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Transmedia Storytelling of Game IP from the Perspective of Convergence Culture: A Case Study of NetEase's Onmyoji (Postprint)

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Abstract

In the new media era, establishing transmedia storytelling has become an approach for the development and marketing of numerous IPs. This paper conducts a case analysis of the transmedia storytelling of NetEase's game 'Onmyoji' by integrating Henry Jenkins' convergence culture theory, explores the characteristics of game IPs in transmedia storytelling, examines the role of fan knowledge communities in transmedia storytelling, and offers recommendations for issues within the transmedia storytelling system of 'Onmyoji'.

Full Text

A Study on Transmedia Narrative of Game IP from the Perspective of Convergence Culture: A Case Study of NetEase's *Onmyoji*

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Abstract: In the new media era, establishing transmedia narratives has become a primary approach for IP development and marketing. Drawing upon Henry Jenkins' convergence culture theory, this paper conducts a case study of the transmedia narrative employed by NetEase's game *Onmyoji*. It examines the distinctive characteristics of game IPs in transmedia storytelling, analyzes the role of fan knowledge communities in facilitating transmedia narratives, and proposes recommendations for addressing existing problems within *Onmyoji*'s transmedia narrative system.

Keywords: Convergence Culture; Transmedia Narrative; Onmyoji; Collective Intelligence

I. Research Background

In his work *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Henry Jenkins elucidates the concept of convergence culture through analyses of real-world cases, focusing on media convergence, participatory culture, transmedia narrative, and collective intelligence. Media convergence encompasses not only technological integration but also cultural dimensions, including “the collision of old and new media, the intersection of grassroots and corporate media, and the interaction between the power of media producers and consumers” [1]. Through his examination of *The Matrix* franchise’s transmedia narrative, Jenkins demonstrates how, despite varying story content across different media platforms, synergistic storytelling enhances entertainment value and motivates consumers to actively excavate details across media texts to piece together fragments of a “story universe,” thereby increasing audience engagement. In today’s competitive environment where major media corporations vie for consumer markets, this approach of leveraging transmedia narrative to foster audience participation and capture market share has become a strategic choice for numerous media IPs.

Onmyoji represents a domestic game IP that has implemented transmedia narrative comprehensively. Developed by NetEase, *Onmyoji* is a Japanese-style turn-based RPG mobile game set in the Heian period depicted in *The Tale of Genji*, narrating the story of the onmyoji Abe no Seimei as he searches for his lost memories in a world where humans and demons coexist across the boundaries of yin and yang. According to iResearch’s *2020 China Game IP Value Research Case Report*, *Onmyoji* has reached a total user base of 160 million people, with a market valuation of 70.22 billion yuan, establishing itself as a leading product in China’s mobile gaming sector [2]. To date, the *Onmyoji* IP has developed an extensive and rich narrative system encompassing animation, film, theatrical performances, and a series of derivative games. As two-dimensional culture gradually becomes mainstream in China, the *Onmyoji* IP has gained increasing familiarity among consumers through its rich transmedia narratives, with numerous fan-created derivative novels and comics widely disseminated across social media platforms.

II. *Onmyoji*’s Transmedia Narrative System

In the context of the internet and multimedia era, content collaboration across different media carriers has become a common promotional strategy. Recognizing the importance of establishing their own transmedia narrative universes for brand communication, many major media corporations have begun researching their IPs’ world-building systems to explore development possibilities. As an RPG game, *Onmyoji* offers a rich story world to explore, which has enabled the construction of its narrative universe.

The transmedia narrative extends first into film and television. In 2021, *Onmyoji* released its live-action film *The Yinyang Master*, which elaborates on the in-game storyline of “Kuro Seimei’s invasion of Heian-kyō.” Through live actors’

performances of the emotional entanglements among various factions, the film renders the game's characters more three-dimensional and substantial. In the animation domain, *Onmyoji* has leveraged its advantage as a two-dimensional mobile game to achieve extensive content expansion, producing a series of animated works including four seasons of *Ghost Stories Kindergarten*, two seasons of *The Good-for-Nothing Onmyoji Family*, and two seasons of *Onmyoji: Tales of Heian-kyō*, each achieving tens of millions of views on Bilibili. In terms of fan culture creation, official comics present audiences with the daily lives of game characters, enriching game settings and focusing on character storylines to enhance emotional connections across transmedia narratives. Furthermore, offline events have bridged the distance between game characters and players. The musical *Onmyoji: The Tale of Great Sword* performed 35 shows across nine cities to full houses, expanding on "side story" narratives from the game's plot. Familiar "shikigami" such as Onikiri, Shuten Dōji, and Ibaraki Dōji, along with their equipment, were brought to life on stage. As the musical toured, *Onmyoji's* average daily active user rate increased by 15% [3]. In derivative game development, *Onmyoji* has also implemented comprehensive strategies. For instance, the card game *Onmyoji: Card Game* allows players to understand the worldview of the "Night Parade of One Hundred Demons" and the backstories of numerous shikigami through the perspective of the character "Yamakaze."

All extended narratives derived from the *Onmyoji* game IP occur within the worldview established by the original game, differing only in presentation format and consumer participation methods. Multi-dimensional narratives deepen audiences' understanding of game characters through interconnected yet distinct storylines, establishing emotional bonds between consumers and characters and thereby immersing them in the world of *Onmyoji*.

III. Intertextual Effects in Transmedia Narrative

Intertextuality requires that texts across different media correspond with one another to achieve holistic effects. "The core story constitutes the heart of transmedia narrative, while intertextuality serves as its internal mechanism, facilitating text transformation across platforms and ultimately constructing the story world" [2]. To achieve effective intertextuality, content across different media must be continuous and complementary.

When discussing the seven principles of transmedia narrative, Jenkins mentions "continuity" across media texts: "Some transmedia franchises strive to maintain unified principles, ensuring coherence and consistency across all installments so that every extension remains as plausible as possible. Others use original material as a foundation for re-creation by altering character settings or rewriting stories through parallel universe approaches" [4]. In *Onmyoji*, the main storyline progresses chapter by chapter, with each chapter introducing a new shikigami and deepening the narrative, thereby constructing the story of Heian-kyō. Event storylines, such as "Ghost King's Banquet," "Past of the Sea Kingdom," and "Serpent Demon Invasion," also feature narrative connections. For

example, the plotline of the character “Yamata no Orochi” becoming a “fallen god” and the mystery surrounding the true identity of “Arakawa” advance incrementally across events, despite intervals between them. These developments prompt extensive player speculation about subsequent plots and predictions, enhancing immersive gameplay experiences. Animated works also extend game narratives—for instance, *Ghost Stories Kindergarten* uses “Tamamo no Mae’s” enrollment in the kindergarten to create a series of troubles, echoing the original game plot where the shikigami “Tamamo no Mae” stirs up turmoil in Heian-kyō, thereby enriching the character’s persona.

World-building represents another principle of transmedia narrative, where the story origin serves as the foundation for everything [4]. A well-constructed story world supports the viability of transmedia narrative. In *Onmyoji*, the main game plot plants narrative seeds regarding the complex relationships between “Genji Onmyoji,” “Onikiri,” “Shuten Dōji,” and others—subplots unsuitable for direct inclusion in subsequent game chapters. These seeds become clues that receive detailed elaboration in the musical *The Tale of Great Sword*, transforming game players into theater audiences who learn the backstories behind these characters. The original story world must retain sufficient exploratory space to provide transmedia narrative with adequate depth, attracting audiences to investigate foreshadowing and clues embedded across media texts.

Furthermore, effective intertextuality requires differentiation between media texts and the source material to avoid homogeneous repetition that diminishes audience appeal. Transmedia narrative is not mere adaptation of the original story world but achieves differential complementarity across media channels through varied content. Different media forms stimulate distinct audience responses: “If audiences encounter a text in one medium type by chance, they may be attracted to actively explore corresponding works presented in other media, gradually perceiving the overall narrative landscape and enriching their narrative experience as media types multiply” [5]. In *Onmyoji*’s multi-platform narratives, each medium emphasizes different aspects—for example, the main game focuses on Seimei’s memory quest, the musical emphasizes the side story of the “Great Sword trio,” and animated works primarily showcase characters’ daily lives. Different media audiences may experience varying narrative engagements, while game players can maintain freshness toward the IP through rich transmedia narratives, thereby extending the lifecycle of the game IP and increasing possibilities for consumer participation in texts.

IV. Transmedia Narrative as a Link for Fan Participatory Culture

Active fan participation constitutes a key characteristic of transmedia narrative. Jenkins’ research on participatory culture posits that fans are no longer passive “recipients” but also “creators” of media culture who participate in text production, with future media inevitably competing around audiences. Transmedia narrative provides fans with more channels for participation and creative space,

establishing connections between IPs and audiences. *Onmyoji* encourages fan players to create content and participate in the game world, offering official recognition for fan works. For example, the game character premium skin solicitation event organizes creation competitions among artists, with winning works determined by popular player vote and subsequently implemented in *Onmyoji*. Such activities motivate more players to participate in the game, enhance user loyalty, and enable the collaborative completion of transmedia narrative through joint efforts between the game developer and fan creators.

In the convergence culture era, fans and media producers are interdependent. Through collaboration between official channels and audiences, transmedia narratives better align with audience expectations, becoming more reasonable and enriching narrative world content. When the original text retains substantial creative space, fan participation can fill these gaps, allowing details not presented by the official source to be discovered through fan creations and increasing the overall completeness of the narrative universe. For instance, the story of the shikigami “Kiyohime” in *Onmyoji* is not extensively detailed in character biographies or game plots, prompting fan players to actively research Kiyohime’s backstory, thereby developing deeper understanding and emotional resonance with the character and gaining richer narrative experiences through active participation. Following the performance of *Onmyoji: The Tale of Great Sword*, the game developer launched a promotional campaign offering exclusive in-game character skins to players who purchased tickets for the live musical, motivating many to attend the theatrical performance and gain more comprehensive understanding of its narrative content.

In the media convergence era, official producers increasingly value communication with audiences, whose feedback becomes crucial. Audiences can participate by providing feedback to official channels through online platforms, potentially influencing subsequent narrative production. For example, many fans favor the shikigami character “Arakawa,” who had limited utility and few appearances in the game. Responding to player demands, the developer incorporated Arakawa’s storyline into official events and created an animated version of “Young Arakawa” to meet player expectations and sustain fan engagement.

Simultaneously, audiences’ exploration of content across different media channels facilitates mutual flow between audiences of various media. “Consumers can freely migrate between every media text” [6], increasing the audience base for each medium and contributing to transmedia narrative success. For instance, many *Onmyoji* users watch derivative animated series due to their love for the game, while some players try its MOBA spin-off *Onmyoji Arena*, thereby forming fan communities for these transmedia texts.

V. The Extending Role of Collective Intelligence on Game IP

Jenkins quotes Pierre Lévy in *Convergence Culture* to explain collective intelligence: “On the Internet, nobody knows everything, but everyone knows something, and what we previously could not understand or accomplish alone, we can now complete together by gathering” [7]. Individual audiences may not fully comprehend all aspects of transmedia narratives, but through fan aggregation and exchange, they can share their partial knowledge with others to gain more comprehensive narrative content. This collective intelligence promotes audience understanding of narrative texts across different media and motivates audiences to actively explore unknown textual content. In *Onmyoji*'s latest event “Final Battle,” the main storyline references content about “Genji Onmyoji” from long ago. In interactive text segments, exchanges between Minamoto no Yorimitsu and Onikiri may confuse newer players about the relationship between these characters. In such instances, veteran players who know this backstory provide explanations on social platforms or in the game’s “world channel,” enabling many players to understand this content. “Audiences are no longer merely consumers, viewers, or readers; more often, they are also creators who obtain more immersive and profound experiences, express their perspectives, and reinforce self-identity through participation and creation” [8].

Audience exchange and sharing of narrative content also serve to strengthen connections between texts across different media channels. As transmedia narrative universes expand, official producers may be unable to elaborate on every text in each medium in detail, inevitably creating “gaps” between texts. Audiences then function as “adhesives.” When connections between textual content in different media are not obvious, audiences enrich transmedia content by supplementing details through participatory creation. Simultaneously, the collective intelligence generated by audience “knowledge communities” reduces the risk of certain transmedia narrative texts becoming “marginalized.” “Common intellectual activities and emotional investment strengthen internal bonds, uniting members tightly through shared achievements and reciprocal knowledge exchange, prompting each member to seek new information for collective benefit, with unanswered questions generating pressure” [7]. Under this “pressure,” all content related to the original text is searched by the vast audience community, ensuring that even less-noticed media content is not neglected or marginalized.

VI. Existing Problems and Countermeasures

(1) Problems in *Onmyoji*'s Transmedia Narrative

1. Lack of Innovation in Narrative Texts

In transmedia narrative, it is crucial that texts across various media complement each other to form a complete story system. A lack of innovative narrative texts leads to homogenization problems and singular transmedia forms. *Onmyoji*'s

most frequently used transmedia narrative method involves introducing new shikigami to drive plot development or character storytelling. Particularly after the initial hype period following the game's 2016 launch, introducing new shikigami has become the primary method for retaining players, often by upgrading shikigami from "SSR" to "SP" rarity. However, this approach eventually causes player fatigue, as new shikigami are released before players can obtain previous ones, and universal access to high-tier shikigami reduces gameplay enjoyment and interest. New event storylines also lack innovation—examining past event content reveals that the narrative core consistently revolves around "defeating invading monsters to save Heian-kyō," with this repetitive plotline diminishing player novelty and reducing anticipation for and participation in transmedia narratives.

2. Exploiting Audience Emotions for Product Marketing

Transmedia narratives foster immersive emotional experiences for audiences. "As media carriers switch, audiences' understanding of stories continuously enriches and deepens, progressing from narrative immersion to being subtly surrounded by emotions conveyed by the narrative" [9]. Since its 2016 release, *Onmyoji* has developed profound emotional connections with many players over six years. However, as various media IPs actively seek transmedia dissemination and narrative expansion, this approach has become a shortcut for rapid marketing and promotion, with game developers exploiting player emotions to pursue marketing effectiveness and achieve promotional goals through hyped content, gradually diminishing players' emotional experiences until they become overexploited.

(2) Improvement Strategies for *Onmyoji*'s Transmedia Narrative

First, developers should establish an explorable, open story world. Transmedia extensions enrich and perfect the original text, requiring sufficient narrative threads in the source material for transmedia storytelling to explore. Leaving content for audiences to investigate across spatial and temporal dimensions enables participation and achieves the goal of extending narrative texts. Simultaneously, these transmedia narrative texts must possess adequate significance, demonstrating both depth—showcasing narrative logic and credibility that resonates with audiences to generate intertextual effects with the original text—and breadth—presenting multiple facets of the narrative world that can be accepted by most audiences.

Second, official developers should value user feedback and plan brand activities. In the competitive game IP market, outstanding event planning is necessary to build brand recognition and expand participation in derivative narrative texts. For example, *Onmyoji* launches various events during holidays to attract players online during vacations, providing gameplay forms beyond daily routines to increase enjoyment. However, event designs should feature memorable elements that satisfy most players' needs and expectations, with adjustments made based

on audience feedback during beta testing to effectively capture player attention.

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