



The Phenomenon of Cultural Exchange and Learning Reflected in the Transmedia Fiction Comment Area: Taking *Lord of the Mysteries* as an Example

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Abstract

Transmedia fictions in Asian countries such as China and Japan are continually improving, and related research is multifaceted and cuts across disciplines. Transmedia websites are the main communication channel for this fiction, and this article seeks to promote an improved understanding by engaging with them in more depth and detail. It does this by exploring cultural participation in transmedia fictions and analyzing the message content in the comment area of China's largest related website, which allows users to leave messages and engage in free and open discussions, opening up a range of typesetting possibilities. The book review section of the transmedia fiction *Lord of the Mysteries*, which has been read by tens of millions provides 1000 book reviews, is then used to analyze topics that most interest users. It is concluded that users are most interested in novel types, characters, and plots and orientate towards social and cultural content and some popular science knowledge. When they are part of a community, meanwhile, they gravitate towards transcultural issues, niche knowledge topics, and peer culture. This article makes an important contribution by clarifying the participation, communication, and learning potential of transmedia fictions and also shows how transmedia fictions can improve cultural learning and communication.

Keywords Audience · Discourse analysis · Informal learning · Participating culture · Transcultural · Transmedia fiction · Transmedia fiction website

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Introduction

Transmedia fiction (subsequently tf) is an increasingly popular cultural form and medium that is growing both in China and across the East Asian region. One of the main reasons for this is the opportunities that “web fiction” creates for reader engagement and participation. Here, the “firewall” that traditionally separated the author and reader is increasingly being challenged and broken down, opening up new opportunities for creative engagement and production. To take just one example, comments are no longer simply a way of reacting but are increasingly guiding and shaping creative content.

This article engages one of the most well-known and popular examples of tf and specifically examines how the formation of fan groups by users influence the subsequent development of the novel. It specifically identifies key priorities among users and also examines how reader interactions around this leading example of tf feed into wider cultural interaction and exchange; the article does not provide important insight into tf, but also situates it in a wider cultural perspective and context.

The Comment Area and Participation Culture

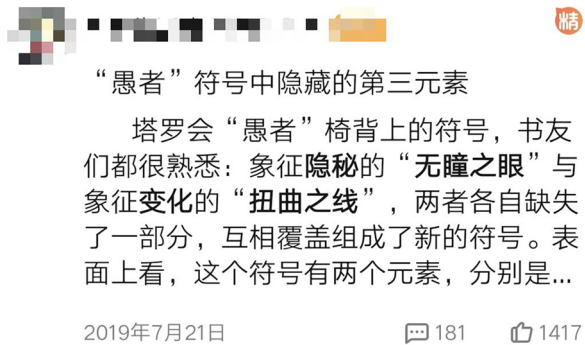
While Western audiences frequently access video works through YouTube and leave messages in the comment area, increasing numbers of young people in East Asia are reading tf, which are stories that are normally disseminated through at least two different media platforms, which both contribute something different to the world of the story (Jenkins, 2006). In China, web fiction, much of which might be considered tf, has developed over more than two decades. Web fiction generally refers to works of literature that are mainly written to be accessed via the Internet. In China, *wǎngwén*, which literally translates as “web literature,” is primarily user-generated fiction in various genres, including science fiction, that is commonly “serialized on online platforms where users write, publish, read, and interact with each other.” The end products are “typically curated according to genres, subgenres, and gender orientations” (Zhao, 2022).

Users who read novels on transmedia fiction websites (subsequently tfw) or mobile apps can also leave messages in the novel comment area. On China’s tfw, the comment area, which is known as “shupingqu,” is similar to the comment area on video websites. Publishers invite viewers to comment on published content, which is a continuation of the old practice of issuing letters (Muddiman & Stroud, 2017). The tfw has introduced this technology and improved it, and users are not only allowed to directly publish public or private comments to the author on the page, but also insert comments about a sentence or word of article content. Each comment is recorded synchronously on the novel website for subsequent viewing, so users can read and reply to previous comments, forming a situational chat on the framework itself. Users can read, write, and exchange views on the same screen when watching their favorite novel text and can be part of an instant, situational, and dynamic chat.

The comment area technology was added to news websites around 2000. In the period 2007–2008, the number of popular news websites with comments increased by 42% (Chen & Pain, 2017). Before, in 2010, a comment area was introduced to the Chinese Qidian website and gradually developed and improved.

In the comment area of some popular tf, there are now many comments and posts with high response volume. Sometimes, hundreds of inserted comments can be found in article

Fig. 1 Analyze the novel content using semiotic insights



fragments. Users of tf appear to love the function of the comment area. As the tf comment mechanism has developed, users have gradually become a force that must be recognized (Zhou et al., 2021).

Comments are a novel and illustrative example of a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) in which young people play an active role in rewriting and transforming audio-visual products in an open, creative, and powerful way. The review of tf has several functions: first, to accompany the audience, so they have a “pseudo synchronization” feeling of real-time interaction with other fans (Johnson, 2013); second, to entertain with humorous information, including by complaining, imitating, and correcting (Hsiao, 2015); and third, to discuss novel content, including character setting and plot development. The mechanism of online literature paying by words and instant interaction enables users to creatively compete with the author and influence different aspects of the novel, including its structure, plot, and even character setting (Zhou et al., 2021).

The comment area of tf can also enable users to carry out cultural exchanges and learn new things. Users try to use some cultural knowledge to interpret the novel content. When a reader posts a comment in the comment area, other users will actively respond, and participants will learn through active sharing. Figure 1 shows how a reader tried to analyze novel content by using semiotic insights and received many responses.

The comment area of tf is very similar to Gee’s (2005) “affinity space”, which allows users to connect, interact, and share their content in informal, self-managed, and multi-mode learning communities (Jenkins et al., 2009). But the learning potential of the comment area is currently under-researched. This article analyzes this problem by researching the tf comment area content that is particularly popular in China. *Lord of the Mysteries* is serialized on China’s largest tf website, where it is one of the most popular tf books.

Fan Groups

Lord of the Mysteries is a well-known Western mystery novel that merges the Cthulhu Mythos,¹ western magic elements, the style of the First Industrial Revolution, and steam-punk feelings. It presents a world of steam and machinery which is a legend of “fools”.

¹ The Cthulhu Mythos is a mythopoeia and a shared fictional universe, originating in the works of American horror writer H. P. Lovecraft.

It was awarded the fourth Top Orange Melon Online Literature Award, was identified as the top 10 game IP with the most potential (Sohu, 2020), and on September 16, 2021, was included on the “China Network Literature Influence List: Overseas Influence List” (China News, 2021).

Its writing style has a strong “Kesulu” style, and it has a profound humanistic spirit. It constructs a different world that resembles the First Industrial Revolution in the West and extensively describes the poverty, unemployment, environmental pollution, and many other social challenges that confronted those at the bottom of the social ladder at this time.

It also integrates oriental humanistic thoughts into exotic customs, which provides global users with a familiar and fresh experience and a sense of unique beauty (Phoenix, 2021). It is not only popular in China, but also in other countries, in large part because of its steampunk theme and Western background (China News, 2021).

The many users of this novel formed a large fan group that organized many offline activities, such as fan gatherings, and created a large number of “fan works” (including “fanfic,” “fanart,” and “gif”) and transmedia narrative works (Jenkins, 2003) that expanded and supplemented official production, including peer novels, novel peripheral products, and fans’ self-made video works. At the offline signing ceremony, fans will come to the scene wearing the official uniform and carrying accessories (Sohu, 2022). Fan devotion was also reflected in the number of comments — there are more than 100,000 posts in the comment area, and hundreds of posts have more than 1000 replies. At one point, the activity in this comment area made the book a hot topic of discussion for the whole network (China News Network, 2021).

Fans do not only share their feelings and views on the novel content in the book comment area, but also share their cultural knowledge gained from the novel. Transcultural communication is complemented by participation in the novel creation process through interactions with the author that one observer characterizes as an outgrowth and expression of fan culture (Jenkins, 2003). In acknowledging the link between participation and this culture, the researchers propose two research questions:

1. Which questions (knowledge, attitude, and practice) are most interesting to fans, and why?
2. How do fans use the book comment area for cultural learning and exchange?

The researchers believe *Lord of the Mysteries* is an appropriate research object because:

1. It has a large fan group and will therefore be able to provide sufficient samples.
2. Its content integrates many Eastern and Western cultural elements, which will encourage knowledge exploration.
3. It combines a distinctive “Eastern style” Chinese thinking philosophy and absorbs elements that are simultaneously part of reality and stand above it while showing a sharp understanding of the world. It is a masterpiece that arouses interest and has ideological value (China Writers Network, 2021).

Materials and Methods

Context

The article data analyzed in this paper comes from the Qidian website, a transmedia Chinese novel platform (Fig. 2) created in 2002. Anyone can access and view its content. However, those who wish to publish book reviews must first register and respect network etiquette

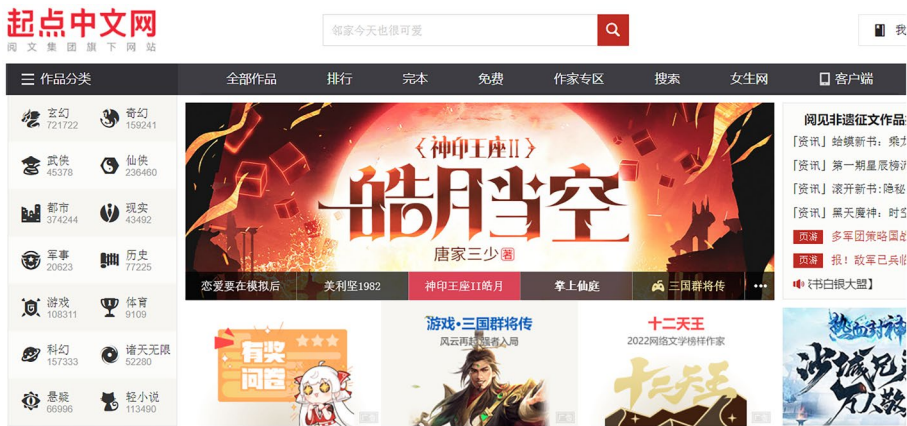


Fig. 2 The Qidian website

rules, including refraining from false advertising and personal attacks. The book comment area does not only promote interaction between fans and authors but also between fans.

In 2017, a “This Chapter Says” function, a bullet screen in online literature, was added to the website’s book comment area. In any novel paragraph, users can draw lines, comment, engage in “real-time” discussions of the plot, urge people to change, support their favorite characters, and even start a second creation (Sohu, 2022). This technology has increased the frequency of novel fan interactions.

Corpus

By screening the comment area, the researchers find that StartingPoint uses some simple tags to distinguish the comment content. For example, there are a large number of comments under the “story discussion,” “role-related,” and “asking for help” tags, and almost every comment has numerous replies. There are also several million corpora.

The researchers selected “elite comments,” which is the unique function of the Qidian website that will be divided according to the popularity and content of comments. “Essence comments” are the most representative samples with high content quality and elicit many replies. The researchers selected a total of 1000 comments.

These data are part of a broader corpus from the author’s doctoral research, which seeks to analyze the role of comment areas in participation, communication, and learning. These undisclosed data will not affect this article’s results or interests.

Methods

The researchers first referred to the work of Torrego and Gutiérrez (2016), which established a basis for our analysis. In order to analyze comments, the researchers combine content and discourse analysis. First, the researchers classify all the comment corpus by topic and quantitatively select the comment that best represents the reader’s interest and reaction. Second, the researchers use the theoretical tools of discourse analysis (Herring, 2004),

which is characterized by its linguistic methods, to analyze this choice from a global perspective (comments within the framework are considered in series and fan platforms contexts), and also apply discourse analysis methods to study Internet interaction. This makes it possible to understand the emerging issues and their statistical relationships and also gain an improved insight into the phenomena (including culture and ideology) that underpin digital discourse.

The first step is to identify the topics that users most frequently mention. The researchers therefore divide the topic of “elite comments” in the corpus in accordance with the existing comment label in the comment area. In order to select more representative comments, the researchers formulated an intervention standard, which established the number of replies to this comment should exceed 50.

After obtaining 12 topics and 415 comments, the researchers dropped 585 unrepresentative comments because they failed to meet the standard. These topics were divided into four categories (see Table 1).

The discussion will use examples to illustrate these categories and explain the knowledge, social practices, and attitudes they contain.

Analysis and Results

In the statistics, most categories are related to the novel’s plot content (143 out of 1000 comments; 14.3%), followed by the social culture category, which accounted for 105 comments (10.5%). The total number of comments involving novel style categories and character categories is relatively small and, respectively account for 88 (8.8%) and 79 (7.9%).

Fiction Style

The original inspiration for *Lord of the Mysteries* was provided by the Cthulhu Myth genre, which originated in modern Europe and the USA during capitalism’s rise in the Victorian era. Chinese users are not well-acquainted with the myth of Cthulhu and are predisposed to regard it with curiosity. Its background style does not describe some things positively and emphasizes that the unknown is the greatest fear, meaning there will be a large amount of blank space that the reader will need to fill with their imagination — this is shown in the comment area, where users have written “Praise the night goddess who is more ancient than eternity” (Fig. 3) and “Summary and brief introduction of the god Cthulhu in the book”.

The combination of steampunk and Western magic color is also a book feature, as acknowledged by one reader who writes “this is one of the best steampunk-type trans-media fictions”. The Tarot Club organization, various constellations of knowledge (including magic drug knowledge), and other Western magical elements are all reader preoccupations. The novel is very long, and users will summarize some elements in the comment area, including by referring to “list of magic items of Tarot members”, “functions of magic potions in the inventory book”, and “information analysis on mystery (constellation)”. A lot of people replied to these comments — the largest number of replies, which are still being updated, exceeded 2000. This did not only show the users’ love and admiration for the works, but also fully conveyed their enthusiasm to assert, challenge, and communicate in the comment area.

Table 1 List of 12 topics divided into 4 categories

Category	Theme	Number of comments	Example
Fiction style	Cthulhu	28	“Doesn't anyone remember that this book is in the background of Cthulhu?”
	Steampunk	36	“One of the best works in steampunk style”
Characters	Western magic	24	“Information Analysis on Mystery (Constellation)”
	Main character	47	“Information map about the current ability of the main character”
	Other characters	32	“The hostess must stand for Susie”
Plot content	Urge for more rewards	42	“Reward stickers, one reply is 10 yuan, and one thousand reply is settlement”
	Thoughts on Reading	54	“Post to record the daily life after the completion of the novel”
Social culture content	Plot speculation	47	“Guess the plot—I think the curly haired baboon will die”
	Social and cultural background	21	“Introduce some Victorian etiquette”
	Chinese and English bilingual tables	18	“Overseas Version Noun Comparison Table”
	Linguistics	11	“Why Russell's Diary Can't be Cracked from the Perspective of Linguistics”
	Fans' creation	55	“Illustration of the big ending”
Total		415	

Fig. 3 “Praise the goddess of the night”



这是黑夜女神和封印物0-17的签到楼！

黑夜女神

“祂是比星空更崇高，比永恒更久远的黑夜女神，也是绯红之主，隐秘之母，厄难与恐惧的女皇，安眠和寂静的领主。”

小克的顶头上司和未来老婆。（确信）...

2018年12月7日

1417

1255

Characters

In the statistical comments, there are mainly two categories of comments — the first relates to the protagonist and the second to other characters. The 47 comments on the main character addressed different things, including his appearance, character, special abilities, and past emotional experiences. Another 32 comments referred to other characters and mainly focused on their appearance, personal traits, and fate.

Users are particularly interested in other roles and especially in the heroine. They did not fully agree with the protagonist’s original emotional line and so added their own. They also proposed other characters as a suitable protagonist and posted in support of favored characters while discussing them with others. Some characters were not human, but this did not bother users who then turned their attention to constructing and enjoying strange-looking CPs, including one who announced: “This is Susi’s True Love Building, let’s contribute to them!” All of the 2731 replies willingly overlooked the fact she was the protagonist’s pet dog and supported her being appointed as the heroine (Fig. 4).

Similarly, when one reader announced that “Klein (the hero) and Amun (the supporting actor) are together! I love this group!,” they received more than 1000 replies. Quite clearly, same-sex CPs were also not a problem for these users.

Story Content

The success of *tf* is inseparable from the setting of the plot content. The *Lord of the Mysteries* attracted many users and became the best-selling *tf* on the Qidian website in a single year, and its excellent content setting was clearly a very important part of this success.

Fig. 4 “This is Susi’s True Love Building, let’s contribute to them!”

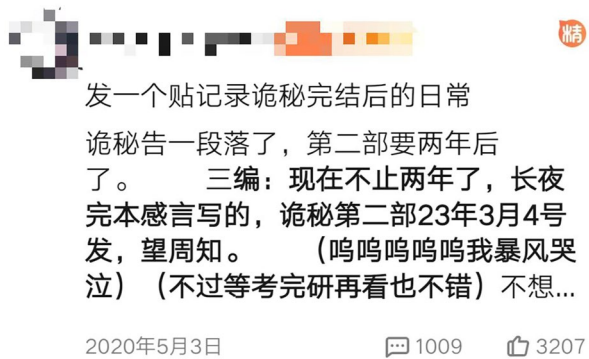


这里是苏茜的真爱楼，让我们为克茜结局贡献力量吧（滑稽）

2018年6月21日

2731

3567

Fig. 5 Users' daily life after the end of the novel

Comment area users will naturally discuss topics related to the work plot. The author must ensure a certain number of words are updated every day in the creation period, as this will meet the needs of readers who follow the trend every day. In order to see the new chapter as quickly as possible, users will habitually leave messages in the comment area that urge the author to update — there are 42 posts urging the author to update quickly, and many replies to each one. This is normal behavior of users, and well-known authors are not the recipients of these appeals.

There are also 47 comments in the comment area related to plot conjecture, which users like to leave messages about. They are serialized every day, and users whose curiosity is not satisfied by these daily updates will leave guesses about the plot content in the comment area, which will often spark intense discussions and exchanges that only end when one “side” is persuaded or gives up. This is a process of users’ wisdom collision that benefits the novel — Ai Qian Shui De Wu Zei, the author of *Lord of the Mysteries*, once told an interviewee of how he would seek creative inspiration by going to the comment area to browse users’ conjectures and discussions.

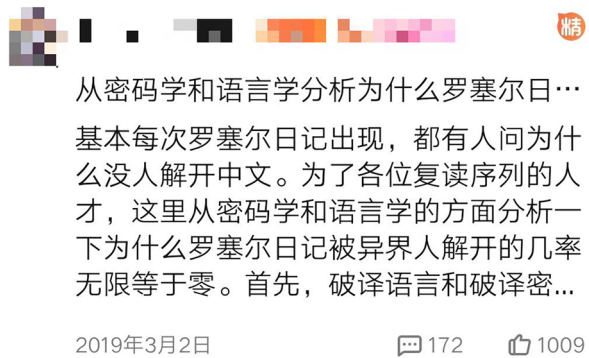
There are 54 comments on the reading of the novel, which mainly relates to users’ feelings about the novel content and the novel’s impact on their life. In discussing and analyzing some plots, users therefore discuss their daily life after finishing reading the novel (Fig. 5), their future expectations for the novel sequel, and other things.

In seeing the intense feelings that are aroused, researchers gained a strong sense of users’ commitment to the book and the extent to which it is an accompaniment to their own lives and a source of refuge in times of trouble.

Social and Cultural Content

There are many comments related to social culture, and 21 refer to the novel’s cultural and social background. The novel’s deep debt to the Victorian era was acknowledged by some readers, who sought to introduce some knowledge of the Victorian era by “introducing some etiquette in the Victorian era,” referring to “food, clothing, housing, and transportation of people in the Victorian era” and “briefly introducing the political system in the Victorian era.” These posts did not only provide historical and cultural knowledge, but also answered reader questions about the setting of the novel’s background. In acknowledging that the novel’s major countries were powerful at particular points in history, users also

Fig. 6 Why Russell's diary cannot be cracked from the perspective of linguistics and cryptography



contributed posts that assessed important differences from cultural, economic, political, and social perspectives.

Users contributed 11 comments that analyze some novel contents from a linguistic perspective, including the post “Why Russell’s diary cannot be cracked from the perspective of linguistics and cryptography” (Fig. 6). The reader committed a substantial amount of time to analyzing the reasons for the novel’s indestructible diary by drawing on perspectives from linguistics and cryptography. The post has a clear logic and organization, which provides a strong theoretical basis for assessing the novel content. These contributions provide other users with social and cultural knowledge that is not commonly held and also contribute to improvements in cultural literacy by assisting learning and knowledge exchange, which are important justifications for the tf comment area.

Users added 18 posts that are Chinese and also contributed (English Chinese) bilingual tables. The Chinese and English forms in the comment area, which included a plot summary, character set, and exclusive vocabulary (Fig. 7), attracted many responses and generated considerable attention. The novel has many overseas users, and these tables helped them better understand novel content and learn some Chinese. When they leave messages under comments, this produces contact with Chinese users and promotes transcultural communication and learning.

A large number of comments also refer to the act of creating with other fans, which is one of the most important manifestations of fan culture and also a part of social culture. The novel has a large number of fans, who are often from quite diverse backgrounds. “Fan works” published in the comments are mainly illustrations and humanistic works and also include some handmade peripheral photos. Well-known scenes from the novel are also often depicted. Word limits in the comment area however prevent the Tongren essays from offering an in-depth treatment and elaboration. Some information about peripheral products, including the PVC figure (Fig. 8) and the specific itinerary of the offline fan meeting, is also available here.

Discussion

The researchers observed that fans use the book comment area to expand the fan circle’s influence and read the novel in the spirit of a series (Jenkins, 2010) while helping unfamiliar “newcomers” to better understand the material. Fans also promote cultural learning and

Fig. 7 Exclusive vocabulary



exchange by posting in the book comment area, where they communicate with each other by raising questions and participating in debates.

The posts in the comment area have a lot of colloquial and concise content, which is something that is not frequently encountered in public communication. Some words are

Fig. 8 The PVC figure



the exclusive property of the novel fan circle, including “Gailou”, which does not mean “building” in the conventional sense, but is instead a call for updated material; “How many floors?”, meanwhile, is the number of users who lend their voices in support; and “irrigation” is a dismissal of a post as empty, boring, or perfunctory.

In the comment area, users do not only “respond”, “debate”, or “understand”, but also engage in a range of complex activities that include comparing the similarities and differences of social culture and creating with others, which are both good examples of cultivating cultural competence (Benson, 2015). Posting is also anonymous, which promotes reader cooperation because users can set aside image-related concerns and express themselves without worrying about the “correctness” of their views.

Conclusion

Researchers found fans are most interested in:

1. Guessing or questioning the story content (characters, story rationality and/or background settings).
2. Transcultural exchanges that bring together Chinese and foreign fans. This can take different forms, including urging authors to update novels and creating peer works.
3. Some obscure problems in China, including same-sex CPs.

The researchers found that, in addition to potentially contributing to participation, communication, and learning, the comment area can also make an interesting and innovative contribution to the media and digital fields. The comment area, which is a product of popular culture and grassroots culture, is not only concerned with entertainment but also with sharing culture, knowledge, and values that interest users. This is consistent with the findings of Tuzel and Hobbs (2017), who observed how social networks and other virtual environments promote intergroup dialog, in a way that fosters curiosity, cultivates citizens’ voices, and promotes understanding of peoples and cultures across the world.

Suggestions for Future Study

The comment area seeks to promote communication, discussion, and learning, and it would be worthwhile to compare it to counterparts in other tf.

Researchers could also study reader views in the comment area and then examine how they apply technology to the learning of language and culture. They could also examine if abilities acquired in the leisure environment can be adapted to different contexts and applied to different purposes — for example, they could consider how language learning can be analyzed, enriched, and reused in the real environment, leading to “seamless” learning (Wong et al., 2017).

Author Contribution Ph.D. Han Xu is the only author involved in writing the manuscript. Professor Javier Gonzalez Patiño and Professor José Luis Linaza, these two authors revising it critically for important intellectual content, contributed equally to this work and jointly supervised this work.

Availability of Data and Materials Data sharing is not a concern, as no datasets were generated or analyzed.

Declarations

Ethical Approval This article does not involve human participants.

Consent to Participate This article does not involve human participants.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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