



Temporal Reconstruction and Defamiliarization: Narrative Design of Where Winds Meet's Based on Bakhtin's Chronotope

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Abstract. Against the backdrop of the integration of digital culture and historical dissemination, games, as an important symbol of digital culture, have become an effective vehicle for disseminating historical culture. However, the industry has long faced a conflict between historical authenticity and game playability. Taking the open-world martial arts game "Where Winds Meet" set in the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period as a case study, this paper explores narrative design ideas for historical games from the perspective of innovative narrative design, guided by Bakhtin's theory of spacetime and Genette's theory of transgressive narrative. Research findings indicate that "Where Winds Meet" recreates the historical narrative space-time based on a triple spatio-temporal framework of "Jianghu—Street Life—Historical Rift," and reshapes the unfamiliar expression of historical narrative through the intervention of the protagonist "Young Master" with multiple identities and the method of time-space re-tracing. This design resolves the inherent problems faced by historical games in creation and creates an immersive historical game experience that is different from traditional linear narrative methods. By analyzing data materials from three aspects—4.77 million words of non-linear narrative text in the game, foreign player evaluation data, and cross-time-space task completion rate—the study outlines the innovative path of narrative design in historical games and provides some guiding suggestions on how to further promote the digital development of historical culture and promote innovative narrative practices in historical games.

Keywords: Where Winds Meet's, Narrative Design, Spacetime Theory.

1 Introduction

With the development of digital game technology, historical games have gradually shifted from a one-dimensional approach of "historical replication" to "historical re-creation," becoming a unique medium for cultural dissemination. While providing entertainment for players, they also bear the important responsibility of inheriting and spreading culture [8]. Currently, historical games suffer from two main misconceptions: on the one hand, an excessive pursuit of historical accuracy at the expense of gameplay, resulting in a lack of narrative tension; on the other hand, an overemphasis

on gameplay excitement, leading to an inaccurate grasp of historical narrative and the atmosphere of the era, thus failing to adequately present the game's cultural core [13].

NetEase Games' "Where Winds Meet" uses the chaotic Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, more than 500 years ago, as its creative backdrop. This historical period, often described as relatively marginal in traditional historical narratives, is thus "marginalized" by the game. The game features 4.77 million words of non-linear narrative and a uniquely creative historical presentation. Unlike the linear narratives typically employed in traditional historical games, it constructs its game concept using a multi-dimensional narrative space-time, allowing users to freely participate in the game's historical development within a four-dimensional space [15]. This is an innovative approach that resolves the dialectical relationship between historical accuracy and gameplay [9].

2 Relevant Theories

2.1 Bakhtin's Spacetime Theory

Bakhtin's "spatiotemporal structure" refers to the unity of time and space in a narrative work; they are not purely isolated but rather possess a function of temporal and spatial fusion. Time and space determine the temporality of the novel's style, the imagery of the narrative characters, and the subjectivity of the novel. Different literary works have different "spatiotemporal structures [1]," such as "adventure spatiotemporal structures" and "biographical spatiotemporal structures." Compared to traditional literary narrative methods, digital narratives can utilize digital technology to break through the limitations of physical time and space, reconstructing narrative time and space through certain technical measures, and achieving free transformation and overlap in time and space. For historical games, the time and space framework is the core of creating the narrative; only by reconstructing historical time and space can players be better immersed in the game's scene.

2.2 Genette's Transgressive Narrative Theory

Genette's narrative theory mainly includes three aspects: narrative perspective, narrative time, and narrative voice. Transgressive narrative breaks the traditional temporal and spatial order and logical sequence of narration. Techniques such as flashbacks, interludes, and multi-perspective narration all belong to transgressive narrative [2]. This narrative technique can increase the layers of a story, add suspense, and make it more captivating. Cross-boundary narratives can resolve the contradiction between the linearity of history and the freedom of gameplay in historical games. By breaking the linear historical narrative, players can participate in history in different times and spaces, complete different historical and cultural missions, and realize the player's free exploration and the presentation of historical context.

3 Temporal Reconstruction of Narrative in “Where Winds Meet's”

"Where Winds Meet" abandons the traditional single historical narrative space and time, and constructs a three-dimensional space-time system of "Jianghu - Shijiao - Historical Rift". The three are interconnected and interact with each other to form a multi-dimensional narrative network.

3.1 Rivers and Lakes Chronotope: The Space of Martial Arts Freedom

The game develops a Jianghu (martial arts world) space-time based on martial arts culture, which brings together various martial arts sects, Jianghu forces, and natural scenery. Players can explore freely, cultivate martial arts, make friends with celebrities, and participate in Jianghu conflicts. This Jianghu space-time is not bound by a linear historical timeline, and players can decide when to play according to their own preferences. The Jianghu time-space system is not detached from history, but rather reflects its historical context. The Jianghu time-space system thus possesses both freedom and a sense of history.

3.2 Urban and Rural Life: A Carrier of Folk Life

The "City Life" mode reflects the lives of ordinary people during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period, featuring cities, towns, markets, and more, all imbued with a sense of everyday life. Players can experience the daily routines of ordinary people in these city scenes, interact with all the NPCs, and discover that each character has their own life story and personality, exhibiting different behaviors at different points in time [7]. The "City Life" narrative serves as a supplementary narrative to historical stories, depicting a vivid and detailed reflection of historical life not explicitly shown in historical accounts.

3.3 Historical Rifts Chronotope: The Link of Time and Space Interweaving

The Historical Rift provides the game with a unique narrative space, connecting possible events across different time periods. These rifts are special regions created by temporal distortions during historical evolution. Within the Historical Rift, players can travel through different eras and participate in significant historical events firsthand [8]. The Historical Rift Timeline breaks the linear concept of historical time, giving the narrative more possibilities. It requires players to have a better understanding of the history of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms, to complete game tasks with greater accuracy, restore the narrative, and make correct judgments [11].

3.4 Interweaving Mechanism of Chronotopes

The three-dimensional spacetime in "Where Winds Meet" do not exist in isolation, but are nested and interconnected through multiple means such as task guidance, NPC interaction, and environmental changes, ultimately weaving together into an organic whole.

Mission guidance serves as the primary method for the interweaving of chronotopes. Many tasks span multiple chronotopes in terms of their locations. For instance, a quest may begin in the Jianghu chronotope, proceed to the Shijiao chronotope for clue gathering, and ultimately reach its destination within the Historical Rift chronotope. NPC interaction can serve as another way to integrate different timelines. NPCs from different timelines have completely different identities and information. By interacting with them, players can obtain information clues from other timelines, thereby triggering new quests and new storylines. The changing environment drives the interaction between time-space entities. As the game environment progresses and responds to the player's choices, environmental changes occur.

4 The defamiliarization of the Narrative in "Where Winds Meet"

4.1 The Involvement of the Protagonist's Multiple Identities as the "Young Master"

The game's protagonist, "Young Master," has no fixed identity or background; he is essentially "blank." Different players can set different identities for him according to their own preferences, such as a knight-errant, a scholar, or a merchant. These different identities will also correspond to different narrative perspectives and interaction methods, enabling the participation of multiple identities in the narrative. The involvement of multiple characters alters the traditional single-perspective historical narrative, allowing for a multi-faceted and multi-layered understanding of the complex connotations of the same historical event. This diverse range of perspectives enriches historical narratives, creating a sense of estrangement. At the same time, the characters are not always fixed. During the game, players can switch their identities. In the process of narration, due to the observation from multiple perspectives, there are also different interpretations, which may bring a sense of novelty, mystery, confusion and uncertainty, thus enhancing the characters' participation and interaction in the environment.

4.2 Spatiotemporal Retrospection Mechanism and Narrative Defamiliarization

The time-travel mechanism is one of the key elements of "Where Winds Meet", creating a narrative sense of estrangement for players. By returning to the past and revising past choices, players can enter various story branches. This breaks away from traditional historical fatalism, imbuing the past with more possibilities and forming a cyclical view of history. Time travel is not simply a cycle of time, but rather a repeated

re-enactment of the same historical event occurring within the same time and space. Initial encounters with historical events often lead to hasty decisions, but time travel provides ample time for players to re-examine history, making more appropriate choices and resulting in different historical narratives. Through repeated exploration and experimentation, players understand that history needs to be adjusted and changed according to current events. By witnessing the small details, rhythms, and logic within the grand narrative across different time periods, players break down previously fixed and flawed historical perspectives, achieving a narrative defamiliarization effect. In addition, the time rewind mechanism increases the game's playability. Rewinding allows players to see multiple narrative branches and storylines, providing more enjoyment from the game. The branching narratives also enhance the game content, satisfying the gaming needs of different players.

5 Empirical Analysis of the Effects of Narrative Innovation

To verify the effectiveness of the narrative innovation in "Where Winds Meet", this paper collects data from three dimensions: non-linear narrative text of the game, overseas player reviews, and cross-time and space mission completion rate. Data sources include the game's official website [10], overseas game review platforms such as Steam and Metacritic [12], and game data analysis agencies. We used quantitative and qualitative methods to statistically calculate several quantitative indicators, such as the length of the non-linear narrative text, the number of narrative branches, overseas player ratings, and the completion rate of cross-time and space missions. We also summarized and analyzed the evaluation opinions of overseas players based on their forum posts, news reports, published game reviews, and program feedback regarding the overseas testing of domestic games.

5.1 Narrative Text Data Analysis

"Where Winds Meet" comprises nearly 4.77 million words, with almost three-quarters consisting of non-linear narrative texts with over 200 narrative branches [3]. It directly depicts various historical events and the stories of numerous historical figures during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. Compared to all previous historical games, this game's non-linear narrative text is richer and more diverse. The interconnected narrative branches form a network that links the historical threads together, adding a wealth of characters and stories through these side quests, making the world more complete and profound. At the same time, the game's narrative text emphasizes both historical accuracy and artistic creation. It does not distort historical facts excessively, but rather draws inspiration from history, incorporating personal artistic ideas and subjective emotions while ensuring accuracy [6]. It also employs techniques such as plot arrangement and the portrayal of historical figures to achieve a vivid and lifelike effect. Except for some vague details, the records of the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms are relatively close to the truth. The protagonist's identity and time travel in

the game are part of the artistic creation, and the insertion of background information makes the game background more complete and vivid.

5.2 Analysis of Overseas Player Reviews

The game has been available overseas for about 6 months so far, with more than 5 million registered overseas players, accounting for about 35% of all players. The game has an average score of 8.5/10 on Steam and an average score of 82/100 on Metacritic [4] [5]. 78% of overseas players mentioned the narrative design used in the game, and 65% of them had a positive impression of the non-linearity and time travel in the game.

From the evaluation content, overseas players believe that the game features innovative narrative design, which departs from traditional linear historical narrative models and instead offers players a fully immersive and freely chosen historical experience. For example, one player commented, "The game's narrative is like an ink-wash painting with distinct layers and profound meaning, and the time-rewind mechanism brings an enjoyable experience to players." Another player stated, "Through the game, I learned about the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period in Chinese history. With such a multi-faceted identity, I was able to experience history from my own perspective." This demonstrates that the game's narrative design is highly popular among international players, and the expression of historical narrative defamiliarization is well received and recognized by them.

5.3 Analysis of Cross-Time and Spacetime Task Completion Rate

In the game, cross-temporal missions refer to missions that traverse three timelines: the martial arts world, the marketplace, and the historical rift. According to statistics, players have a 62% completion rate for cross-temporal missions, which is nearly 15 percentage points higher than that of typical linear missions. This shows that players prefer this type of mission, and the interweaving of the three timelines also allows players to better immerse themselves in the narrative. Meanwhile, there is no time limit for completing the cross-time and space missions, with an average completion time of 8.5 hours, but significant differences in completion times among different players. This indicates that players can arrange the missions according to their own preferences, allowing them to progress in a game-centric order and experience a more free-flowing game narrative. The high completion rate and diverse completion methods of the cross-time and space missions demonstrate the effectiveness of the game's time-space reconstruction design [14].

6 Conclusion and Prospect

6.1 Research Conclusions

This paper draws inspiration from the game "Where Winds Meet", and explores its innovative narrative design by combining Bakhtin's spatiotemporal theory and Ge-

nette's transgressive narrative theory. Analysis reveals that, firstly, the game establishes a three-dimensional spatiotemporal structure of "jianghu—civil society—historical rift," using the interweaving of multiple spatiotemporal structures to reset the historical narrative's temporal space, resolving the conflict between the linearity of historical narrative and the freedom of gameplay; secondly, the game recreates the unfamiliar aspect of historical narrative through the protagonist "Young Master's" multiple identities and time-space retracing, making the narrative style more novel and creative; finally, empirically, the game achieves innovation in historical narrative, influenced by both high cross-cultural communication power and strong audience engagement, and its narrative design can serve as a reference for games of the same genre.

6.2 Research Limitations

This paper still has certain limitations: First, the case of "Where Winds Meet" is singular, and the research conclusions are case-specific and difficult to generalize; second, the empirical data is only based on the first 6 months after the game's overseas launch, making it difficult to see the development timeline of an online game, its relationship with users, and the mechanism for the game's long-term existence. Further long-term tracking is needed in the future; third, while the research on the game's narrative design is relatively thorough, the discussion on the implementation of narrative technologies such as the Unity engine is not in-depth enough.

6.3 Future Research Prospect

Later, other historical games can be included for comparison to summarize more universal experiences in innovative historical game narrative design. Continued observation of "Where Winds Meet" will help determine how long it takes to inspire more similar games, demonstrating its broader impact beyond gameplay. Furthermore, research into game narrative technology should be intensified, utilizing cutting-edge artificial intelligence or virtual reality technologies to further develop historical games. This requires considering not only its technical attributes but also its artistic aspects. Finally, we can explore how to better integrate traditional Chinese culture into digital narratives to more effectively promote its dissemination and development.

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