The narrativization of quantified play in videogame fanfiction

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Masculinity, gender, Chinese MMO, fanfiction, game procedures, intermediality, liminality

INTRODUCTION

When fanfics translate the game systems or mechanics of their source game into a narrative form, they establish an intermedial relationship, where the story 'thematizes, evokes or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium [videogames here] through the use of its own media-specific means" (Rajewsky, 2005, p. 53). This research extends game studies' understanding of the limits of games by examining how the fanfiction (fanfic) of a Chinese MMO evokes elements and structures of the game, and how, in doing so, it surfaces aspects of hegemonic masculinity latent in the game's systems and mechanics.

Fanfics' intermedial relationship with videogames closely links to the games' limit. To understand this, we draw upon Matthew Horrigan's (2021) discussion of liminality in game studies, which he sees as the crossing of thresholds of transformation. These thresholds are sometimes understood in terms of the "magic circle" (Huizinga 1949/1938): "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (1949/1938, p.10). Horrigan (2021) argues that it is hard to specify the precise location of the magic circle for any given game, and thereby identifies the video screen as a clearer boundary that separates the videogame from the real world. This research adopts Horrigan's definition of liminality to discuss what happens when a game's ludic elements leave the video screen and become part of prose fiction. Specifically, it describes the recurring patterns in videogame fanfics by which the limit of the video screen is crossed, evoking the elements or structures of the game in a narrative form.

This research analyzes the fanfics of the popular Chinese MMO, *Jianxiaqingyuan Online* (*Jian 3* hereafter, Seasun Game Studio, 2008). *Jian 3* is selected as it is a popular game that has generated a large number of fanfics, many of which are widely read in the game's player community. We are focusing on a particular type of (fan)fiction named system fiction. System fictions are fictions where a system finds and ties itself to the protagonist, requiring and/or helping the protagonist to achieve certain goals, such as taking revenge and earning reputation. System fictions emphasize the existence of the system by presenting rewards and punishments in terms of quantifiable outcomes, and explicitly describing the quests and abilities in terms familiar from videogames. The system fictions analysed here all refer to *Jian 3*'s game systems, such as leveling-up systems and reward systems, and thereby have liminal/intermedial relationships with the game.

The fanfics were collected between September 2020 and January 2021 from *Jinjiangwenxuecheng* (*Jinjiang*, *Jinjiangwenxuecheng*, 2003), a frequently used (fan)fiction publishing website in China. Purposive sampling was used to select fanfics that incorporated aspects of the game system into their fictions. We searched Jinjiang, Baidu and Google using the keywords "Jian 3, system", and this returned 204 fanfics as of August 1st 2020. We selected the most popular three based on the numbers of

reads. All selected fanfics are long slash stories, with an average of 620,000 words. They borrow game systems, procedures and mechanics from *Jian 3*, but have original male protagonists and storylines. Methodologically, this research employs close reading to examine the game and the three fanfics.

When these fanfics imitate game systems or mechanics, they engage in a process we call the *narrativization of quantified play*. We are particularly interested in how this narrativization impacts the ideological meaning of these elements when they are reproduced at (or across) the limit of the game. To explore this issue, we make use of research on quantified play, a concept that has been used to discuss the ideological implications of videogames' tendency to represent the world in terms of quantifiable data (Egliston 2019, 2020; Pérez-Latorre & Oliva 2019). For example, Rogers (2020) has discussed the link between the quantified conceptualization of health in videogames and hegemonic masculinity. We, too, are interested in this link between masculinity and quantified play, and how the relationship is affected by the transition from ludic to narrative form.

The three analyzed fanfics present their narratives in terms of quantified data, often in terms of health, strength, and experience. For example, one of the fanfics narrativizes quantified play by transforming the leveling-up and reward systems from *Jian 3* into a narrative device through which characters are described and developed. As readers, we see the story from the perspective of an overarching 'System' that observes and measures everything the protagonist does and converts it into a quantifiable score to reward or punish him. This narrative technique reduces characters and their behaviors to mere data that can be analyzed and sorted according to objective criteria. The protagonist learns to perceive and engage with others and themselves based on a logic of extreme quantification. Following Rogers (2020), we see this as characteristic of traditional masculinity, arguing that the narrativization of quantified play deepens and extends a form of hegemonic masculinity that is already latent in the game's systems and mechanics.

The research contributes to the understanding of games' limit and liminality (Ramsay 2020; Horrigan 2021), by connecting liminality to intermediality and to videogame fanfics. The analyzed videogame fanfics break the limit of the video screen by evoking the elements or structures of the game in an intermedial relationship. The research contributes to previous scholarship about intermedial relationships between Chinese online fiction and videogames (Inwood 2014, 2017) and between videogames and videogames fanfics (Burn, 2006; Rambusch et al. 2009), as it analyzes the intermediality in videogame fanfics by identifying what is being narrativized, how it is being narrativized, and what the narrativized element is doing in this new context both formally and ideologically. It contributes to game studies and fan studies by challenging Burn's (2006) and Rambusch et al.'s (2009) position that videogame fanfics tend to not feature ludic elements of their source games. It also contributes to game studies and gender studies by discussing how the videogame fanfics express traditional masculinity, through the transformation of ludic elements.

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