What's in a Game? Transmedia Storytelling and the Web-Game Genre of Online Chinese Popular Fiction

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Abstract

This paper uses a genre of online Chinese popular fiction known as Web-Game fiction as an entry point for exploring the influence of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) on linear narrative fiction. By offering a thick description of MMORPG gameplay and of gamers' movements between online and offline worlds, Web-Game fiction narrates and "deinteractivates" the subjective experiences of players as they progress through the levels of online role-playing games. This essay proposes that the genre offers an alternative perspective on transmedia production strategies in Chinese popular culture and on the nature of immersion in online environments, often viewed in negative terms by Chinese critics who employ vocabulary such as *youxihua* ("gamification" or "ludification"), "YY" (*yiyin*, or "mental masturbation"), and chenmi (absorption or addiction) to warn of the dangers of allowing one's imagination to run wild in mediated fictional worlds. By reading one novel from the perspectives of transmedia storytelling, remediation, and affective involvement in digital games, I suggest that Web-Game fiction is emblematic of Chinese netizens' desire to take control of their own stories within a larger contemporary reality, the rules and parameters of which lie beyond any individual control.

Keywords: Chinese Internet fiction, online games, *youxihua*, transmedia storytelling, immersion, YY

Introduction

The massive popularity of both gaming and narrative fiction on the mainland Chinese Internet is beyond doubt. Statistics released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that online games (*wangluo youxi* or *wangyou*) currently rank as the seventh most popular online activity with a user base of over 338 million by January 2014, equivalent to 54.7% of China's approximately 617 million-strong Internet population.[1] Since Chinese literature websites moved toward a pay-to-read model of online publishing in the early-to-mid 2000s, Internet literature (*wangluo wenxue*) has developed into a multimillion-dollar industry, worth 600 million RMB in 2011 and forecast to reach over 3 billion RMB in 2014.[2] According to CNNIC, the creation and consumption of literature is the eleventh most prevalent activity on the Chinese Internet, with a utilization rate of 44.4% and a population of over 274 million users at the end of 2013. On web-enabled mobile phones, games and literature rank as the sixth and seventh most popular applications after instant messaging, news, search, music, and video, with utilization rates of 43.1% and 40.5%, respectively.[3]

In recent years, the kinds of entertainment offered by online games and fiction have met with a range of critical responses from China's cultural elite, with some critics suggesting that they offer little more than lowbrow escapism from real-life responsibilities, and others expressing concern that the moral ambiguity present in genres such as Fantasy fiction could mean that its authors

and readers have become numb towards the "value vacuum" that characterizes today's "era of cynicism."[4] Both the frequently censorious attitudes of cultural scholars working within China and the tendency of researchers outside of China to focus on socio-political aspects of the Chinese Internet have meant that only recently has English-language scholarship started to appear that analyzes the rich textual content of online popular fiction and its surrounding commercial operations. This delay reflects broader trends in research on Chinese popular culture, which, as Shuyu Kong notes, has tended to emphasize the ideological messages of end products over the active roles of audiences in consuming and communicating about pop culture.[5]

The research presented in this essay can be considered a response to Kong's assertion that there is a need to "fashion new modes of critical inquiry and to adopt a new kind of methodology for researching Chinese popular culture that refocuses attention on the communicative practices of popular masses," including practices such as decoding, responding, interpreting, and talking back.[6] My choice to focus on the textual relationship between web games and online popular fiction is spurred firstly by the fact that these are among the most popular yet understudied forms of entertainment in the contemporary People's Republic of China. Web-based games and fiction share many characteristics in common and exert a constant influence on each other, due not simply to an overlap in their user base but also to growing commercial ties between publishers of fiction and China's gaming industry. Many of the companies responsible for licensing and publishing online fiction, including Qidian (www.qidian.com), Hongxiu Tianxiang (www.hongxiu.com), and Jinjiang (www.jjwxc.net), are now owned by the same parent company, Shanda Interactive Entertainment Limited (Shengda hudong yule youxian gongsi), which is also one of China's biggest producers of video games; the companies NetEase (Wangyi) and Tencent (Tengxun, responsible for the QQ franchise of social networking sites, forums, and online games) also own both literature and gaming subsidiaries.

While the commercial links between narrative fiction and different forms of visual culture would be worthy of enquiry in their own right, the goal of this paper is to explore textual connections between online fiction and games, focusing on how game-based experiences are incorporated into, or "remediated" through, a gaming-inspired genre of online fiction known as Web-Game fiction (*wangyou xiaoshuo*).[7] In combining typical elements of genres such as Fantasy (*xuanhuan*), Immortal (*xianxia*), and Competition/Sporting (*jingji*) fiction with descriptions of gaming environments and gameplay styles in the web games from which it takes its name, Web-Game fiction reflects the increasingly participatory nature of popular culture production and consumption in contemporary China. It exists among a myriad of fan-produced texts and grassroots creative communities active across the Chinese Internet that have sprung up both to meet the seemingly insatiable demand for the transmedia continuation of popular narratives and fictional worlds, and to make up for the failure of much commercially produced popular culture to satisfy the true desires and ambitions of China's media consumers.

I begin this essay with an overview of English-language scholarship on Chinese online popular fiction and Chinese-language discourse surrounding the

term *youxihua* (gamification or ludification), highlighting arguments that warn of the potentially harmful effects of immersion or escapism on those who play games or consume game-influenced popular culture. Borrowing from scholarship on transmedia storytelling and world-building, I suggest that in remediating the interactive experience of playing games in a linear narrative form—a process one scholar terms "deinteractivation"—Web-Game fiction reflects authors' desire to assert mastery of their own destinies, both in-game and in the offline world. A close reading of one representative work of Web-Game fiction leads me to argue that while immersion in fantastical works of fiction and online role-playing games may not offer a direct route to political participation or online activism of the kind examined in research by Guobin Yang, Yongming Zhou, and others, significant changes are nonetheless afoot in the ways in which Chinese netizens relate to others and make sense of their lives by narrating and incorporating different planes of fictional realities.[8] Such developments may have more broad-ranging implications for the impact of information and communication technologies on Chinese popular culture as well as for the human quest for meaning in an ever more mediatized world.

Research on Internet Fiction and youxihua

Early scholarship on Chinese Internet literature focused primarily on the community functions of literary websites and the relationship between online literature and "high" culture.[9] In more recent articles, scholars have begun to answer Michel Hockx's call for a production-oriented approach to studying Internet literature, focusing in particular on the production of online narrative fiction.[10] Xinkai Huang, for example, examines Chinese online Fantasy fiction, arguing that writers and readers produce content that satisfies their shared interests, such as the desire to transcend China's political and socio-economic realities through the collective imagination of fantasy worlds.[11] Elaine Jing Zhao focuses on the monetization of China's biggest Web 2.0 literature website, Qidian, remarking that involvement in the extended communities or "virtual worlds" inhabited by authors and readers results in the "line between the virtual and the real" becoming "fuzzy," a critique echoed in much Chinese-language criticism of online fiction.[12] In another recent article on the changes brought about by Qidian to the Chinese literary field, Shih-chen Chao highlights the escapist nature of much online literary prosumption (a conflation of the words production and consumption), arguing that readers are drawn to stories with exciting plots that take them to imaginary worlds in which "anything can happen" as a way to "escape the harsh reality and repetitive daily routine of being human pawn in an aggressively industrialized/capitalistic society like today's China."[13]

In her research on the Romance genre of Chinese Internet literature, Jin Feng adopts the kind of audience-focused or fan-centered approach to online fiction that Shuyu Kong laments has typically been missing from Chinese popular culture studies.[14] Rather than the "cultural dopes" implied by researchers who adopt a top-down, ideological approach to the production and reception of pop culture, female authors and fans of web-based romance novels are highly active readers and creators, employing popular fiction as a means of engaging in activities such as social satire and female identity construction, and in the

process blazing new pathways to literary success.[15] Feng notes how online popular fiction is characterized by its incorporation of heterogeneous influences from other media and texts.[16] Online games represent just one of the many media of inspiration of Internet fiction, alongside television shows, films, manga, international works of popular fiction, and so on. She offers a literal translation of *wangyou xiaoshuo* as "Web Travel" fiction, citing it as an example of the close collaboration between fiction and games being pioneered by companies like Shanda Interactive Entertainment in an attempt to lure younger technologically savvy readers to online literature.

Although the field of game studies (also known as ludology) is still in its infancy in the PRC, scholars there have begun to observe the widespread influences of digital games within contemporary Chinese culture. One term that is regularly employed in discussions of online games and their textual offshoots is *youxihua*, a neologism that literally means "turning into a game" and can be directly translated into English as either gamification or ludification. Scholars have adopted this term to explain developments occurring within the arts, the entertainment industry, and online popular culture more specifically. Shang Hui, for example, uses *youxihua* to explain the transformation of art from an educational medium into what he describes as "the entertainment-style concerns of aesthetic leisure," while others analyze signs of gamification in online subcultures and the spread of counterfeit (*shanzhai*) television shows and films across the Internet.[17]

According to Tao Wenwen, a playful or game-like spirit (*youxi jingshen*) can be detected in films that ignore historical reality and the logics of real life, creating a narrative ideal (*xushi lixiang*) and postmodern artistic quality that acts in opposition toward high or elite culture. Tao employs his understanding of "gamified characteristics" (*youxihua tezheng*) to demonstrate how certain Chinese films—such as the 2004 romantic comedy *Waiting Alone* (Duzi dengdai), directed by Dayyan Eng (Wu Shixian) and the 2001 film *The Marriage Certificate* (Shei shuo wo bu zaihu?), directed by Huang Jianxin—tell stories in a fragmented, illogical, and non-linear way, making heavy use of montage and presenting "absurd," "gamified" cinematic narratives.[18] There seems to be something illogical here in Tao's depiction as "gamified" of what is still, ultimately, a linear narrative presented in cinematic form under the sole control of the film's producers. Playful, rather than gamified, may be a better English rendering of a concept that aims more at conveying the deconstructive mentality of certain film directors than any interactive, game-like approach to telling stories and engaging audiences in innovative ways through the cinematic medium.

Exploring a more philosophical understanding of *youxihua*, Xie Shenghua suggests that a "gamified aesthetic" (*youxihua shenmei*) rooted in emotional experience and intuition is a defining characteristic of Chinese popular culture in the new media age.[19] One of the principle manifestations of a gamified aesthetic, he suggests, is the phenomenon known as "surrounding and observing" or the "surrounding gaze" (*weiguan*), a key feature of Chinese Internet culture, in which an online public gathers around a particular issue, spectacle, or event.[20] Hu Yong has noted that what was once an attitude of cold indifference along the lines of Lu Xun's early twentieth-century depictions of the "culture of the gaze" (*kanke*

wenhua) has, in the age of the Internet, developed into a more positive form of public participation in which even the smallest expressions of opinions can "add up to a great deal."[21] According to Xie, surrounding and observing can be considered a means of participating in a game, with "game" understood in broad terms as entertainment that encompasses complex relationships among people, between people and nature, and between people and society. The typical gaming mindset is one that may appear relaxed on the outside but contains tensions within as gamers grapple with the "unbearable heaviness of living."[22] Like others who refer to *youxihua* in their discussions of game-like trends in popular culture, Xie shies way from defining "gamification" or games as a cultural category, using the term instead to illuminate a general shift in Chinese culture away from the pursuit of truth and beauty toward the expression of concrete aesthetics (*shenmei de juxianghua*) and perceptual experiences (*ganxing tiyan*).

Huang Fayou, one of a handful of scholars to have written about *youxihua* in Chinese Internet literature, identifies two main forms. The first is the tendency of online novels to emphasize their entertainment and gaming functions, evident in a trend toward a "light-hearted, mocking, amusing" writing style and the incorporation of "multimedia artistic techniques" into genres of Chinese fiction that have been popular since the Republican era (such as Romance, Martial Arts, Detective, and Science Fiction). The second refers to the mutual influence between online fiction and games, which manifests in the interactions between characters, plot, form, and structure. Huang adopts a markedly critical attitude toward the latter, arguing that

> in terms of style, online genre fiction and games are pretty much the same across the board, standing out for their low quality and repetition, immersing themselves in the vulgar process of killing monsters and moving up the levels. Not only are they full of commercial elements such as violence and sex, they have also lost all historical-cultural and aesthetic content.[23]

The moralizing argument on display here is a clear remnant of the traditional Chinese belief that literature's primary responsibility is to educate, reflect reality, or "convey the way" (*wen yi zai dao*). Huang's critique hinges upon his use of the term *chenmi*. There are several Chinese equivalents of the English word "immersion" as it applies to the experience of playing online games, including the relatively neutral *dairugan*, literally "the feeling of standing in [for the protagonist]," and *chenjin'gan*, or "the feeling of being immersed/absorbed." The word *chenmi*, meaning "immersed and enthralled/lost," carries the negative connotation of "absorption that cannot be helped"—or addiction. It regularly appears in discourse on Internet addiction, the dangers of which have been widely publicized in media reports on addiction-related deaths and crimes in the mid-2000s.[24]

Huang proceeds to warn that "confusion between the virtual and the real world is a psychological trap from which those who are immersed in games have difficulty escaping." He shares with other observers of *youxihua* an awareness of the broader transformations underway in contemporary Chinese culture, in which entertainment, leisure, and moneymaking have supplanted traditional cultural ideals of education and moral enlightenment. What all the above-mentioned critics fail to address, however, are the deeper structural changes occurring in the production and consumption of culture. One stand-out feature

of online fiction that has received scant treatment in English- or Chinese-language research is the way in which it remediates texts taken from other media such as films, television shows, and games, and in turn spurs further remediation back into these media forms, as when the online Fantasy novel *Legend of Immortals* (Xingchenbian) by I Eat Tomatoes (Wo Chi Xihongshi) was adapted into a popular MMORPG of the same name. As Jin Feng notes in her research on Romance fiction, a large proportion of online novels can be broadly considered Fan fiction (*tongren xiaoshuo*) in that they take inspiration from and expand upon the narratives and fictional worlds contained in existing texts that span a wide range of cultures, media, and time periods.[25] Although David Bolter and Richard Grusin have argued that all media work through a process of remediation, Web-Game fiction is especially transparent in its attempt to recreate the experience of playing games through the medium of online literature and is thus worth examining in more detail.[26]

Henry Jenkins' ideas about transmedia storytelling can help us understand how specific texts can "spread" across media, for example from a film into a video game or from a novel into a television drama, and from there into fan-produced comics and literature. In two blog posts published in 2009, Jenkins built upon his earlier work on "textual poaching," fandom and gaming, and convergence culture to put forward his "Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling": "spreadability" versus "drillability," continuity versus multiplicity, immersion versus extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance.[27] While the expansion of fictional worlds through fan creation and cross-media promotional strategies is nothing new to global culture, the participatory nature of new media technologies has increased the opportunities for fans to get involved in the telling of stories, in many cases extending the fictional reach of preexisting cultural texts well beyond what was ever imagined possible by their original creators.[28]

Viewed on the level of the medium rather than a specific text, Web-Game fiction can be understood as a form of transmedia storytelling in that it expands and extends the experience of playing web games into the medium of narrative fiction, remediating the interactive, player-controlled medium of games into the non-interactive medium of author-controlled linear text. Conceptualizing Web-Game fiction as a form of transmedia storytelling throws up some interesting questions about the relationship between games and narrative, already broached in work by game studies researchers, such as: To what extent can games be viewed through a narrative lens—is narrative the best tool for explaining what happens in the minds of gamers as they navigate their way through interactive game worlds? Secondly, and relatedly, what happens to audiences' subjective experience of gameplay when it is, to use the terminology of Mark Wolf, described and "deinteractivated" through the linear narratives of online Chinese popular novels? Finally, what implications do such forms of transmedia storytelling have for Chinese popular culture and the lives of its media-savvy producers and consumers?

Web-Game Fiction

Web-Game fiction is a broad category of writings that can be traced back to the popularity of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Domains, referring to text-based multiplayer virtual worlds) in China in the late 1990s. It has since developed into a major genre of Chinese Internet fiction that contains a number of sub-genres based on the type of gameplay, technology, setting, gender of the player-protagonists, and so on.[29] According to the Baidu Wiki entry on the genre, its popularity can be explained by the desire of gamers to explore the mythology surrounding their favorite online game and to experience things in writing that they cannot achieve within the game itself, such as reaching the top of the leader board.[30] In narrating the experiences of gamers as they move through a real (*shizaixing*) or imaginary (*xugouxing*) game, Web-Game fiction fosters an intertextual and mutually beneficial relationship with online games themselves, spurring readers to spend more time playing games to develop the skills they have read about in fiction and, in turn, giving game designers inspiration for new types of games to create.[31] Most novels narrate the in-game adventures of a male protagonist, charting his progress through the levels as he earns money and weapons, wins over the hearts of female gamers, and establishes himself as the undisputed champion of the game. This plot type, known as the "game career type" (*youxi shengyalei*), tends to be goal-oriented and predictable, allowing the virtual fulfillment of the heterosexual male gamer's every subjective desire.

One representative work of Web-Game fiction, examined below, is the hit novel *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* (Wangyou zhi zongheng tianxia), written by Fallen Leaf (Shiluo Ye) and serialized on the pay-to-read VIP section of the literature website 17K over the course of nineteen months in 2009 and 2010.[32] *Traversing the Universe* is the second in a series of three popular Web-Game novels by Fallen Leaf and the first to bring widespread fame for its author after it topped the weekly popularity charts on 17K. It is now listed on many Internet forums and literature websites as a classic work of Web-Game fiction, and in late 2013 was still ranked as the thirtieth most searched-for complete work of Chinese Internet fiction on Baidu.com.[33]

The novel follows the adventures of a young man called Ding Shusheng, a typical "loser" (*diaosi*) and impoverished online gamer who has the good fortune of rescuing a beautiful drunken woman outside his home one night. While she sleeps, Shusheng uses the virtual-reality headset he discovers poking out of her bag to gain illicit entry into the world's hottest new MMORPG, a fictional game called Lingtong that is on the verge of being released to the general public. Like many MMORPGs, Lingtong features a variety of guilds, races, weapons, and skills, along with endless levels to ascend and "bosses" (Artificial-Intelligence-controlled monsters) to kill in the pursuit of experience, weaponry, money, and fame. Once inside the game, Shusheng names his avatar Frivolous Scholar (Qingkuang Shusheng) and begins to accumulate points and allies, rising through the ranks and engaging in fights with gamers who resent his success. He often plays alongside the woman whose headset he first used to enter Lingtong, a beautiful swordswoman named Clear Breeze Flying Snow (Qingfeng Feixue), or Lingxue in real life. Shusheng and Lingxue later fall in love, their romance developing alongside a number of ambiguous relationships with other female

characters who also appear in the course of the novel. Lingxue's twin sister, another talented gamer known as Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon (Qingfeng Lanyue) or Lingyue, happens to manage a gaming company, Blue Star (Lanxing), that later employs Shusheng to earn money within the game (a form of labor known as "gold-farming").[34]

Partly in response to the chauvinistic or "stud" (*zhongma*, a genre of popular fiction that features one man and countless women) overtones of much male-authored Web-Game fiction, a sub-genre of female Web-Game fiction (*nüsheng wangyou xiaoshuo*) has also emerged online. Such novels tend to focus less on the upward trajectory of the protagonist's in-game adventures and more on interpersonal relationships inside and outside of the game, in particular romances between female protagonists and male gamers. The in-game environment, thus, functions less as an alternative universe in which the characters' exploits take place than as a background setting to the real-world romance between a female protagonist and her male admirer(s) that develops simultaneously within and outside of the game. One work often cited as a classic of female Web-Game fiction is *Weiwei's Stunning Smile* (Weiwei yi xiao hen qingcheng) by the female author Gu Man, part of which was published in print by Jiangsu Publishing House in 2009, after its serialization began on the literature website Jinjiang in 2008.[35] *Weiwei's Stunning Smile* offers a humorous depiction of the social interactions between a gamer and her friends and competitors; its frequent use of Internet slang such as the character *jiong* (an open-mouthed reaction to any stupefying situation) and hilarious insights into the psyche of a female gamer likely helps explain its status as a stand-out example of the genre.

Aside from its obvious indebtedness to MMORPGs, another feature of Web-Game fiction that deserves mentioning is its length. Most Chinese Internet novels are serialized in daily or weekly installments over the course of months or years and many end up running to several million characters long. This recalls similar practices in early-twentieth-century China, when the commercialization of the printing industry and the spread of the vernacular-literature movement of the 1910s and 1920s spurred the growth of commercial popular fiction, which became collectively known as the Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School (*Yuanyang hudiepai*). Butterfly fiction was vilified by intellectuals at the time for its apparent lack of social concern, simplistic themes, and embrace of "low" cultural tastes at the same time as it was hungrily devoured by a growing audience of predominantly urban residents. Perry Link estimates the average length of a Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies novel of the Republican Era (1911–49) at 100,000 words or 200 pages, but notes that some works stretched much longer. Li Shoumin's Martial Arts (*wuxia*) novel *Swordsmen of the Sichuan Hills* (Shushan jianxia), for example, contained 357 chapters and 3.7 million Chinese characters.[36]

At 4.6 million characters and 1173 chapters in length, *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* would have been considered relatively long by the standards of early-twentieth-century serialized popular fiction, but is by no means unusual among Chinese Internet novels, particularly those that loosely fall within the category of Fantasy fiction. As well as ranking novels according to their number of subscribers (*yuepiao*), recommendations (*tuijian*), "hits" (*dianji*), and bookmarks (*shoucang*), Qidian also keeps track of the number of characters, suggesting that

length is a similarly desirable characteristic. In early 2014, the longest novel on Qidian was a Web-Game novel titled *Starting from Zero* (Cong ling kaishi) by Thundercloud Storm (Leiyun Fengbao), still in the midst of its serialization at chapter 418 and at over sixteen million characters into the narrative.[37] All of the top-ten longest novels on Qidian's charts exceeded ten million characters, and even the highest-ranking novel on the list of works with the most monthly subscribers, a work of Web-Game fiction titled *Full-Time Expert* (Quanzhi gaoshou) by Butterfly Blue (Hudie Lan), contained nearly five million words.

For readers of Internet fiction who encounter these novels during the course of their serialization, their length serves as an invitation to become immersed in an ongoing narrative whose twists and turns can be experienced concurrently with other readers and fans, with the possibility of sharing one's subjective reactions in the comments sections that accompany each novel and on community forums. The economic need of authors to win readers' paid subscriptions and value-enhancing recommendations for as long as possible partly explains the epic lengths to which so many Internet novels stretch. It also accounts for the phenomenon known in Internet slang as "eunuchs" (*taijian*): novels that stretch on for so long that their authors eventually give up writing them, thus leaving them with "nothing down below" (*xiamian meiyou le*). As one of Jenkins' seven principles of transmedia storytelling, seriality is an indispensable means of strengthening audience investment in a story, distinguished in the case of transmedia productions (as opposed to single-channel works like a television soap opera or long-running comic series) by the dispersal of chunks of story information across multiple media systems.[38] If Web-Game fiction is to be understood as a transmedia adaptation of the subjective experiences of players of MMORPGs, then lengthy serialization, too, is an important means of remediating the sensation of being immersed over prolonged periods of time in a highly absorbing web game.

Remediated Gameplay

As Mark Wolf argues, the concept of transmediality suggests that "we are vicariously experiencing something which lies beyond the media windows through which we see and hear it."[39] All media make use of the five basic elements of words, images, sounds, interactions, and objects in their construction of "windows" through which we experience a fictional world. When one medium is remediated through another, these elements are transformed through processes of description (adaptation into words), visualization (adaptation into images or objects), auralization (adaptation into sounds), interactivation (adaptation into interactive media), and deinteractivation (adaptation from interactive into noninteractive media).[40] In Web-Game fiction, the processes at work are description and deinteractivation: the images, sounds, physical hardware, and interactive processes that comprise online role-playing games must all be represented in the form of words alone, arranged in a fixed linear form. Deinteractivation requires the removal of any element of choice when entering the game world, as readers of Web-Game fiction have no control over what the protagonist does next, unless they attempt to influence the author in the comments sections of literary websites while the novel is being

serialized. Description, therefore, is key to enhancing readers' sense of subjective involvement and investment in the psyche and experiences of the (usually) first-person narrator.

One feature of MMORPGs described in great detail in Web-Game fiction is the player-protagonists' linear ascent through increasingly difficult levels of experience or gameplay, a feature that is also closely linked to the seriality of online fiction, one of Jenkins' principles of transmedia storytelling. In *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe*, most chapters consist of the characters "practicing the levels" or "grinding" (*lianji*), a repetitive everyday activity aimed not only at moving up the leaderboard but also at accumulating experience and points to strengthen their overall gaming prowess. Chapters often end with the main protagonist, Shusheng, killing or on the verge of killing a boss and begin with his movement into a different area of the game world where fresh challenges await. His acquisition of new weapons, equipment, and skills, and the gradual development of closer relationships with fellow gamers also lift the level of play and lead to ever more thrilling, high-stake situations. Here is an extract from chapter 709, in which Shusheng and Lingxue are discussing an international competition for players of the game Lingtong:

> "I've heard that the offline prize for the overall winner of the WSL competition is extremely generous and actually includes real-life magical weapons."
> "Yeah, the levels prize is not bad either – if I become champion then I can progress ahead of time to level 255, at which point the system will give me a super big prize!"
> "Oh! What prize is that?"
> "It might be a weapon of the gods, or a super-magical tool, or maybe an ancient mystical weapon or something."
> "Could it be the Axe of Pangu, the Sword of Xuanyuan, or some ancient mythical weapon like that?"
> "Who knows, we can but hope!"

As games are by nature competitive, almost all the methods of moving up the levels in Web-Game fiction involve engaging in competition and conflict with other gamers. In this particular chapter, Shusheng and Lingxue proceed to embark on yet another violent PK (Player Kill) battle with a group of female gamers, taking great satisfaction in their bloody victory.[41]

Social interactions between characters in Web-Game fiction are defined by the gnarly nature of the competition presented by MMORPGs as well as the need to collaborate with other players in order to gain a sense of in-game community and to advance through the levels at a faster rate than might otherwise be possible. Relationships, as a result, alternate between strictly competitive or cooperative modes of interaction, with other characters serving either to aid or to hinder the protagonist's journey through the game. They are further categorized into two groups depending on whether they exist solely within the fictional world of the game that is described within the narrative ("non-player characters" or NPCs) or within both the everyday world and the fictional world ("player characters" or PCs). Characters who act as a hindrance usually meet with a sticky end, dying after a vicious bout of PK. Competitors often make an appearance in clans (*jiazu*), bonded by an offline connection or shared sense of purpose, such as unsettling Shusheng's position as one of Lingtong's top players in *Traversing*

the Universe. One such group of rival players known as the Disdaining the World Clan (*Aoshi Jiazu*) pops up at regular intervals throughout the novel, concocting ever more determined strategies for defeating Shusheng and his group of friends but failing in every case.

In situations where the protagonist can benefit from the company or experience of others, he or she will enter into cooperative relationships with other gamers that either take the form of a fixed team that works together throughout the novel or manifest themselves in temporary agreements between gamers who cooperate on a specific challenge or spend a few hours "grinding" the levels together. Shusheng is especially fond of cooperating with beautiful female players, some of whom apparently see in him an opportunity to gain experiences and skills to which they would not otherwise have access. In other instances, Shusheng teams up with more experienced female gamers in order to enhance his standing within the game. As a result of his in-game interactions with Lingtong's early leader Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon/Lingyue, Shusheng becomes the beneficiary of her more advanced skills and knowledge, allowing him to rise more rapidly through the levels. At one point in chapters 42 and 43 of the novel, he joins forces with all three of the female gamers with whom he has been interacting up to this point: the two Clear Breeze twins, and another female gamer called Purple Rhymes (Zi Yuner):

> In less than an hour we had managed to wipe the haunted temple clean of all its monsters and couldn't help remarking on just how vicious we were when working as a team. In just a short space of time Purple Rhymes had already advanced another level, bringing her up to level 32, Lingxue had advanced to level 34, I had long since reached level 35, and Lingyue had retained her status as the highest level gamer among us, having advanced to level 37!

Shusheng's relationship with his female companions becomes a central theme in the narrative. *Traversing the Universe* ends with an offline reunion in a teahouse between Shusheng, the sisters, and another female friend named Iced Tea (Bingcha), who had disappeared for six months while she built up a successful national business running teahouses: she just so happens to be the owner of the particular teahouse where the characters had arranged, in-game, to meet. By this point, Shusheng and the Clear Breeze twins have achieved every goal they had set out to achieve within Lingtong, and the game itself has descended into an anarchic state of warfare, with new monsters on the loose and battles breaking out between players in the United States- and China-based servers of the game. Shusheng's reaction upon discovering that Iced Tea is the owner of the teahouse suggests that human relationships are at the heart of his long-running commitment to life within the game: "Her soft body pushed into my chest and a familiar light scent wafted over me. I barely needed to look to know who it was, and couldn't help crying out in happy surprise: 'Iced Tea, you … what are you doing here?'"

In competitive and cooperate modes of social interaction alike, most genres of Chinese Internet fiction tend to focus overwhelmingly on the subjective desires and experiences of the first person narrator and/or main protagonist, rarely if ever describing the action from the point of view of another character or even an omniscient narrator. This effectively closes the subjective gap between the protagonist and the reader, meaning that readers experience the fictional world

entirely through the mind and body of the protagonist, similar to the experience of playing First-Person Shooter games.[42] Through this mechanism, Web-Game fiction allows its audiences the vicarious realization of subjective and frequently unrealistic desires, such as winning the friendship of the most outstanding player(s) within a certain game, becoming a global champion, or joining forces with a team of world-famous gamers like the Clear Breeze sisters. By consuming the author's imagined gameplay, in other words, readers are able to experience indirectly the player-protagonists' fictional success.

Combined with plots that are structured around the characters' ascension through the levels, this emphasis on the attainment of tangible yet lofty goals suggests a mode of writing known in Chinese as "YY" (also written *waiwai*). YY is the abbreviation of *yiyin*, a term originating in Cao Xueqin's classic Qing dynasty novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (Hongloumeng) that translates loosely as "lust of the mind" or "lust of intention," and which might be rendered in more contemporary language as "mental masturbation" or "mental porn."[43] In Internet slang, what has been described as a "semi-erotic" or "semi-chaste" ambiguity in Jia Baoyu's dreams of girls has come to refer to any creative expression of imaginative desires.[44] YY is no longer limited to sexual lust, but includes any kind of self-centered fantasy that can be constructed in the mind but less easily enacted in everyday life, such as flying, time travel, rebirth, or becoming a deity and ruling over the universe. There is some parallel here with the concept of the "Mary Sue" (or in male-centered works, "Marty Stu") character in English-language fan fiction, an idealized figure who is assumed to be a stand-in for the author and thus a means of enabling wish fulfillment through fiction-writing.[45] Although Mary Sue writings are often discussed in pejorative terms, scholars have suggested that their idealized characters serve as a symbol of subaltern critique and a means of empowerment for their authors.[46]

Chinese critics have suggested that YY is the defining characteristic of all Chinese Internet fiction and can be traced back to such classic novels as Wu Cheng'en's *Journey to the West* (Xiyouji) and, more recently, the twentieth-century martial-arts fiction of Jin Yong.[47] Song Shoufu notes that the current parameters of YY discourse are extremely broad, covering hopes, yearnings, dreams, daydreams, acts of voyeurism, and shameless showing off.[48] The theme of dreaming is picked up upon in readers' explanations of why they like to read Web-Game fiction: as one fan puts it, "The imaginative story content of Web-Game fiction makes it stand out among popular fiction; the best Web-Game novels I have read differ from the magical powers and chaotic gods of Fantasy fiction in that they are like a beautiful dream, a dream that is logical and worth revisiting."[49]

The dreamily self-indulgent YY nature of much Web-Game fiction relates closely to the issue of subjectivity in popular fiction and role-playing games. According to Gordon Calleja, human subjectivity is one of the trickier problems facing game-studies theorists: a game, after all, only becomes a game when it is interacts with human minds, before which it is little more than "a set of rules and game props awaiting human engagement."[50] The need to maximize audience engagement by decreasing the subjective distance between players and their gaming environments has been at the heart of discussions of player involvement

in video games and is often described using the concept of "immersion." Research on immersion is also dogged by conflicting definitions of the term and its conflation with related concepts such as involvement, engagement, and presence.[51] Muddying matters further is the fact that immersion is variously seen by critics and industry insiders as a positive commercial strategy for strengthening player commitment to games and an emblem of the kind of escapism that some believe endangers gamers—and consumers of popular culture more generally—by weakening their grasp on "reality."

According to Calleja and other scholars, the escapist understanding of immersion, common in Chinese-language discussions of *youxihua* and YY trends in popular culture and online literature, is premised on a false assumption that virtual environments exist in a dichotomous relationship with "an external real." It tends to be put forward by those who lack an understanding of the specific features of digital games as well as a solid theoretical grasp of what escapism entails.[52] In response to such critiques, Calleja proposes a "player involvement model" for digital games that emphasizes the six dimensions of kinesthetic involvement, spatial involvement, shared involvement, narrative involvement, affective involvement, and ludic involvement.[53] This model has similarities with Wolf's description of the three metaphors of immersion, absorption, and saturation in popular culture. Absorption, Wolf argues, differs from immersion in that it denotes a two-way process: at the same time as users are "pulled into" a fictional world by opening a book or interacting with a game, they also absorb and construct the world in their own imaginations. Saturation occurs when the secondary or fictional world occupies so much mental space that it crowds out awareness of the immediate "primary world."[54] As a kind of YY fiction that describes an idealized experience of MMORPG gameplay, Web-Game novels encourage the affective involvement or absorption of readers in narrations of the gameplay experience, urging them to identify with the first-person protagonist whose fictional adventures they are consuming.

A further characteristic of Web-Game fiction that reflects its remediation of online gaming culture is the way that it allows characters to move between multiple realities or different planes of a single reality, a defining experience of people who spend their lives shifting between online and offline worlds. These movements occur when characters enter and exit the persistent world of the game in question by donning a headset or using a computer keyboard. As such, the boundaries between the fictional (in Wolf's terminology, the secondary) game world and the (primary) offline world, while tangible, are easily permeable by characters within the novel. Meanwhile, the narrative blurs the boundaries further by letting the player-protagonist's physical needs such as hunger or tiredness impinge on his or her performance within the game and by incorporating vivid descriptions of physiological and affective reactions to stimuli within the game.

In chapter seven of *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe*, for example, Shusheng suffers a minor injury while fighting a "fire bat" (*huoyan bianfu*), a level-five monster: "The fire bat suddenly flew at me in a vicious assault and my body felt a pang of pain: I glanced at my blood levels, and was surprised to see that the poison had only cost me 24 points!" Shusheng's life outside of

the game, by contrast, is relatively unremarkable, characterized mainly by brief periods of sleep, washing and eating, and offline social interactions with fellow gamers that advance the overarching plot of the novel. Of course, it must also be noted that the primary (offline) and secondary (in-game) levels of reality that make up Shusheng's existence are both, for the readers of Web-Game fiction, fictional worlds: neither exists outside of the novel, and thus any imagination of the secondary game world should be considered what Wolf terms "subcreation within subcreated worlds."[55]

Although Shusheng's social status within the game quickly becomes much higher than in his offline life, both the online/secondary and offline/primary worlds are clearly presented as belonging to the same overarching reality. This is evidenced, for example, by the increased respect that he earns from his colleagues in the gaming company, Lanxing, as he progresses through the levels of the game. Throughout the novel, it is apparent that the characters see no contradiction between the world contained within Lingtong and the physical reality that they must confront between stretches of gameplay. While absorbed within the game, the characters are adept at moving between different forms of media such as Internet forums, video-sharing sites, and the various screens and means of communication (on-screen statistics, private messaging services, and so on) built into the game. In the course of the novel, gossip regarding Shusheng and his relationship with the Clear Breeze sisters regularly surfaces on Internet forums dedicated to Lingtong and affects their reputations and battles within the game; Shusheng, in turn, gains insights into his rival gamers by watching video clips that are covertly recorded within the game before being circulated among fans on forums and other websites.

This question of how to negotiate and move between different levels or planes of reality can, again, be illuminated by the concept of "affective involvement" that Calleja uses to counter the claims of some critics that video games offer little more than trivial escapism from one emotional state or environment to another, more favorable state.[56] While "escapism" is often thought to imply a willful fleeing from a less than ideal point of departure, affective involvement emphasizes instead the role of the imagination in playing games and consuming media, allowing gamers to simultaneously maintain an awareness of past experiences and future possibilities, or the world they have just exited and the one in which they are currently immersed. Ultimately, what players achieve as a result of their involvement in video games is not escapism but incorporation, whereby players assimilate the game environment into their consciousness at the same time as they are incorporated into the environment through the actions of their avatar. While Calleja explicitly states that his definition of incorporation precludes its application to non-ergodic (i.e., non-interactive) media such as books or films, I hope to have shown how Web-Game fiction demonstrates, through its descriptive remediation of online role-playing games, that the successful incorporation of online and offline environments and identities is a central part of many Chinese media consumers' experience of life in a media-saturated world.[57]

Conclusion

In a postscript to the novel *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* that was posted on 17K upon its completion in 2010, Fallen Leaf reminisces upon his experiences of playing online games and writing Web-Game fiction:

> Time spent playing games is always so beautiful and nostalgic that it is only when you suddenly stop and turn around that you realize you are no longer the ignorant youth who was once lost [*chenmi*] within the game. It seems that a man approaching the age of thirty should not be so absorbed [*chenjin*] by that immature dream. But *Web-Game of Traversing the Universe* fulfilled my dream of many years, and for that I am immensely grateful! ... *Traversing the Universe* is a dream, but also an undying classic within my heart! ... It is time to end. As I type out those characters, I suddenly feel full of reluctance: reluctant to give up those many characters who live within my heart and reluctant to leave that web-game dream that made us all so infatuated [*chimi*]. But end it must, as life must go on.

Fallen Leaf's comments here betray a contradiction. On the one hand, he feels pressured to leave behind the worlds of online gaming and Web-Game fiction, which he describes as both an "immature dream" and a "Web-Game dream," as playing games—and writing fiction about them—is, apparently, an inappropriate pastime for a man approaching his fourth decade of life. At the same time, he is filled with nostalgia for the imaginary world that he created within his novel and believes that he has achieved things by writing that might have been impossible by any other means. After producing 4.6 million characters and turning into a more famous Internet author in the process, Fallen Leaf has become "a man." Although he has realized his dreams by authoring popular fiction and immersing himself within a self-created secondary world that keeps him in its affective grip, part of his newfound maturity seems to lie in his acknowledgement that "real life" ultimately exists somewhere beyond the game.

For writers and readers alike, Internet novels like the Web-Game fiction explored in this article offer an imaginary space in which they can vicariously experience thrilling, challenging circumstances both fantastical, such as killing monsters or being attacked by fiery bats, and more quotidian, such as negotiating relationships with a number of women or balancing the demands of a "real-life" job with the pleasures of life spent immersed within an online game. This alludes to the more active understanding of immersion or absorption proposed by scholars of fan culture and new media like Jenkins, Calleja, and Wolf. Rather than simply functioning as a form of escape from everyday life and its accompanying pressures, as suggested in existing scholarship on this topic, Internet fiction presents an opportunity to become affectively involved in imaginary worlds, requiring that readers incorporate their existing knowledge of life, culture, and what it means to be human today into the reading experience. Thus, as Calleja suggests is true of video games, it is possible that authors and readers of Internet fiction are able to find pleasure in incorporating their past experiences with those of the main protagonist of the novel that they are writing or reading.

What implications might this remediation of online role-playing games in Internet fiction have for transmedia storytelling and the position of games in Chinese popular culture? As discussed above, there remains a wary attitude among cultural critics in China regarding the effects of online gaming—and the Internet more generally—on Chinese popular culture and its consumers;

the topic of Internet addiction continues to loom large in popular media-based discussions, even as Chinese academics engage with Internet fiction from an ever broader range of perspectives and as online fiction and gaming continue to grow in popularity among China's Internet population. The growing discourse of *youxihua* reflects preliminary attempts to make sense of the impact of gaming across different media of popular culture, with Chinese scholars suggesting (perhaps misleadingly) that the term be used to explain not only the shift in contemporary Chinese culture away from the serious connotations of "art and literature" (*wenyi*) toward "the entertainment-style concerns of aesthetic leisure" but also the prevalence of films, television shows, and works of fiction that tell stories in a fragmented, playful, self-referential manner.[58]

What is arguably most interesting about Web-Game fiction, however, is not the "absurd" or fragmented ways in which it tells stories, as Tao Wenwen suggests is the case for "gamified" films. Quite the contrary, its popularity demonstrates that there remains a hunger for simple yet gripping linear narratives that depict the good fortunes of their protagonists in a way that puts fun and novelty before all else. As one fan related in an Internet forum discussion in 2012:

> The reason I like [reading Web-Game fiction] is because I like playing games, I've played lots of games, so when I read Web-Game fiction I'm doing so from the perspective of games. As a game, [Web-Game fiction] must have playability [*kewanxing*], that is to say it has to be fun: even if it starts off fairly ordinarily, as long as there is innovation in the plot and design then I will read it. As for whether or not it has realism and emotions I simply do not care.[59]

Web-Game fiction, in short, exists as part of an evolving media landscape in which what is deemed "real," "playable," and important is increasingly in the hands of consumers and fan-producers, rather than the intellectuals and cultural critics whose voices dominated China's cultural scenes for much of the twentieth century. It suggests that more than a means of escaping reality, the Internet and the transmedia worlds its existence enables represent a valid destination in their own right. As technology continues to expand the realm of the real, it is in the imaginative writings of China's army of online authors that some of the most exciting explorations of technology's effects on human existence can be found.

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Glossary

Absorbed	*chenjin*	沉浸
Absorption, addiction	*chenmi*	沉迷
Art and literature	*wenyi*	文艺
Blue Star	Lanxing	蓝星
Bookmarks	*shoucang*	收藏
Butterfly Blue	Hudie Lan	蝴蝶蓝
Clans	*jiazu*	家族
Clear Breeze Flying Snow	Qingfeng Feixue (Lingxue)	清风飞雪（凌雪）
Clear Breeze Reaches the Moon	Qingfeng Lanyue (Lingyue)	清风揽月（凌月）
Competition/sporting	*jingji*	竞技
Concrete aesthetics	*shenmei de juxianghua*	审美的具象化
Counterfeit	*shanzhai*	山寨
Culture of the gaze	*kanke wenhua*	看客文化
Dayyan Eng	Wu Shixian	伍仕贤
Ding Shusheng	Ding Shusheng	丁舒升
Disdaining the World clan	*Aoshi Jiazu*	傲世家族
Dream of the Red Chamber	*Hongloumeng*	红楼梦
Eunuch	*taijian*	太监
Fallen Leaf	Shiluo Ye	失落叶
Fan fiction	*tongren xiaoshuo*	同人小说
Fantasy	*xuanhuan*	玄幻
Female Web-Game fiction	*nüsheng wangyou xiaoshuo*	女生网游小说
Fire bat	*huoyan bianfu*	火焰蝙蝠
Frivolous Scholar	Qingkuang Shusheng	轻狂书生
Full-Time Expert	*Quanzhi gaoshou*	全职高手
Game career type	*youxi shengyalei*	游戏生涯类
Gamification	*youxihua*	游戏化
Gamified aesthetic	*youxihua shenmei*	游戏化审美
Gamified characteristics	*youxihua tezheng*	游戏化特征
Grinding	*lianji*	练级
Gu Man	Gu Man	顾漫
Hits	*dianji*	点击
Hongxiu Tianxiang	Hongxiu Tianxiang	红袖添香
Huang Jianxin	Huang Jianxin	黄建新
I Eat Tomatoes	Wo Chi Xihongshi	我吃西红柿
Iced Tea	Bingcha	冰茶
Imaginary (Web-Game fiction)	*xugouxing*	虚构型
Immortal	*xianxia*	仙侠
Infatuated	*chimi*	痴迷
Internet literature	*wangluo wenxue*	网络文学
Jinjiang	Jinjiang	晋江
Journey to the West	*Xiyouji*	西游记
Legend of Immortals	*Xingchenbian*	星辰变
Li Shoumin	Li Shoumin	李寿民
Lingtong	Lingtong	灵恸
Literature conveys the way	*wen yi zai dao*	文以载道

Loser	*diaosi*	屌丝
Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School	Yuanyang hudie pai	鸳鸯蝴蝶派
Martial arts	*wuxia*	武侠
Mental masturbation	*yiyin*	意淫
Narrative ideal	*xushi lixiang*	叙事理想
NetEase	Wangyi	网易
Nothing down below	*xiamian meiyou le*	下面没有了
Online games	*wangluo youxi (wangyou)*	网络游戏（网游）
Perceptual experiences	*ganxing tiyan*	感性体验
Playability	*kewanxing*	可玩性
Playful spirit	*youxi jingshen*	游戏精神
Purple Rhymes	Zi Yuner	紫韵儿
Qidian	Qidian	起点
Real (Web-Game fiction)	*shizaixing*	实在型
Recommendations	*tuijian*	推荐
Shanda Interactive Entertainment Limited	Shengda hudong yule youxian gongsi	盛大互动娱乐有限公司
Starting from Zero	*Cong ling kaishi*	从零开始
Stud fiction	*zhongma xiaoshuo*	种马小说
Stupefied	*jiong*	囧
Subscribers	*yuepiao*	月票
Surrounding gaze, surrounding and observing	*weiguan*	围观
Swordsmen of the Sichuan Hills	*Shushan jianxia*	蜀山剑侠
Tencent	Tengxun	腾讯
The feeling of standing in	*dairugan*	代入感
The Marriage Certificate	*Shei shuo wo bu zai hu?*	谁说我不在乎？
Thundercloud Storm	Leiyun Fengbao	雷云风暴
Waiting Alone (film)	*Duzi dengdai*	独自等待
Web-Game fiction	*wangyou xiaoshuo*	网游小说
Web-Game of Traversing the Universe	Wangyou zhi zongheng tianxia	网游之纵横天下
Weiwei's Stunning Smile	*Weiwei yi xiao hen qingcheng*	微微一笑很倾城
Wu Cheng'en	Wu Cheng'en	吴承恩
YY	*waiwai*	歪歪

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