and shaped in oral literature. The fact that dangers are also ubiquitous in modern society makes the motif of predestination works for young digital Natives in video games, which finally helps them realize their recognition to real world.
3. WHAT TO REFLECT ON TRANSFORMATION PRACTICE OF FOLK LITERATURE TO VIDEO GAMES

There exist many problems in transformation practice. The first is the negligence of players’ role as the subject. For instance, even Shadow Play: Nezha is successful in presenting shadow puppets and the folk tale Prince Nezha’s Triumph Against Dragon King for it does help some players think of the old days when watching shadow puppets, data from Apple store, Tap Tap community and other player rating platforms shows the market doesn’t buy it as player fails to get the initiative when operating but manipulated to watch the game telling folk tale mostly in a way of animated movie, which deprives the player of the right to respond in game. When video game ignores player, it will inevitably force player to be the disadvantaged party, just as what French postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard proposed in the power relationship between the media and the audience: if the audience fails to respond to the media, then the media would be granted authority. Therefore, when transforming folk literature, players shall be prioritized to resources. Enabling players to respond to game is expected to be one of an effective and feasible ways to eliminate this problem. As long as players gain the right to respond, this kind of imbalance would be counteracted. After all, lots of video games have to rely on a sufficient number of players to create interesting, emergent play, so that their players do not get bored. On a practical level, if enough players start voting with their time, attention, and wallets, and choose to play something else instead, they would turn into a force able to push the game (possibly also the game company) out of existence (Harviainen et al, 2020).

Secondly, playing mode in many video games featured by exploration of the unknown is repetitive, time-consuming and labor-intensive, which imposes an exploitation and an anonymous authority on players. The playing mode that players must finish enough repetitive work to unlock new journey exhausts them at a cost of a large amount of time. Consequently, players who refuse to top up money or are misled to pay by the underlying pay-to-win mechanics to offset time cost gradually leave. Harviainen et al (2020) found even a large company, like Zynga can suffer from drastic customer attrition, if its business practices are seen as exploitative. But Zynga’s ethical, rational egoism, manifested in well-done design and fair trade finally enabled the once thoroughly hated company to survive and prosper again. To realize a sustainable development of video game, a well-done design should basically provide a possibility for players to improve life and a free expression of human nature, which in turn counters the exploitation of players. In addition, this kind of playing mode is imposing “anonymous authority” (Fromm, 2002) on players. Fromm of the Frankfurt School states anonymous authority is invisible, which doesn’t give orders to people, nor does it make people stressful, but they are captured and manipulated by the invisible enemy. When players are motivated to unlock something new, they would feel obliged to finish that repetitive game labor because other player also will follow this practice. Therefore, to deal with this manipulation by anonymous authority, game makers could enrich the genres of folk literature to diversify the playing experience. Folk ballads, proverbs, sayings, local plays, folk rituals, folk poems, local knowledge and other oral traditions featured by different forms are potential to creatively produce different playing modes, which would also create a diverse folk aesthetic culture to answer different kinds of spiritual and cultural demands in virtual world.

Thirdly, many orthodox ethics in video games violate social ethics and mislead players. Huizinga (1971) termed the orthodox in video games as magic circle within which the normal rules of social interaction are suspended, but a new and usually temporary social contract is formed. It is common to find aggressive behaviors are accepted, unreasonable behaviors are rewarded, like violence, fraud, theft, and some disruptive
behaviors, all receive additional rewards. As folk literature centers its narration on the daily life of people, thus the integration of folk literature can break the magic circle for it allows players to immerse themselves in realistic ethical practices, that means game makers don’t even need to design ethics on purpose. Just as what Engels wrote in The Books of German Folk Tales that it cultivates his sense of morality like the Bible, so that he recognizes his power, his rights, and his freedom, and his courage, his love to his motherland are aroused. An in-depth exploration of the ethical value of folk literature to video games is expected to replace the disputed ethics and then provide a right ethical guidance for players. If the ethical values on heaven and man, on good and evil in folk literature are absorbed, it would be beneficial to a long-run and healthy development of video games, and to provide a right moral guidance for players in moral dilemmas.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper is a initial try to combine video games with folk literature resources, which on one hand aims to point out the huge potential and feasibility of folk literature resources to the construction of video games; and on the other hand, intends to highly recommend video game makers to pay attention to folk literature since the breakneck advancement of technology largely hit the growth of this kind of oral tradition in an information age, actually, whether in oral or written forms, most folk literature are instantaneous, some are even near extinction, and also reminds the professionals of folk literature research to seek new possibilities to vitalize folk literature resources in this novel field.

The key limitation of this paper is that it’s mainly from the viewpoint of players, many findings may need further discussions from the perspective of game makers or the marketing side.

REFERENCES

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