

University of Tartu
Department of Semiotics

Jin Yan
Transmedia Narrative and Fan Culture
— *The Example of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles*
Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Phd. Elin Sütiste

Tartu

2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
Aim and Research Question	4
Background Introduction	5
Literature Review	7
Overview of the Material Studied: <i>The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series</i>	10
CHAPTER 1 — THE TRANSMEDIA DISSEMINATION AND RECEPTION OF <i>THE GRAVE ROBBERS' CHRONICLES</i> SERIES	13
1.1. Transmedia Dissemination of the Series	14
1.2. Transmedia Reception of the Series	18
1.2.1. The Interaction Between Creation and Reception	20
1.2.2. Embracing the Interaction Between Groups	22
CHAPTER 2 — THE TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE FEATURES OF <i>THE GRAVE ROBBERS' CHRONICLES</i> SERIES	25
2.1. Continuity of Narrative Content	26
2.1.1. Continuity of Theme	27
2.1.2 Continuity of Text	30
2.1.3 Continuity of Characters	33
2.2. Diversity of Narrative Strategies	35
2.2.1 Narrative Time and Space	36
2.2.2 Narrative Skills	38
2.2.3 Narrative Perspective	41
CHAPTER 3 — THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STORY WORLD AND FAN CULTURE	48
3.1. The Internal Formation Mechanism of transmedia Fan Economy	49
3.1.1. Individual Fans	50
3.1.2. Building an Identity	50
3.1.3. Integrated Marketing	51
3.2. The Story World of <i>The Grave Robbers' Chronicles</i> Series in Transmedia	

Storytelling	52
3.2.1 Stage Play and Game	52
3.2.2 TV and Movies	53
CONCLUSION	56
KOKKUVÕTE	58
REFERENCES	60

INTRODUCTION

Aim and Research Question

This dissertation aims to explain how fan culture has contributed to the formation of the transmedia narratives in China by taking *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* as an example. To do so, it analyzes the spread and shaping process of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* story across various forms of media and discusses the role played by fan groups. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* is selected for analysis as it is one of the most successful network novels in China, which has gone on to be adapted into games, films, and TV series. Prior to embarking on the discussion, it is necessary to define network novels. In Chinese academic circles, the mainstream view is that network literature is original literature that was first published on the Internet. More specifically, it is a new type of literature created by Internet users, and published on the Internet for other Internet users to enjoy or participate in. Due to its origins online, it constitutes a new form of literature that has developed alongside modern computers and digital network technologies. At present in China, network literature mainly consists of network novels. This conceptualization of network novels only applies within China.

By studying this case, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the current situation of transmedia narratives in China and understand how they completed the transmedia process of evolving from a novel to the complex aggregation it is today through fan participation.

Background Introduction

To define **media**, Henry Jenkins drew from the notion put forward by Lisa Gitelman, that media is “socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice.” (Gitelman, 2006) In this thesis, *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* appears in both traditional and digital media such as books, TV, platforms for fans’ practices, etc.

The transmedia concept was first put forward by Henry Jenkins in 2003¹. He argues that today's society centres on media integration. Jenkins uses *The Matrix* as a case study, proposing that a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. It would be helpful to clarify the difference between transmedia and crossmedia at this point. To highlight a new kind of franchise exemplified by the Wachowski Brothers’ *The Matrix*, Jenkins coined the term “transmedia storytelling”. He explains that “*The Matrix* is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” , (Jenkins, 2006a: 95) Contrastingly, crossmedia involves more than one form of public communication. Kevin Moloney, a journalist, offers a simple and clear explanation:

Transmedia = One story world, many stories, many forms, many channels.

Crossmedia = One story, many channels.” (Moloney, 2014)

Likewise, many scholars have reached a consensus on the definitions of crossmedia and transmedia. Crossmedia tends to tell the same story on different platforms, much like an adaptation. Transmedia, on the other hand, is much richer and more focused on using the features of different platforms to create a sprawling story world. (Evans, 2011:27-28; Scolari, 2009: 587; Bourdaa, 2013: 205; Dena, 2018: 196)

¹ Jenkins, Henry. Transmedia Storytelling, 15.01.2003. Retrieved from: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2003/01/15/234540/transmedia-storytelling/> 14.04.2022. n.p.

The foundation of such integration is the multi-dimensional interactions between media producers and consumers. The evolution of media will inevitably change the ways in which media producers and consumers think. In this context, the dramatic changes that have taken place in the contemporary era have produced transmedia narratives.

In line with the rapid development of the media, the role of transmedia narratives in storytelling is increasingly important. Transmedia storytelling aims to develop a comprehensive and multi-angle narrative by integrating multiple forms of media. (Jenkins, 2006a; Long, 2008; Moloney, 2014) In this case, the story world expands through various media platforms, enriching the story and facilitating acceptance of the texts.

Transmedia narratives are non-linear collaborative narratives. The structure of a transmedia story is like a bicycle wheel: the core story is at the centre, whilst the various narratives have different purposes and radiate out in different directions, like the spokes of a wheel. Although spoke is independent and creates a new world, it inherently ties back to the original story world. In this story world, the story does not have a fixed pattern like traditional literary works. Instead, different parts of the story are explored in different media, creating a number of smaller, independent stories that are simultaneously related. The continuity between story content has evolved into continuity between different media.

Due to the development of the Internet, readers have become progressively more involved in the story-building process. At the same time, fan culture is expanding into more fields and social platforms. It should be noted that there are significant differences between fans and general media users (Zhong, 2021: 13). To be specific, the degree of participation amongst general users is lower than among fans. General users are typically short-term crossmedia viewers, functional illiterate media users, or non-member audiences who exhibit little interest in the media in question. By way of contrast, fans are excessive media users; their investment in media consumption is active, fanatical, and participatory (Yang, 2016: 27, 32). Idol worship leads such individuals to pursue a way of life that is shaped by their media interests. As a result, they invest a lot of time and resources into media consumption, from which they can

derive a sense of happiness, satisfaction, and social recognition. What's more, media activities were crucial in shaping the history of fan culture, as the history of fandom and fan culture were classified by media forms and genres of products (Yin, 2018: 7; Zhu, 2015: 51).

At present in China, a large number of novel texts have expanded from a single media platform, evolving across multiple media platforms, such as film and stage plays. The present paper takes *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles series* as a case study. It is a very successful example of this genre and offers much research value. An analysis of the series can help to deepen the understanding transmedia narrative theory and practice.

This paper analyzes the series transmedia narration efforts from three aspects: (1) Transmedia dissemination and reception, in which fans are important recipients; (2) Transmedia features; and (3) The establishment of the story world through fan participation. The first part of the thesis discusses how transmedia narrative promotes the communication and development of the novel text from a single media platform to multimedia platforms. The second part discusses this series' transmedia narrative features through the process outlined in chapter one. The third part compares the construction of the story world of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles series* with that of other media platforms, and further considers the social media fusion and aesthetic acceptance transformation underpinning the construction of the transmedia narrative world.

Literature Review

One of the central concepts of the present thesis is 'transmedia narrative/storytelling'. This concept refers to stories that "unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more

integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products.” (Jenkins, 2006a:293)

Research on transmedia began in Western academic circles. The personification was Henry Jenkins. He articulates seven principles to characterise transmedia storytelling: spreadability vs. drillability, continuity vs. multiplicity, immersion vs. extractability, worldbuilding, seriality, subjectivity, and performance. In this thesis, the last principle is the main reference: fans tell fragments of the story, and transmedia storytelling encourages users to participate in creating new stories (Jenkins, 2007).

These seven widely accepted principles describe the goals and audience strategies that transmedia storytelling should achieve, whilst also establishing a new narrative system. The creation of the narrative text and the methods of audience participation are two essential parts of this system. As such, the discussion that will proceed is based on these principles. In the thesis, fans of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series are regarded as audience participants. To define transmedia more accurately, Jenkins offers the following description:

In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best — so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. (Jenkins, 2003b)

This paragraph gives an idea that the core of a transmedia narrative is a story core, and the interpretation, catalysis and reconstruction of the story core can be carried out through different forms of media. A wonderful story can give rise to cultural content conforming to the nature of media in different media forms and be accepted by different groups (Wang, 2015: 180, 182).

In recent years, Chinese scholars have taken transmedia to refer to the situation in which a narrative behavior is carried out in more than one medium. Moreover, the narrative work is transformed from one medium to another, so as to appear to the audience in various forms. (Long, 2008: 61; Cheng, 2017: 262)

It is also necessary to outline a term related to transmedia narratives: ‘story world’. Transmedia is the art of world-making, and the story world provides an organizational structure for many media texts. (Jenkins, 2006a: 21; Liu, Zhang, 2019: 29).

Melanie Bourdaa analyzed how to construct an encyclopedic story world through different media in her article, *The Creation of an Encyclopaedic Universe with Transmedia Storytelling (2013)*. She believes that the relationship between transmedia narratives and TV series is premised on the audience's participation in the narrative. Taking the American TV show *Fringe* as a case study, she explained the production and reception of the mechanics of this narrative strategy. In the German context, Lothar Mikos published *Television Drama Series and Transmedia Storytelling in an Era of Convergence (2016)*. He pointed out that transmedia storytelling is a product of media convergence and the co-creation of a multi-platform media environment. By leading the audience into different media markets, they can access a full range of experiences. Moreover, a transmedia series must emphasize continuity. On this basis, the setting of the story's time and space must meet the specific needs of the audience. In the story world of transmedia storytelling, the focus of the TV series is still storytelling. (Mikos, 2016: 47-67) There are papers showing that in the process of building a story world, **fans** can be considered an important part of audience participation.

Spanish scholar Carlos Alberto Scolari outlined the importance of transmedia audiences, and also how to make a cluster of brand series and strategies for the expansion of fictional worlds. He divided audiences into three categories: single text consumers, single media consumers, and transmedia consumers. Single text consumers are independent and focus only on the text; they do not engage with other forms of media in the story world. Single text consumers are contained in a single media consumer. Single media consumers enter the narrative world by watching television. The transmedia consumer expands the scope of the fictional world through different media, languages, etc. (Scolari, 2009: 586-606)

Chinese scholar Zhu Songlin emphasized that fans are the central consumers of transmedia products. In contrast with ordinary users, fans are fanatical consumers of media. The main purpose of the crossmedia user interaction strategy is to attract and encourage fans to participate in the creation process. (Zhu, 2015: 51-54) In addition,

Wang Xin put forward the concept of story core in his paper: transmedia narratives have a high-quality story core, around which new story content is created to attract different levels of consumers. (Wang, 2015: 179-187)

Overview of the Material Studied: *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series*

The Grave Robbers' Chronicles is one of the most famous network novels² in China. In this thesis, the novel is the main material. In addition, other versions, including films, TV dramas, games, and stage plays will also be drawn upon. In 2006, Xu Lei (better known by his pen-name Nan Pai San Shu) started to post his story on Qidian Novel's website³. By 2011, he finished his main story online, which was then published as a series of nine books (the last volume was split into two books).

It is a story about three grave robbers, Wu Xie, Zhang Qi Ling and Wang Pangzi, who are widely known as "the triplets". Together, they explore hidden tombs, go on treasure hunts, and follow clues to reveal secrets and mysteries involving their families and their past. The main storyline can be divided into two parts: In the first part, Wu obtains a notebook from his grandfather, a famed grave robber. Wu's uncle, Wu Sanxing, disappears in a grave robbery. Many years later, Wu Xie surprisingly receives a message from his uncle, leading him to take his grandfather's note and set out on a journey to find the truth about the Ultimate. In the second part, Wu Xie finds out that his best friend Zhang Qi Ling's family is also deeply related to the Ultimate. This leads the three of them to work together to try and save Zhang Qi Ling's life.

In addition to the eight main volumes, Xu Lei also wrote two sequels, named Zang Hai Hua and Sha Hai, to enrich the characters and storyline by introducing the perspectives of other characters besides Wu Xie. However, neither of those two stories

² Network novel refers to novel that is published and serialized on the Internet.

³ <https://m.qidian.com/book/68223.html>

were finished by the time Xu Lei announced his retirement from writing in 2013. Six years later, the author started writing *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles: Reboot*.

By 2011, more than 10 million copies of novel (the first to seven volumes) had been sold, China News Reported.⁴ At that time, the final volume had yet to be published. By the end of 2011, a week after its publication, the final novel had sold more than a million copies⁵. As of 2009, after the author signed a book publishing agreement with Beijing Motie Book Company, the series was no longer published on Qidian Novel's website. However, the novel's influence on the Internet continued unabated. The novel series ranked in the top 10 on the 2016 China IP (Intellectual Property) value list of online literature. (Li, 2019: 47)

According to the publisher and the author, the series' circulation had sold around 15 million copies by 2015, making it one of the most successful network novels in China.(Li, 2019: 48) The series' huge fan base represents great commercial value, which has piqued the interest of various media producers to develop the text. In 2009, the comic version was published and the story was then brought to the stage in 2013. The stage **play** retells the story of the first volume. Specifically, it introduces the backgrounds of the three main characters and tells the story of their encounter and first time exploring a tomb together. Unlike traditional stage plays, this one involves the audience from the beginning of casting, which suited the audience's needs. In 2014, the mobile **game** *The Lost Tomb* was released. The main storyline is drawn from volumes 1 to 4 of the novel, in which players play as Wu Xie's friend and explore the mysterious world of tombs with the help of non-player characters. In 2015, a **TV** version was produced, which attracted a whole new set of fans who had never read the novels. The TV series was only shown online, not on television. The series, called *The Lost Tomb*, tells the story of the protagonist Wu Xie and others traveling to the royal palace of Lu

⁴ Liu, Huan. 2011. The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series Have Sold Nearly 10 Million Copies. The Beijing News. 24.11.2011 Retrieved from: <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2011/11-24/3482487.shtml>. n.p.

⁵ Wangyi. 2011. The Grave Robbers' Chronicles' Finale Sold More Than A Million Copies In Its First Week. Wangyi News. https://3g.163.com/ntes_x/article/7MK1GHI200923P3U.html, 31.11.2011. n.p.

to protect the national treasures. This TV series is largely based on the story line in the first volume of the novel. One year later, a **movie** named *Time Riders* was produced. Since then, six more TV series and four more movies have been released. It should be noted that in the present thesis, only the earliest version is used. The movie tells the story of Wu Xie and his friends meeting the King of Snakes in a ghost town, which is a retelling of the content of the fourth volume of the novels. In addition to traditional media forms, other forms such as radio plays and cosplay albums have also been produced. These outstanding works are not simply adaptations but have their own characters and plots which are connected to the original novel series.

It can be seen from the above that *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles*, as a cultural text, has transcended the limitations of a single network novel due to the intervention and integration of different media. In this way, the creation has gone beyond the scope of the original novels. The novel text of this series presents a thrilling virtual world for readers. Although the world of the story is fixed in “the date of the decade”, the powerful influence of the story world leads to its use across various forms of media and stimulates its creation. On the one hand, the transmedia narration of this series is deeply influenced by the works themselves; on the other hand, transmedia storytelling is the product of media convergence, which is characterized by the mutual influence of various media creations. Furthermore, the complete story world forms the core of the transmedia narrative. Only the narrative text of multiple media forms together constitute a complete story world.

The introduction mainly introduces the background and significance of the topic, as well as relevant research all over the world, especially in China. The next chapter will look at transmedia dissemination and reception.

CHAPTER 1 — THE TRANSMEDIA DISSEMINATION AND RECEPTION OF *THE GRAVE ROBBERS' CHRONICLES* SERIES

As noted above, there have been many types of retelling of the series. As a cultural phenomenon, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series* needs to be located in its cultural context and combined with contemporary media development to obtain a better understanding. Since its launch, the series has been developed into films, TV series, stage plays, games, and more. The series has become one of the most famous pieces of IP in China. On 5 March 2018, the 41st Statistical Report on the Development Status of the Internet in China by CNNIC (China Internet Network Information Center) stated that as of December 2017, the number of Internet literature users reached 3.78 billion, an increase of 4.455 million from the end of last year, accounting for 48.9% of the total number of Internet users. The number of mobile Internet literature users was 344 million, an increase of 39.75 million over last year, accounting for 45.6% of mobile Internet users. In this year, the online literature business enters a profitable period.⁶ Whilst the boom in online literature has driven the IP development market in China, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series remains the most successful example of the genre.

The Grave Robbers' Chronicles series has formed a huge industry chain with an estimated market value of over 20 billion CNY (approximately three billion USD). In 2011, an online game and a card game were simultaneously launched and in 2015, the web series of the same name was launched. By the end of 2015, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* was the top-rated web series of 2015 with 2.754 billion viewers, at

⁶ The 41st China Statistical Report on Internet Development, 2018. 01. CNNIC

which time it was named one of the "Top 10 web series of the year" by Hurun Media. In 2016, the movie named *Time Riders* was released. In 2017, print editions of the books were published. In addition to this, comics and audiobooks were gradually introduced into the market. (Li, 2019: 46-51)

In this chapter, I will analyze the transmedia practice of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series from two aspects: transmedia communication and the corresponding transmedia reception.

1.1. Transmedia Dissemination of the Series

The permutations of this series include almost all popular forms of media. As mentioned above, it is one of the most popular pieces of IP in China. Before that, most IP was imported from America or other Western nations. It can be seen that *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series is a good demonstration of IP commercialization.

Marshall McLuhan posited that the medium is the message. (McLuhan 1967: 126-128). Jim Euchner argued that, in saying this, McLuhan meant to emphasize the implications of any new technology (or medium) beyond the specific context of its use (or content of its message). The importance of any medium inevitably goes beyond its contents, to its effects on the work in which it is embedded. (Euchner, 2016: 9-11) Hence, transmedia communication is an inevitable outcome of media convergence.

On the basis of media convergence, communication and interaction between different forms of media should be strengthened to achieve innovative media integration in terms of both form and content. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* is a series that has been adapted into various forms of media and disseminated across multiple media platforms, including novels, TV drama, and games, to name but a few. The transmedia communication of this series integrates text, sound, video, and other media forms, capitalizing on the unique features of different media channels. On this basis, transmedia dissemination of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series can be further analyzed.

Many kinds of retellings have been produced based on the novel. The interactions and communications between different media channels form a series of works with different media attributes, thus shaping the vivid character image and conveying the ups and downs of the story. The transmedia communication of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series is not only the second creation of the story content by multiple media, but also the platform foundation of system construction between different media. This imbues it with the characteristics of the common communication subject and comprehensive communication channels.

The spread of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series from the network platform to different media platforms, such as paper media, film, and television, shows that its transmission has crossmedia properties. In contrast with Chinese traditional literature or network literature whose communication field is limited to a single or very limited number of media forms in their early stages, this series exhibits different features due to its multimedia application. The transmedia communication of this series enriches the communication mode of novels, thus helping to popularize the communication subject. The original carrier of the novels was a network. Compared with traditional media, its biggest characteristic is popularity and interactivity. Therefore, when the series was first disseminated online, it highlighted the openness and interactivity that traditional media lacks. The dissemination and re-creation of the novel text in other different media was able to flourish on the open and accessible platform facilitated by the Internet.

The transmedia communication of this series mainly involves print media and electronic media, as represented by books, films, and networks. The original novel, published in 2011, has sold more than 12 million copies⁷, whilst cartoon has received more than 7 million hits online, and the movie and TV series are doing well in terms of viewership. The successful exploitation of this intellectual property has fueled a boom in online novel retellings in China. Up to now, its topic page on Weibo has 7.14 billion page views and 95,500 followers⁸.

⁷ Data comes from Yi, Chafang. 2017. On the Textual Adaptation and Audience Reception of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series. *Movie Literature*. 2017(20): 88-90.

⁸ Weibo is used as Chinese version Twitter. Since Twitter is banned in China, people tend to use Weibo to communicate. And the data is up to 31.03.2022.

As the main body of communication, different media have also become the new subject of creation. This “communication - creation” phenomenon is a distinctive feature of transmedia communication. More specifically, transmedia communication is not only the sharing of text information between different media, but also the collaborative narration and dissemination of the same basic text through different forms of media. In the context of digital society, the emergence of transmedia communication blurs the boundaries between different media. Information content can be interacted with and disseminated in every medium, thus allowing various forms of media to go beyond the single-wire mode of information exchange. The interaction between media communication subjects and users, of whom mostly fans are considered here, has given rise to diversified communication modes. The transmedia communication of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series is not only a simple presentation of the story prototype across different media platforms, but also a network mode of interactive and creative communication and collaborative communication produced by different mutually influencing communication subjects.

In this process, fan groups play a role that cannot be ignored. Among the fan groups, the fans of the novel were the earliest loyal fan group. They recommend *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series to more people in various ways, such as drawing and writing fan fiction. It is often the case with fans that after the release of a new movie, they will make a second creation based on the original content of the novel or movie. (Yi, 2017: 88-90) Movie-only audiences are drawn to the fan art, leading them to become interested in the series as a whole.

Transmedia communication presents a new communication network system model. This new system is centered on a basic text that proliferates across various media platforms through different media channels. Compatible media are integrated and used to create story worlds with different media forms. Against the backdrop of the new communication network system, *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series spread from the Internet to other media. Through communication and interaction with media, people can explore a greater range of possibilities for this series. Notably, this process is different from the one-way scattering of traditional literature from paper media to the Internet and telecommunication media. In the era of the convergence of cable TV

networks, telecom service networks, and the Internet, network literature communication has achieved interaction cross-network communication among various media. Therefore, any series of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* can appear in different media: novels, audiobooks, plays, games, movies, and anime can be watched simultaneously through online and mobile media. Using different communication channels, the series manifests through new media. The significance of the series' transmedia communication includes the following aspects⁹:

(1) The first is textual innovation. Transmedia communication has changed the single media character of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* and created new versions in other media, thus providing for transmedia communication. In the novel, brotherhood is not only one of the central themes, but also one of the attractions to other media producers. During the serialization of the novel, the relationship between the protagonists attracted a lot of attention, leading fans to create fan fiction. TV series, film and game makers each have reinterpreted, adapted and recreated classic narratives. In the movie, the characters have to save each other from a dungeon. Meanwhile, the web games immerse the player in this emotion through role-playing. The transmedia communication of the series is based on the novel text, whilst the secondary creation enriches the story content to help disseminate the series.

(2) Secondly, the communication between media drives the reception effect of stories. Transmedia communication has moved on from the passive and single mode of communication or reception between media of the past. For example, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* novel and the play positively interact with each other, with the author of the novel watching the play and the audience reading the novel. The audience's feelings during this period are doubled, creating two different types of sensory experience. These two types of sensory experience continually interact with each other, jointly opening and creating new spaces for the story to be received.

The transmedia communication of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series radiates from the network literature to different media platforms, such as comics, movies and games, opening up new spaces for creation and reception, and introducing narrative

⁹ The characteristics of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series' significance are summarized with reference to Li (2019:46-51) and Liang (2017: 54-56).

possibility into the communication. For example, the game takes the story plot as the basis of its design and creates a game interface and character skins in line with the story, thus providing players with an immersive sensory experience. Meanwhile, through the characters' dialogue and background music, the radio drama provides audiences with a fresh take on the story world, attracting audiences to all kinds and creating a unique experience of terror and horror. With the continuous development of such transmedia communication and greater development and utilization of the text on media platforms, the creation and reception of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* text present more and more possibilities.

1.2. Transmedia Reception of the Series

Transmedia reception is another aspect that is worth discussing. The current push towards transmedia has emerged from shifts in production practices (shaped by media concentration, in some cases) or reception practices (the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media). (Jenkins, 2011) In transmedia practice, works re-enter people's contemplation through their recreation in different forms of media. This process is achieved through bidirectional symbiosis and interactive communication. In this way, a basic text can be shaped into different story system styles through the unique interpretations of different media.

For example, in *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series, the novel highlights the story content and focuses on creating a feeling of suspense. Contrastingly, the stage play uses advanced 3D technology to produce unique space experiences.

While most of the retellings have been well received, the producers completely failed in their film retelling. Specifically, the audience generally felt that the visual effects in the film were not properly integrated with the storyline, resulting in a film that did not do justice to the source material. (Yi, 2017) The film, *Time Raiders*, (2016) essentially splits the narrative in two, with half devoted to the friendship between Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling, and half to the exploration of the tomb. However, both the

friendship and the exploration lack the necessary power to drive the storyline. In trying to promote both, the film's narrative logic becomes confused.

The film begins with the portrayal of the mysterious Zhang Qiling in a brief fight scene. It then moves on to Wu Xie, starting with his childhood apparitions before elaborating on the legend of Wu Xie and his family. After Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling meet, the film focuses on the emotional connection between the two men, both of whom have mysterious identities and possess special skills. In particular, the two men become closer during the exploration of the tomb. It is their intimate partnership that allows them to unlock the tomb's secrets. The whole film is a star-studded retelling of the original text that focuses on the characters and their relationships, with Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling playing the main narrative roles. Although the story is told in a traditional progressive manner, the visual presentation and plot retelling are not in harmony.

The novels have a huge fan base, which is the main audience for the film. Both readers and audiences expect the film to recreate the mysterious underground world of the story, allowing them to experience the legendary tomb raiding adventures of Wu Xie as if they were there. Regarding the audience's aesthetic needs, the visual effects of the film, as well as the suspense and logic of the process, are the main focus of other retellings. Contrastingly, the film's director focuses the narrative on the two main actors, trying to use the power of idolatry to drive the box office. As a result, the film naturally became a solo show for the actors.

Each medium creates different story of the series with a different emphasis on aesthetic reception. Therefore, in the context of the transmedia system, the basic model of symbiosis and cooperation between different media integrates multiple story worlds to create a multiplicity of aesthetic experiences. On this basis, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series is no longer a single, closed text; instead, it is a comprehensive story system generated through multimedia synergy.

The transmedia reception of the series is shared through multiple media channels, which affects the audience's aesthetic sensory reception and produces new means of reception.

1.2.1. The Interaction Between Creation and Reception

The interactivity of transmedia practice not only takes place between media, but also between audience and creator. In the traditional communication model, creators' works are deeply influenced by the social environment and inspired by feelings. In the process of creation and consumption, the creator seldom communicates with the audience, meaning that the presentation of the work is typically exclusively produced by the creator. In the Internet era, creators are more likely to serialise their work. Moreover, they will listen to the voice of the public in the creation process and make necessary adjustments in light of the feedback.

For example, in the process of writing *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series, the public paid close attention to the emotional changes between Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling (Yi, 2017), leading the author to include more interaction between the two characters later on. In 2013, Xu Lei posted a letter on his weibo account,¹⁰ mentioned that the support of Zhang Qiling/Wu Xie shippers gave him great strength in the early days of the novel. (Xu, 2013) After the release of the audio version in Mandarin, the publisher acknowledged the demand to release a Cantonese version (Yi, 2017), which promoted the spread of the series in other regions with different dialects and provided a new experience and opened up new audiences. Meanwhile, the authors and publishers of this series all played the role of creators in the process of transmedia reception of their works. In the system of transmedia practice, not only the novel writer is the creator, but also those individuals who re-create through different media platforms. Creators no longer have zero communication with the audience and instead re-create on the basis of listening to the aspirations of the audience and catering to their needs. Like Jenkins wrote on his blog:

This circulation of media content - across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders - depends heavily on the active participation of the consumer. ... convergence represents a shift in cultural logic, whereby consumers are encouraged to seek out new information

¹⁰ This letter has been hidden, only screenshots can be found. Retrieved from: <https://iknow-pic.cdn.bcebos.com/63d0f703918fa0ecd3461f09209759ee3d6ddb35>

and make connections between dispersed media content. The term, participatory culture, is intended to contrast with older notions of media spectatorship. In this emerging media system, what might traditionally be understood as media producers and consumers are transformed into participants who are expected to interact with each other according to a new set of rules which none of us fully understands. Convergence does not occur through media appliances - however sophisticated they may become. (Jenkins, 2006b)¹¹

It can be seen that the process of transmedia reception is a process of disrupting the traditional "production-consumption" model. It emphasizes the dynamic influence of the audience's psychological experience of transmedia creation, transforming audiences from mere onlookers into active participants in the re-creation of works. This reception process constitutes a new interaction model between different media forms and the media and the audience, especially fans. Taking advantage of the respective media advantages of traditional media and new media, other modes of integration should be sought out and integration and interaction between different communication channels promoted. In this way, the story content of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series has become more comprehensive and diversified, and created a varied interactive media environment for different creators and fan groups.

Audiences in the age of mass communication need to be catered to and seduced in order to attract their attention, especially fans. Against the backdrop of increasing media integration, the enthusiasm for common participation is high, and the communicator and the recipient need to engage in benign interaction and establish a complementary relationship. As noted above, fans pay more attention than ordinary viewers. As such, TV producers must offer more to hold their attention: a great story needs to be coupled with an experience that provides multi-platform entertainment. For instance, hidden clues can be embedded in each individually told story, and audiences can even be given control over the direction of the story.

¹¹ Jenkins, Henry. 2006. Welcome to Convergence Culture. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html , 01.02.2022.

1.2.2. Embracing the Interaction Between Groups

Transmedia reception is based on the reception of re-created works amongst different media. On the basis of interaction and cooperation between different media, the works present new sensory experiences and novel forms of psychological enjoyment. In the process of transmedia practice, the audience, a vague group concept in the traditional media period, has gradually been clearly divided. Different groups begin to gather together the works presented on different media platforms and communicate and interact with each other through this model. On the basis of their original psychological experience, audiences gain new understandings of stories presented and developed on other media platforms. In this way, the audience's psychological experience feeds into the development of the transmedia experience.

In the transmedia practice of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series, the aggregated audience group shows large-scale development. There are many means or channels through which the audience can receive the story content, which are beyond the limit of time and space. For instance, after reading the novel, they can listen to the audio version or watch the movie or television versions of the story to have an aural or visual experience. What's more, people can also interact with other fans on Weibo and Lofter¹² (see *Figure 1 and 2*). To this day, hundreds of thousands of people participate in the discussion. By exchanging ideas, they form a strong resonance, from which they can derive a feeling of satisfaction.

¹² Lofter is a popular platform in China, mainly for articles and pictures.



Figure 1. Hashtag on Weibo

The hashtag including 1.155 million followers, 7.34 billion reads and more than 333,000 posts. (translation of the text in the screenshot by J.Y.)

Screenshot from Weibo



Figure 2. Hashtag on Lofter

The hashtag including 89.228 million reads and 231,000 fans. (translation of the text in the screenshot by J.Y.)

Screenshot from Lofter

The transmedia practice of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series mainly relates to transmedia communication and transmedia reception, which together promote the dissemination and reception of the series across multiple media platforms. Transmedia communication uses a variety of media platforms to creatively present the series, attracting a myriad of recipients who adopt a unique interpretation of the story

according to their own preferences. Active participation and creation of this kind develop a solid audience base for transmedia narratives. This also makes the series' huge fan base extremely loyal. The transmedia dissemination and reception of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series also exhibit some typical features, most notably continuity and diversity.

CHAPTER 2 — THE TRANSMEDIA NARRATIVE FEATURES OF *THE GRAVE ROBBERS' CHRONICLES* SERIES

As an example of transmedia, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series started with online novels that were created and disseminated on an Internet platform, and subsequently developed into multi-media texts such as dramas, games, films, and TV series. Finally, the construction and presentation of the story world were completed through cooperation between multiple narrative texts across multiple forms of media.

Based on the network novel text, whilst still being distinct from network novel text narration, the series is spread across multiple media platforms. To maintain the integrity of the core content, the same story narrative principle is adopted and then tailored to the media in question according to its unique properties. Later, various media creators on each media platform began to create transmedia narratives to build a more comprehensive story. Compared with the traditional single media platform narratives that utilize a single narrative line, the series' multi-media platform narrative is an interactive and symbiotic interactive narrative between different media, featuring multiple collaborative narrative lines.

In this kind of collaborative narrative, the relationship between narrative texts of multiple media is not simply superimposed, but rather the narrative texts of multiple media platforms are independent but interconnected, to jointly construct a polyphonic and multidimensional story world. This chapter will analyze the continuity of narrative content and the diversity of narrative strategies in the series to clarify the central characteristics of transmedia narrative in relation to this series.

2.1. Continuity of Narrative Content

The main purpose of transmedia narrative creation is to construct a story world that stands apart from single, closed worlds.

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction (Jenkins, 2006)

Every form of media involved in the creation of a transmedia narrative is distinct; however, at the same time, there must be relationships between the different forms of media. This relationship limits the direction of various media and guides transmedia narrative works in their creation of multi-media narrative texts. Hence, it can be seen that transmedia narratives across different platforms are simultaneously independent yet interrelated. This relationship is called continuity.

Continuity in transmedia narratives is different from that in traditional narratives. Traditional media narration is a complete narration on a certain media platform. Continuity in traditional narrative manifests in the causal relationship between the coherence of narrative content and the narrative elements in the narrative text of the same media platform. However, the continuity of transmedia narratives refers to the continuity of narrative texts across multiple media platforms. The feature of continuity requires narrative texts to be both independent and interrelated. The narrative world is composed of interrelated texts with a certain synergistic relationship linking them together. In Jenkins' theory of transmedia narratives, one of the main feature of transmedia narratives is that an "intertextuality" model forms between narrative texts between different media forms (2006a: 203), so as to create the continuity of narrative texts across multiple media.

The continuity of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series is mainly reflected in the narrative content of the transmedia narrative works. Below, I will analyze the embodiment of continuity in the series from three aspects: continuity of theme, continuity of text, and continuity of characters.

2.1.1. Continuity of Theme

In “An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, Rolan Barthes writes:

...narrative is present in myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, pantomime, paintings, ..., stained-glass windows, movies, local news, conversation. moreover, in this infinite variety of forms, it is present at all times in all places, in all societies. (Barthes, 1975: 237)

A narrative is a narration of time and state, which may be true or imaginary. Yang Naiqiao defines ‘theme’ in his book:

A theme is a generalization and abstraction of events. In the process of civilization development, human beings will form some moral norms and measure of values based on survival needs. People create and view life events accordingly, and further shape these norms and values. In real life, these norms and values are difficult to carry out due to the existence of various obstacles. So they present themselves in literary fantasy, and they become what we call themes. (Yang, 2002: 215; my translation - J.Y.)¹³

In short, a narrative is a combination of story and theme. In storytelling, the story is premised on a central idea (*ibid.*). Although Yang’s theory mainly pertains to story and

¹³ 主题就是对事件的归纳、概括和抽象。人类在文明发展过程中，会形成某些基于生存需要的道德规范和价值尺度。人们据此来创造和看待生活事件，并进一步使这些规范和尺度得以定型。现实生活中，由于种种阻碍性原因的存在而使这些规范和尺度难以贯彻。因此它们就呈现于文学幻想之中，成为我们所说的主题。

theme in literary texts, it provides a reference that can help to understand transmedia stories and themes, and can also assist in establishing a whole transmedia story world.

The creators on the media platform take the story world of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series as the basement, interpreting it to create new stories across different media, and finally establish a whole transmedia story world. The transmedia narrative create a grand narrative world through multiple narrative texts across multiple media platforms, and also help to implement the core idea. Meanwhile, the theme can be said to be the center of the transmedia story world. It directly affects the expressive technique and artistic skill of works on different media platforms and relates to the construction of the world outlook of the whole narrative work.

Media creators working on expanding the series rely on multiple platforms such as film, television, games, animation, and peripheral product development to narrate the theme of this series through the lenses of different media types and at various levels.

There are obvious differences between traditional narrative and transmedia narration in terms of theme. The theme in traditional narration is characterized by centralization. (Yang, 2002: 216) Generally speaking, a work needs to highlight the theme by focusing on the theme of the literary narrative. For instance, *The Story of the Stone* reflects the decline of a dynasty with the rise and fall of several families. Here, lamenting the fall of the dynasty is the theme of the work. *Hamlet* takes revenge as the main plot to explore various contradictions of contemporary British society. It is readily apparent that the centralization of the theme directly impacts literary narration.

Narrative strategy, characters and plot setting all reinforce the theme. However, the theme in a transmedia narrative differs from the centralization of the traditional narrative theme as it has the characteristics of continuity. In terms of literary narration, the narration is not only centered on a single theme; instead, it aims to construct a transmedia narrative world, carrying out horizontal or vertical continuation of the theme. For instance, *The Matrix* series takes transmedia storytelling to a new level. The series consists of four movies, two games, and an animated series (which consists of nine stories). In addition, the audience creation influenced by *The Matrix* also spawned many media forms of expression. For example, the Japanese animation *The Wicked City* and the game named *Enter The Matrix* developed by Shiny Entertainment. Taking

The Matrix storyline as the main body, films, cartoons and games are narrated through transmedia storytelling, and narrative texts with different narrative themes are formed from different narrative directions. Therefore, the continuity of the theme of transmedia narrative works will directly affect the internal narrative content.

Transmedia storytelling is the product of the era of convergence media. In Jenkins' theory, his definition of transmedia narrative is stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products. (2006a: 293) Therefore, it can be seen that the difference between transmedia storytelling and traditional narrative lies in the diversity of narrative media. On this basis, each form of transmedia storytelling has a corresponding theme, which constitutes the basis of the theme of the entire series of works. Transmedia storytelling works are collaborative narratives between multiple forms of media. Each media form has a core theme in the story world, and these themes and the story world become part of the broader series of works.

The novel text of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* functions as the origin of the whole series. It charts the formation process of the robbers' team, the strange events they encounter, the struggle of three forces, and the pursuit of the truth. The theme of the novel text is the spirit of teamwork among the robbers and their loyalty to each other, as well as persevering, even in the face of difficulties. Team cooperation and the spirit of exploring are the thematic orientation of the novel's story world. Whether it is the triplets dominated by Wu Xie or the tomb raiding team dominated by San Shu, or the mysterious forces behind "It", all elements of the story conform to this theme.

2.1.2 Continuity of Text

“The concept of text is very broad, all objects that convey meaning can be called text, and even the real world is a big text composed of language.” (Hu , 2004: 191; my translation - J.Y.)¹⁴ A narrative text is a collection of narrative languages. Original texts and non-original texts can be found in transmedia storytelling works. The original text, which refers to the novel of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* here, is the source or core of the subsequent series.

The non-original text expands the narrative text by taking the original text as the main body, which achieves the aim of story world construction in transmedia storytelling. For example, *The Matrix* movie is the original text of the whole series, while the subsequent cartoons and games are non-original texts. Meanwhile, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* novel is the original text of the series, whilst the subsequent movies and games are non-original texts. The continuity between the original and non-original texts is mainly embodied in the innovation of the narrative text.

Firstly, the continuity of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series is reflected in the innovation of the stage play. In a traditional drama, the writer, the actors, and the audience resonate with the actors' interpretation, while the text of the play is revealed through the actors' interpretation. The biggest difference between *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* stage play and a traditional drama is that it deconstructs and reconstructs the text elements of the drama. (Chen, 2015: 69) The actors' choices for the stage play are based on the audience. Specifically, WeChat, Weibo, and other social media platforms were used to collect audience opinions on actor selection and performance choices to enhance the interaction between actors and the audience. Moreover, a stage is traditionally conceived of as a platform on which actors perform. However, in this play, the audience has a direct dialogue with the actors, which satisfies the audience's curiosity and desire for a sensory experience. The audience is the main focus of a play; as such, the play takes the audience as the starting point of all creative activities from

¹⁴ 文本的概念十分宽泛，一切传达意义的客体都可以称为文本，乃至现实世界就是语言构成的大文本。胡亚敏：《叙事学》上海：华中师范大学出版社，2004年12月第2版，191页。

casting to promotion and the ultimate performance. In order to better meet the audience's needs, the director incorporated many fashion elements, so *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* play has become a veritable fans' play. Although the play made too many choices that violate the traditional concept of drama to cater to its audience, it eliminated the subjectivity of actors in the drama text and increased audience interactivity, which is an innovation on the original text that constitutes a new text narrative.

Secondly, the novel is the original text of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series, and grave-robbing is the key word of the novel text. The plot and characters are all narrated around this key word. However, when multiple forms of media are employed to create the series, producers of different media exhibited different reactions and produced divergent creative ideas. TV series creators, for example, went their own way. The producers added a new key phrase to the story world of the original text, namely the protection of national cultural relics.¹⁵ Grave-robbing and the protection of historical relics are two seemingly conflicting propositions, however, they were properly integrated into the same narrative text. In this way, the original text and the TV drama text present two different values in the context of a single narrative. Many readers of the novel have taken issue with this, arguing that it undermines the worldview advanced in the novel. However, from the standpoint of transmedia storytelling, the TV drama narrative is a novel text interpretation and creation. The novel focuses on the battles between grave robbers. However, the TV series reflects the creator's alternative interpretation of the original text. In this version, the central ideal of grave-robbing is replaced with more mainstream notions. In addition, two new characters were added to the story, which simplified the complex and hidden character relationships of the novel. What's more, the director also added a pilot film, to flesh out the story that took place fifty years prior to the novel. This is different from a narration interspersed with flashbacks in novel. In the pilot film, Wu Xie's teamwork to protect a historical relic symbolizes a mainstream value. The narration of the TV series evolved from the grave-robbing action in the original text to the action of protecting relics. In the TV series, Wu Xie's team explores ancient tombs to find clues about the relics.

¹⁵ There are several versions of TV drama, here I choose the version released in 2015.

Historical relics became the key object that is protected and ultimate goal. Additionally, Wu Xie was an archaeologist rather than a grave robber. The theme and narrative of the original text were expanded into a new narrative text. At the same time, the dichotomy of "protection/destruction" was positioned at the intersection of the novel and TV narratives. Doing so made new connections between two narrative worlds with different themes. The continuity of the TV series text creates a narrative possibility within a transmedia context. For example, injecting a whole new core of the story into the narrative text. The text of the TV series presents the perplexing grave-robbing world and combines it with the protection of relics which is part of the mainstream value consciousness, thus creating a brand-new narrative text. In this way, it can be seen that the producers created another story world. Moreover, it changed the previous creation model of film and TV retellings, which only add content without changing the core idea. In this instance, the creator has expanded the broader understanding and interpretation of the original text.

In addition, as explained by Li (2019), the innovative aspect of the web game is reflected in the reconstruction of classical novel plots and the expansion of the story, which aims to link the exclusive revelation of San Shu with player interactivity. In the novel, San Shu is the key figure. His task is to guide the main characters in solving the mystery of the chronicle. In the game *Tomb Raider*, by talking to him, players are able to become more deeply involved with the story on an emotional level, such as through the "like" and "red envelope" functions. The environment design of web games contains magical elements from both East and West, whilst also incorporating modern elements. For example, motorcycles are an alternative mode of transportation. The narrative style of the original text is also presented through the game platform. The game's overall design style incorporates the "tomb robbing" features that characterize the novel's narrative world, allowing gamers to complete the corresponding levels while satisfying their curiosity. In 2015, the mobile game *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles S* was launched. This was the first Chinese handheld game to incorporate 3D action and pioneered the Super Shoot gameplay. In this game, players cannot only experience the feeling of realistic marching in the game, but also operate their weapons

specifically to kill or dodge zombies. Specifically, the game is designed to place the player in the position of the main character in the story (Li 2019: 46-51).

Finally, the narrative text features more interesting characters and plots through the use of multiple forms of media. For example, *The Xinyue Hotel*, which was briefly described in the TV show, aroused the curiosity of the audience and attracted the interest of other media producers after its creation by TV producers. The location of the Xinyue Hotel has attracted the attention of some fans, as there are passages in the novel referencing the Xinyue Hotel. In volume 7 of the novel (Xu, 2010b), Xinyue Hotel is described as the most mysterious auction house in all of China. There is a rule called *Dian Tian Deng* (literal meaning is lighting a lantern), under which the person who lights a lantern has to buy the lot in the auction, no matter the final price. In the novel, Wu Xie mentioned that he had heard his grandfather talk about the last time someone engaged in *Dian Tian Deng* at the Xinyue Hotel. Through Wu Xie's memory and other details of the novel, fans began to create fanfiction and paintings about the story of the last time someone engaged in *Dian Tian Deng* (Liu X. Y., 2016: 28-38). Due to the growing fan community, the author and film and television production company saw a huge demand from fans and created the novel *Lao Jiu Men* (2012) and the TV series (Liang S. Q., 2016) of the same name. The contribution of fans to the continuity of the text cannot be ignored.

2.1.3 Continuity of Characters

Narratives can be expressed in a variety of ways, including through language, film, dance and many other forms. Narrative pertains to telling a story; in such a story, characters and plot are the two major components. In *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series, the characters were first presented in the novels. After the creation of multiple media narratives, such as drama, film and game, the characters are now more fully realised.

For example, Yin Xinyue, is the boss of the Xinyue Hotel. She has a limited presence in the novel, but she is a famous representative in the auction and trading industry in the TV and game. Due to the unique creative choices of the scriptwriter and the interpretations of the actors, this character is elevated to one of the key roles.

The main characters in the series are two teams and three forces, namely the grave robbers team and the “It” team; the forces of team grave-robbing, team “It” and team Jude Kao. From the first time the teams and the three forces meet to the end of the story, the team members are constantly changing. Moreover, it is not known who is a friend and who is an enemy, which foreshadows the character arrangement, personnel changes, and plot twists from the outset. The attributes of characters and the friction between them provide the characters with a certain degree of continuity in the series. The creators of different media platforms further shape characters and improve their connotations through their understanding of the characters in the broader context of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* world.

The author of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* novel series, Xu Lei, often communicates with his fans on his Weibo page and his blog, asking them what they think about the characters and the plot. In the novels, there is a character called Hei Yan Jing (Black Glasses; he always wears sunglasses and nobody knows his name), who appears infrequently, but is very attractive and has won the praise of fans. Therefore, when writing Shahai (2013), Xu Lei used Hei Yan Jing as one of the main characters. (*see Figure 3*)

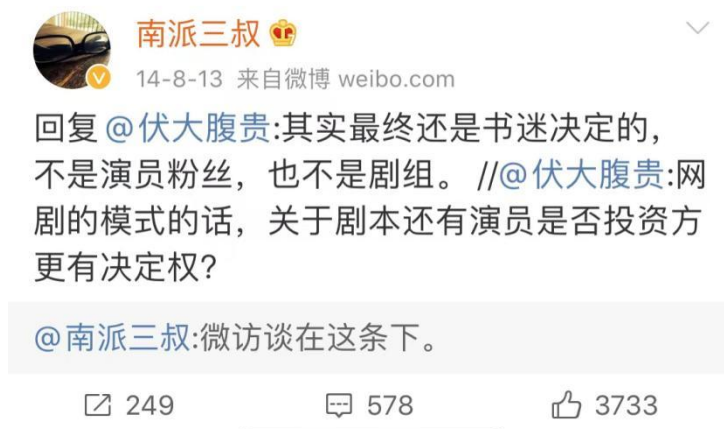


Figure 3. Xu Lei talking to fans on his Weibo.

Fan asks if he can choose the main actor of the series, and Xu says it's actually the fans of novel who have the right to decide.

2.2. Diversity of Narrative Strategies

A narrative strategy is the relevant arrangement and setting of narrative time, space, skills, and perspective. As mentioned above, the transmedia narrative world is a huge one spread across different platforms that encourage fan participation. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series can be seen to have excellent transmedia features. In this part, I will analyze the diverse narrative strategies of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series from three aspects: narrative time and space, narrative skills, and narrative perspective, and I will do this relying on Liu Xin Yi (2016) and Liang Yuan Yuan (2017).

2.2.1 Narrative Time and Space

“Time and space are the existence form and basic attribute of the material of the athlete. One reflects the sequence and continuity of the material movement, and the other reflects the extensibility of the material existence.” (Yang, 1997: 120; my translation - J.Y.)¹⁶ Time and space are important parts of the narrative text. The setting of time and space will affect the overall presentation of the narrative text, and even promote the expansion of the narrative text.

First of all, there are three main dates in *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series: 1974, 1992 and 2003. Narrative time is divided into text time and story time. The text of the novel mainly uses flashbacks to create a staggered narrative. A flashback refers to going back and recounting what happened previously (Hu Yamin 2004: 65). The story includes all sorts of flashbacks and reminiscences. In the novel, the author uses the term "coma" to begin or end a story; to close the narrative of the current story and move on to the beginning of another.

My ears were screaming, and before I could see again, I was head first in the water. At the moment I reached down and immediately felt a rock. Too shallow! No sooner had I realized this than I had hit my head on something, and then my eyes went black and I knew nothing. I was in a coma for three days. When I woke up, I had been sent to the hospital. At the moment I opened my eyes, I couldn't remember anything but nausea and dizziness. (Xu, 2007b: 196-198; my translation - J.Y.)¹⁷

The author also uses dreams to create an atmosphere of suspense:

¹⁶ 时间和空间是运动者的物质的存在形式和基本属性，一者体现物质运动的顺序性、持续性，一者体现物质存在的伸展性、广延性。

¹⁷ “我的耳边一片呼啸，电光火石之间，没等我的视力恢复，我已经一头栽进水里。那一刹那我手往下一伸，马上摸到了一块石头，糟糕，太浅了！我刚意识到这一点，脑袋已经磕到了什么上面，眼前一黑，就什么都不知道了。我昏迷了三天时间，醒过来的时候已经给人送到了医院里面，刚睁开眼睛的一刹那，我什么都记不起来，只觉得天旋地转，止不住地恶心和头晕”

When I heard him say this, I couldn't help but be stunned. It seemed that Qi Yu was also one of the people on the list in the notes. No wonder I feel a little familiar. I suddenly felt very uncomfortable. The name Qi Yu is not that simple, as if often heard, My heart has a very special feeling... Suddenly I heard someone saying: Wu, wake up. Did you had a nightmare? (Xu, 2007b: 67-68; my translation - J.Y.)¹⁸

Qi Yu's first appearance in the novel is not accidental; as the story progresses, his complex relationship with Wu Xie is gradually revealed. Qi Yu also foreshadows the existence of Wu Xie and makes Wu Xie the focus of the book. Flashbacks strengthen the relationships between the characters.

Secondly, narrative time and space are also reflected in the production of web games. Games are a typical nonlinear narrative texts, which differ from novels, films and other media's forms of narrative texts. The end goal of a game is far more important than the story. The web game *Tomb Raider* is a new form of media. The exquisite graphics and challenging levels attract a large number of players. First, web games create a non-linear narrative space for gamers. The player has a high degree of freedom in choosing the starting point of the game and forging their own path as the game progresses. In addition, the game offers a variety of modes through which the players can experience different story content. The game interface is generally represented by multiple windows, and the narrative of the game also unfolds in the non-linear space established through the windows. The game often uses several programs at the same time to play out multiple episodes in parallel through multiple windows. These windows reflect the state of the character, the state of the enemy, and any changes that take place in the environment. In the web game *Tomb Raider*, Wu Xie's apprentices (i.e., the player) do not exist singularly when upgrading, but move on to the next stage of the game by teaming up to fight monsters. For the player,

¹⁸ “我听他这样说，不禁陡地一呆，齐羽，好像也是三叔的笔记里面，写在前面的名单里的人之一，难怪有点熟悉，等等，不对。我忽然感到非常不自在。齐羽这个名字不是熟悉这么简单，好像经常听到，我心里有一种很特别的感觉...我忽然听到一个声音说：老吴，醒醒。你是不是做噩梦了？”

when he enters a point, whether it is a word in the hypertext or a node in the net, he immediately finds himself actually entering a vast cosmic space. He can choose to activate the derivative part of a certain conception, or he can ignore it altogether. The whole structure of the words that unfolded before him seemed like a complex molecular model. Large chunks of information can be reassembled into sentences that can be expanded. Words can be defined on the spot. (Ma, Wu, 2002: 131; my translation - J.Y.)¹⁹

According to the opinions of fans, in the process of writing the novel, Xu Lei, created the side stories on his Weibo as a supplement to the main text (see Xu. 2022). The timelines of these side stories are not fixed or synchronized with the text, meaning that they can take place at any time, anywhere, and with any person. With the urging and encouragement of fans, the time and space of tomb robbing series are becoming increasingly complex and sprawling.

2.2.2 Narrative Skills

Xu Lei, the author, is adept at using thrill to create an atmosphere full of unknown crises. This atmosphere affects the arrangement of characters and the setting of environments. The Tomb is a unique symbol of the series. Accordingly, it becomes the key to the difficulty the characters must go through and drives the reader's curiosity to follow. Therefore, the author often describes the tomb, its external environment, and its internal composition in great detail. For example, the description of the tomb named Yunding Tiangong:

¹⁹ 当他进入一个点无论这个点是超文本的一个词，还是网中的一个节点的时候，立即发现实际上自己进入到了一个巨大的宇宙空间。他们可以选择激活某一构想的引申部分，也可以完全不予理睬。展现在他们面前的整个文字结构仿佛一个复杂的分子模型，大块信息可以背重新组合成句子，可以扩张，字词则可以当场给出定义。

Inside the ice well, there was a huge grey space. The ice dome was like a transparent bowl fastened to a cliff, and countless wooden beams hung with ice rose up from the cliff rocks ... These are the spines of the fetal shadow, and beneath the cliff there is a bottomless, black abyss. (Xu, 2007c: 30; my translation - J.Y.)²⁰

Huge black lamps could be seen in the darkness between the pillars, and darkness beyond. I don't know why the flashlight shines on the past, but there is no reflection of any light. It seems that there is a void, and there is no burial goods. (Xu, 2007c: 37; my translation - J.Y.)²¹

The wooden beams hung with ice, the dark depths beneath the cliffs, and the endless hall; these cold objects and endless darkness seemed to exacerbate Wu Xie and his friends' sense of unease, further drawing the reader into the horrible scene.

The TV series visualizes the thrilling atmosphere of the source material through the fusion of sound and image. It hits the audience's sensitive nerves visually and aurally, providing them with an intuitive sensory experience by making their imagination tangible. The black hair and skeleton-like body of the Jin Po, as well as the Shi Bie with its separated flesh, are depicted in the novels, film, and television series, triggering chills in the audience. In the novel, the Shi Bie is a scavenging herd animal, small in size, which generally feeds on corpses. When a large number of them are present onscreen, their overwhelming presence mobilizes the viewer's psychological association mechanism and creates an atmosphere of terror.²²

What's more, the narrative text of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series effectively uses suspense. The biggest suspense in the story world of the novel is the question of who is Qi Yu and why he is so frequently mentioned in the story. Moreover, the question of how he is related to the protagonist, Wu Xie, lingers over the story. The mystery surrounding this character also enhances the suspicion of Wu Xie's identity. In

²⁰ 冰井之内，是一个灰蒙蒙的巨大空间，整个冰穹如同一个透明的碗扣在一道峭壁上，无数挂满冰凌的木梁从峭壁的山岩上竖起来……这些就是胎影身上的刺，峭壁之下是看不到底、漆黑一片的深渊。

²¹ 石柱中间的黑暗里，可以隐约看到黑色的大型灯奴，在后面就是漆黑一片。不知道为什么手电照过去，竟然没有任何光线的反射，似乎那里是一片虚空一样，也没有看到任何的陪葬品。

²² Jin Po, Xue Shi and Shi Bie are three kinds of zombie/animal in the novel.

order to create a more coherent and plausible film text, the main narrative line of the film focuses on the story that takes place in the kingdom of the Xi Wang Mu²³.

The film *Time Raiders* (2021) presents 24 pieces of copper as a clue, and as they appear, disappear, and reappear, the main narrative structure is established. Readers of the novel will notice that the 24 copper pieces are not taken from the source text. However, their function is similar to the Chu Silk Manuscript in the novel. Therefore, it can be inferred that the role of 24 copper pieces in the film is equivalent to the Chu Silk Manuscript in the novel, thus connecting the narrative text of the film and the narrative text of the novel. Meanwhile, the film introduces information on the background of the tomb robbers presented in the novel. The tomb robber team belongs to Lao Jiu Men, which is the large-scale tomb robbing organization of Wu Xie's grandfather's generation. The film completes the background of Zhang Qiling by narrating the relationship between him and Lao Jiu Men. In addition, in the web game, players can access information that is completely different from that presented in the novels and movies by looking for Chen Wenjin, who is an important figure. This helps the player to obtain new content to better break through the level.

After the film was released, it received bad reviews from the fan base. The film scriptwriter tried to create a new story based on the novel's world, but he did not have a sufficiently strong grasp of the characters and their backgrounds, resulting in a movie with confused logic and characterizations that are OOC (Out of Character).²⁴ In 2020, the production company tried again to make a grave-robbing story. After listening to fans and learning from their previous failure, *Ultimate Note* (2020) was released online, which was widely praised.

²³ Xi Wang Mu is a queen in the Chinese mythology. In the novel, Wu Xie found her tomb.

²⁴ All comments for *Time Raiders* and *Ultimate Note* come from Dou Ban, the biggest rating website in China. <https://movie.douban.com/subject/24827387/>

2.2.3 Narrative Perspective

“Point of view refers to the position or state of the narrator or character in relation to the time in the narrative, or the Angle from which the narrator or character is telling the story” (Hu, 2004: 19; my translation -- J.Y.)²⁵. In transmedia storytelling works, narrative perspectives are characterized by diversity; not only in terms of the narrative perspective of creators on the media platform, but also the audience's narrative perspective. In transmedia storytelling works, the works created from the perspective of audience narrative gradually become a new interactive product. This product constructs the story world in conjunction with the narrative text of multiple media platforms.

As media influences continue to penetrate daily life, everyone is part of an audience that is immersed in media products. Instead of passively consuming the cultural products provided by the media, the audience takes the initiative to search for texts that are aligned with their tastes and preferences through the consumption of their own choice of media text, to reveal their style interest. “Films and television probably have the most diverse audiences; comics and games the narrowest. A good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media.” (Jenkins, 2006a: 96)

Transmedia narratives require not only the creator to produce a grand and complete narrative text for the public, but also to summon the public to participate in it through the media platform to complete the construction of the story world. In transmedia narratives, it is important to distinguish between the concepts of interactivity and participation.

Interactivity refers to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback. ... Participation, on the other hand, is shaped by the cultural and social protocols. ... Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers. (Jenkins, 2006a: 133)

²⁵ 视角是指叙述者或人物与叙事文中的时间相对应的位置或者状态，或者说，叙述者或人物从什么角度来叙述故事。

Participants tend to arise from the audiences' initiative. Based on participation-based transmedia narratives, audiences can also transform into a new platform to participate in the creation of works. This section mainly analyzes the diversity of narrative perspectives in *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series based on the audience who actively participate in the narrative creation process.

2.2.3.1 Types of Audience Participation

The Grave Robbers' Chronicles series is a highly popular series that has received much attention. The large readership of the novel engages with the core material across multiple forms of media: from novel readers to stage audiences, from audience members to film viewers, and then from film viewers to participants in the creation of the story. As can be seen, the audience for the series is not set in stone; the novel's readers will not always be novel readers, nor will the stage audience always be a stage audience. The transmedia nature of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* from the series has long since transcended the limitations of communication between media. Audiences are fluid, forming unique emotional experiences and sources of inspiration by interacting with each other.

Audiences can be divided into three categories based on their investment in works and their creation ability: The first category is **primary audiences** (or real-time audiences). Primary audiences focus on a character or episode in one of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series. For example, in the case of the actors in the TV series, the audience is attracted to the actors' appearance or acting skills. At this stage, the audience's engagement is low and manifests itself as a short-lived fascination. As the work comes to an end, the audience's accumulated enthusiasm diminishes and there is no extended creative capacity. The second category is **intermediate audiences**, who are fascinated by *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series and try to connect the audience to the work through their own actions, exhibiting a high degree of engagement and

creativity. For example, they are the ones who have been influenced by the series and who continue to write or rewrite the ending of the story and post it on common platforms for others to read. Additionally, this group is typically the one that cosplays the series by expressing their personal understanding and interpretation of the characters through their hairstyles, costumes, etc. The third category is the **premium audiences**. Pierre Levy argued that people harness their individual expertise to work towards shared goals and objectives: “No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity.” (Jenkins, 2006a: 26-27) The Internet has brought audiences closer together, with advanced audiences peaking in engagement and consciously developing new platforms for communication and creativity. The resulting knowledge is shared and exchanged through the platforms. An example of this is the Baidu Tieba of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series.²⁶ In addition to their interaction with and creation of the series, audience members that have been deeply influenced by the Internet and transmedia narratives provide the basis for the creation of transmedia narratives.

2.2.3.2 Mode of Audience Participation

a. Baidu Tieba

A large number of readers consciously established communication platforms harvested during the serialization phase of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series. These platforms were later flooded with audiences from different media platforms such as games, film, and television. Through media platforms with interactive features, different types of audience groups express their views and create based on their

²⁶Tieba is similar to a forum where users can set up or join a variety of themed Tieba. Retrieved from: <https://tieba.baidu.com/f?dyTabStr=MCw2LDMSMiw0LDUsMSw4LDcsOQ%3D%3D&fr=ala0&kw=%B5%C1%C4%B9%B1%CA%BC%C7&loc=rec>. 20.05.2022

interactions with each other. As of 20 May 2022, the series had reached 4,030,611 fans and 101,832,639 posts.

b. Weibo and WeChat

Today's society is one characterized by media convergence. Not only do media platforms function as forums for communication and interaction, but they have also developed more functional features, such as facilitating payments. Take Sina Weibo as an example: Weibo is another interactive media platform much like Baidu Tieba. When Xu Lei posted the finale of the novel on his Weibo account, it instantly generated a large number of comments and retweets from fans. Weibo has turned into the main communication platform for the fan community (it should be noted that even Tieba has an account on Weibo (see Figure 3). The features of Weibo itself attract audiences to comment, retweet and interact quickly; however, this has led to a fragmentation of the Weibo audience's creativity and the timely updates on Weibo satisfy the need for fast food reading. The time-consuming presentation of original images, articles, videos and other content has accelerated the proliferation of content information on Weibo.



Figure 3. Tieba's account on Weibo.

Screenshot from Weibo.

The most famous fan activity is Daomi Festival. Daomi is the name of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles'* fan group. At the end of the novel, Zhang Qiling enters the Gate

alone and reunites with Wu Xie ten years later. According to the novel’s timeline, ten years later is 2015. On August 17, 2015, thousands of fans spontaneously came to Changbai Mountain²⁷, where the Gate is located in the novel, to greet Zhang. At 1 a.m. on that day, some people posted photos of Changbai Mountain on Tieba. Since 2015, the Daomi Festival has become one of the most famous, well-attended fan events in China, with fans organizing events on August 17 each year. At present, most of the fans have moved from Tieba to Weibo, with the Daomi Festival’s hashtag now being read by 670,000 people each day (*see Figure 4.1*). A few days ago (August 11, 2022), the associated accounts changed their profile pictures to the same ones (*see Figure 4.2*) to celebrate the 16th anniversary of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* novel.



Figure 4.1. Hashtag of Daomi Festival
Screenshot from Weibo

²⁷ Changbai Mountain is a famous snow-capped mountain in northeast China.

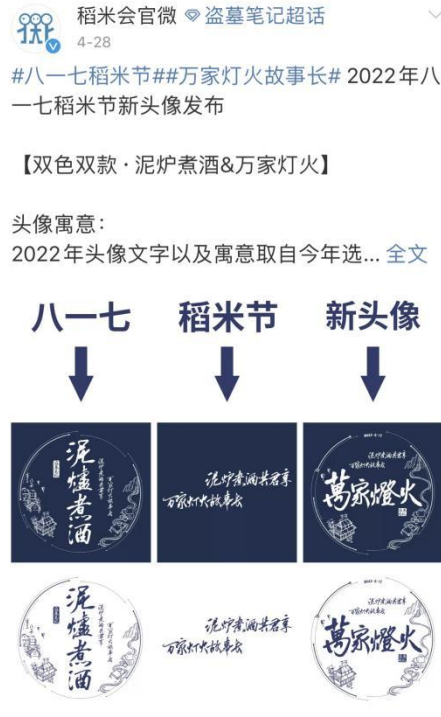


Figure 4.2. Maomi Festival theme image
Screenshot from weibo.

WeChat is another media platform on which audience groups communicate and interact with each other. Xu Lei's WeChat official account has become another way for the author to directly interact with the author and participate in the creative process. From time to time, Xu Lei published additional short stories on his account to supplement the series, thus enriching the characters and their backstories.

c. Bullet chatting website

“Bullet screen”, or “Dan Mu” in Chinese, is an emerging new feature on online video sites in China and Japan, which presents comments from viewers onscreen in real time, like bullets shot from a gun.²⁸ The format originated in Japan. When it took root in China, it changed the way fan groups watched movies and set off a wave of

²⁸ The English concept of Dan Mu comes from <https://medium.com/ipg-media-lab/what-is-bullet-screen-and-why-is-it-so-popular-in-china-be71ee774453>

commercial influence on the part of media creators. The main participants on the site are divided into viewers, commenters, and contributors. The site encourages the fan community to upload original video content, which then further attracts other fans to watch and comment on them. Certain phrases on bullet screens have become common code words among fans. For example, 小花 (Xiao Hua, meaning small flower, to describe someone as being as beautiful as a flower) refers to Xie Yuchen, a character in the novel; 天真 (Tian Zhen, meaning someone is innocent) is the nickname of Wu Xie; 小哥 (Xiao Ge) is Zhang Qiling's nickname in the novel, which fans particularly enjoy using.

d. Peripheral products

The peripheral products of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series are associated with the novels' characters, storyline and game scenes. The development of peripheral products for the series focuses on two main areas: first, the selection of character roles, which are chosen on the basis of their popularity, such as Wu Xie, Zhang Qiling, etc. Second is the issue of distance from the story world. As part of the story world composition of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* transmedia narrative, the development of peripheral products needs to closely adhere to the development of the plot.

CHAPTER 3 — THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STORY WORLD AND FAN CULTURE

Transmedia storytelling consists of separate stories or episodes that include various texts that exist within the same story world. Different forms of media play their roles in building a collective story world together. The aim of a transmedia storyteller is to create a fictional world from which a nonlimited number of stories might potentially occur. (Ryan, 2015; Jenkins, 2006a; Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 17)

According to Henry Jenkins, “this circulation of media content - across different media systems, competing media economies, and national borders - depends heavily on the active participation of the consumer.” (Jenkins, 2006b) He also mentioned that fan culture is a culture that is produced by fans and other amateurs that draws much of its content from the commercial culture, which is then circulated through an underground economy. (Jenkins, 2006a: 285) In today's media landscape, in which there are many forms of expression and operation, transmedia works and the fan economy are new forces driving change. From network novels to TV dramas and movies, such transmedia business operations extend the fan economy into all manner of media fields and consumer markets due to their many advantages. At the same time, fan groups are also gradually growing. Jenkins refers to fan culture as a participatory form of culture (Jenkins, 1992; 2003a); to be precise, some fans take responsibility for dissemination and help others to become deeply involved in the creation and improvement of the text. As a result, fans play an important role in shaping the story world of transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia works heavily rely on collaboration and social interaction with the recipient (for present purposes, the fans) (Ojamaa, Torop 2015: 20). The participatory behavior of fan groups has changed greatly due to the transition from the previous age of mass communication to the age of social media. In the past, participatory behaviors included product consumption, collection, offline participation organization and content creation, while the participatory behaviors of online fans are closely related to the media use behaviors of social media.

In popular culture, being a fan has developed along a fixed course in most countries. In Japanese, for example, “おたく” (Otaku) has become a cultural representation, whilst in China, the word “粉丝” (fen si) is directly transliterated from the English word “fans”. Nowadays, this significant group in China is becoming increasingly involved in the story; as Jenkins puts it, they are the “poachers” of the Internet age. (Jenkins, 1992)

3.1. The Internal Formation Mechanism of Transmedia Fan Economy

For a very long time, China’s cultural consumption market has known the phenomenon of “the castle in the air”, which means that many works have good word of mouth among readers, but no loyal fan base to keep buying. (Li, 2019: 46-51) As a result, many works have positive reputations, but for investors, they can not get good economic returns. It is worth noting that the reputation of *The Grave Robbers’ Chronicles* series was successfully used to generate economic benefits. This is of course not just because of the brilliance of the text. The success of the series in various media fields is inseparable from the market leader behind it. Notably, capital is effectively invested to fully mobilize various resources. The capital side sets up a special team to interact with individual fans, act as a fan organization, integrate celebrity information, and make full use of the interactivity of new media. A

combination of factors contributes to the success of the transmedia fan economy. (Su, 2017: 101-103; Zhu, 2015:51-54)

3.1.1. Individual Fans

Any level of consumption in the fan economy, whether economic or symbolic, is premised on trust. Trust is not only a psychological phenomenon worthy of further study, but also an important economic, ethical, and social phenomenon. (Zhu, 2015:51-54) The forms and characteristics of trust in the fan economy indicate that the trust relationship between fans and their “idols” is very special. This kind of relationship is not constrained by rules or systems; it is generated spontaneously by fans and forms an unconditional, long-term trusting relationship.

Generally speaking, trust in daily life is mixed with rationality and sensibility, albeit to varying degrees. Contrastingly, the fans' trust in their icon is abnormal and irrational. (Zhou, 2017: 18) The fans naturally become the consumers of the fan economy, carrying out various irrational consumption behaviors in the cultural and economic markets. Leveraging this irrational trust, capital can be used to secure markets for transmedia fan consumption. Guiding the movement of fans across media is a prerequisite for the success of the transmedia fan economy.

3.1.2. Building an Identity

In contemporary fan culture, fan groups are a crucial concept. It is a field for individual fans to communicate emotionally, share resources, and mutually construct identity. In this way, it is a community. (Zhou, 2017: 35-37) I would rather use the term ‘fan organization’ instead of ‘fan group’ here in order to highlight the initiative and goal of

its planning and organization. The Weibo hashtag of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* novel was created by fans. However, both the TV series and the movie are labeled "only official" in the Weibo fan community. This shows that these so-called fan organizations are planned and built by those parties that control the capital. What appears as fans' spontaneous identity construction is often in fact coordinated by franchise owners.

A notable example is the 2016 Tieba popularity poll. The list is based on the Tieba of all works of fiction contained in the literature catalog, with the final winner receiving an official award from Tieba. (Zhou, 2017: 41-43) In order to win the vote, Tieba fans called for active participation on Weibo and elsewhere. This behavior encouraged fans to connect more closely and bolstered their sense of collective identity.

3.1.3. Integrated Marketing

The rise of the fan economy is due to the proliferation of new media, which opened up new circulation and operation channels. (Zhao, 2012: 9) The Internet and endless new technologies have created the possibility of realizing the integrated marketing of various communication modes.

Initially, the fan base was dominated by offline activities. Physical fan organizations are limited by space, distance, and cost constraints when planning activities. This also greatly limits the fan economy's field and scope of operation. The advent of the Internet has allowed for the creation of virtual communities for fans with low entry barriers and easy participation, thus rendering such communities more cohesive. Meanwhile, an abundance of online and offline activities blur or even erode the boundary between the online world and real-world society, transporting the transmedia fan economy from virtual to reality. (Zhao, 2012: 18; Zhou, 2017: 18-24)

As a kind of special audience, fans have a strong desire to participate and interact. They need to comment on the things they love, and, more importantly, share them with

like-minded peers. The increasing progress of new media technology has allowed for interactive communication between fans and the public at the same time and in the same space, thus providing an interactive platform for transmedia fan economic mass communication and marketing.

3.2. The Story World of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* Series in Transmedia

Storytelling

This series starts from novels and expands into narrative texts across multiple media platforms, such as drama, game, film, and television, to form a diversified, complete, and unique story world. The story world in the novel text is the starting point for transmedia narrative creation. Against this backdrop, the characters, plots and themes in the novel text are the inspiration for transmedia storytelling. Various forms of media have their own judgments and creative ideas for the characters and plots in the original text of the novel. At the same time, the narrative texts of multiple media forms make unique contributions to the transmedia story world of this series through collaborative narration.

3.2.1 Stage Play and Game

In 2013, the first play based on the series was presented, lasting 77 performances and generating a total box office revenue of 35 million yuan (about 4,851,000 Euros). Since then, six other plays have been staged. (Li, 2019) Regarding the first play, it used glasses-free 3D technology to create the stage setting, incorporating many popular elements not typically found in traditional plays. Prior to the tour, an official vote was launched, allowing the audience to decide which cities would be visited. This poll

attempted to shorten the psychological distance between the play and its fans, providing a new sensory experience for the audience.

The storyline of the novel is full of metaphysical and thrilling features, which the game leans into. Firstly, the designers transformed the adventure in the novel text into the game's levels and selected the novel's storyline as the basis for developing the replicas. Secondly, the team model in the novel's text closely aligns with the game. In contrast to the novel, the game diminishes the story and focuses on the player's adventure experience. By completing quests, players can uncover the mysteries of the story world, filling in the gaps in the uncharted territory of the novel's text and further helping players understand the production and development of the grave robbers' world.²⁹

3.2.2 TV and Movies

The media of transmedia storytelling are not limited, nor specified, but television, videogames, comics and online social media platforms are perhaps the ones most often employed. (Ojamaa; Torop, 2015: 16)

In recent years, film and television drama retellings of online literature have become commonplace in China. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles*, as one of the most successful IP works in China, has attracted the attention of film and TV drama production companies due to its popularity. The project received widespread attention from the start of casting, and in 2015, the series was launched on Aiqiyi³⁰. Due to governmental policy requirements, the story world in the drama had to depart from the source material, changing the core of the story from grave robbing to the preservation of cultural relics. In an innovational sense, this was an interesting experiment.

²⁹ This is the same version of the game as above.

³⁰ Aiqiyi is one of the biggest video websites in China.

The film *Time Raiders* (2016) adopts the worldview of the entire series whilst constructing a whole new world of storytelling. Firstly, the restoration of the novel's mechanism design is one of the highlights of the film. For instance, typical Chinese tomb features, such as crossbow machines and terracotta puppet plays, are shown. Much like the Indiana Jones series, *Time Raiders* also uses layers of machines to create a tense and exciting atmosphere that engages the audience's emotions. For example, in the welcoming hall, Wu Xie accidentally triggers a machine. Subsequently, the strange sound that rings out when the terracotta figurines slowly turn is accompanied by background music that gives the audience goosebumps, in much the same way that the protagonist also feels tense. However, unlike Indiana Jones, *Time Raiders* makes greater use of Chinese elements. For example, the terracotta figurine play originates from the Western Zhou (1045 BC – 771 BC) period and serves as a guardian for tombs, creating a strong oriental atmosphere.

Secondly, the inclusion of hidden characters from the text of the novel and the articulation of character relationships are also a highlight of the film. A prime example of this is how, at the end of the film, Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling look at each other as a wizard and the iron-faced man. The deeper the audience digs into the story content of the film or other forms of media such as the novels, the more hidden clues they unearth. For example, the iron-faced man, who never directly appears in the novel, has some connection to the history of the Zhang family.

In addition to the above versions, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series also covers various fields such as comics and music. From the perspective of the story world construction of a transmedia narrative, the series has been used in a variety of media forms such as stage plays, film, and television. In addition, the fans of the transmedia narrative works not only assume the role of participant, but also of creator. Fans work together to interpret known texts, create new ones, and build their own story worlds. With regard to the characters or plots hidden in the text of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* novels, fans connect themselves with the works through participation and creation, making valuable contributions to the construction of the story world of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series in the process. For example, the relationship between Wu Xie and Zhang Qiling in the source material attracted the attention of fans. They

named the couple "Pingxie" and a lot of fan fiction was generated in relation to the couple. In addition, where any doubt is left in the novels, some thoughtful fans analyze the hidden clues and relationships between characters and plots, adding to the integrity of the story.

By shaping the characters and plots, the novel establishes a story world with distinct characteristics. The story world in the novel text creates characters who grow up gradually from nothing: the novel opens with a prelude to the tomb-robbing world with the Confucius Temple and ends the journey with a ten-year engagement. The transmedia narration of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series enriches the plot lines and characters in the novel text to shape a more complex story world.

CONCLUSION

The continued development of digital technology has blurred the clear boundaries between different forms of media. As a result, diversified development directions have emerged among various media. The essence of transmedia is not simply to use several media forms, but to give play to the unique properties of each form of media to alter the previously closed communication between different media, which can then be presented through optimized resource reorganization. Based on the mutual acceptance of authors, publishers, marketers and fans, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* give full play to their own media characteristics and jointly create the story world of the series. First of all, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* is different from the previous model, in which there is a separation of text creation and consumption. In the contemporary context, texts on various media platforms drive, inspire, and create each other. Due to transmedia practices, *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles'* story world is able to break through the separate and closed situation. Secondly, while fully recognizing the importance of the audience, transmedia practitioners actively mobilize various means to engage with the audience, particularly in terms of the active participation and creation of fans. The various *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* series have distinct yet intersecting fan bases, which are significant in size. Their participation, especially their active participation, gives rise to unique and diverse experiences and suggestions. The participation of fans enriches the story world of the series on different levels.

In transmedia practice, the text of *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* is not just a form of novel reading; it has been carefully curated on different media and become an increasingly perfect text. The presentation of stage plays, movies, games, etc., has led *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles* to become an open text of transmedia practice. As a transmedia narrative text, the story world constructed by *The Grave Robbers'*

Chronicles series has steadily diversified, such that it is now different from the single story world constructed by the traditional narrative text. Through the mining and creation of novel texts, transmedia texts form narrative texts with different characters as protagonists, different scenes as backgrounds, and different time nodes. Moreover, through the inclusion of multiple interwoven clues, a variety of characters are introduced using different media to show the audience a comprehensive, polyphonic transmedia narrative pattern and story world. This series provides an effective model reference for the future development of transmedia narratives for other Chinese works.

With the development of fan culture, fans are a force that cannot be ignored in modern society. Fans are no longer passive consumers of culture, and instead have assumed the role of active, creative participants. As the audience, fans not only occupy the main consumption position, but also exhibit an independent innovation ability. With the rapid development of communication technology today, media integration is accelerating and fans' participation is deepening accordingly. Fans build communities, use collective wisdom to work together, expand their own experience, and extend the core of fan culture to reach new realms. The introduction of transmedia narration has greatly enriched the content of fan culture practice. As a result, fans have been required to improve their media literacy to better face the Internet and the information age.

KOKKUVÕTE

Transmeedialine narratiiv ja fännikultuur „Huaröövlite kroonika“ näitel

Transmeedialises jutustamises (*transmedia storytelling*) on hõlmatud mitu meediumit ning nende koostoimelises jutustamispraktikas sünnib terviklik ja koordineeritud loomaailm. Seda laadi jutustamispraktikas kasvab ja laieneb lugu eri meediaplatformidel, pannes sellega aluse nii tekstiloome kui ka vastuvõtu rikkalikkusele ja mitmekülgsusele.

Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärk on selgitada, kuidas on fännikultuur aidanud kaasa „Huaröövlite kroonika“ (ing. k *The Grave Robbers' Chronicle*) transmeedialise narratiivi kujunemisele Hiinas. Selleks analüüsitakse „Huaröövlite kroonika“ levikut ja kujunemisprotsessi eri meediumides ja tuuakse esile fännigruppide rolli selles. Analüüsiks on valitud „Huaröövlite kroonika“ seeria, kuna see on üks edukaimaid Hiina „võrgustikuromaane“ (*network novel*), millest on tehtud nii mängu, filme kui ka teleseriaale. Selle materjali uurimise põhjal saame ühtlasi ka laiema ettekujutuse transmeedialise narratiivi olukorrast kaasaegses Hiinas. Magistritöö peamine uurimisküsimus on: kuidas on „Huaröövlite kroonika“ arenenud romaanist tänapäevaseks kompleksseks lookogumiks ja milline on fännide roll selles.

Transmeedialine jutustamine ei seisne lihtsalt ühe loo edastamises eri meediumide vahendusel, vaid selles, et iga meediumi varem suletud ja omaette toimimise asemel panustavad eri meediumid igaüks oma unikaalsete omadustega tervikliku suure narratiivi loomisesse, demonstreerides sellega ühtlasi ka ressursside organiseerimise optimaalsust. Autorite, kirjastajate, turundajate ja fännide koostöös avalduvad

„Huaröovlite kroonikas“ eri meediumide omadused, mis panustavad koos seeria ühise loomaailma kujunemisse. „Huaröovlite kroonika“ esindab varasemast erinevat tekstide toimimise loogikat, mis põhines teksti loomise ja tarbimise eraldatusel. „Huaröovlite kroonika“ eri meediaplatvormidel esinevad tekstid mõjutavad ja inspireerivad üksteist ning ajendavad uute tekstide teket. Tänu transmeedialistele praktikatele on „Huaröovlite kroonika“ suutnud ületada meediumide varasema eraldatuse ja suletuse.

Teiseks: mõistes auditooriumi tähtsust, kasutavad transmeedia praktikud erinevaid vahendeid publiku stimuleerimiseks, esmajoones fännide aktiivseks kaasamiseks. „Huaröovlite kroonika“ eri versioonidel on erinevad, kuid osaliselt kattuvad ja seejuures väga suured fännigrupid. Fännide aktiivne osalus toob esile mitmekesised ja unikaalsed kogemused narratiiviga suhestumisel, samuti vihjeid narratiivi edasiarendusteks. Fännide osalus on rikastanud seeria loomaailma eri tasanditel. Kokkuvõttes pakub „Huaröovlite kroonika“ toimivat mudelit teiste Hiina teoste transmeedialiste narratiivide arendamiseks tulevikus.

REFERENCES

Barthes, Roland; Duisit, Lionel. 1975. An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative. In: *New Literary History*, 6(2), 237-272.

Bourdaa, Melanie. 2013. 'Following the Pattern' : The creation of an Encyclopaedic universe with transmedia storytelling. In: *Adaptation*. University of Oxford. 6(02): 202–214.

Chen, Weixian. [陈伟贤] 2015. An Analysis of The Meaning of "Existence" of The Stage Play -- The Grave Robbers' Chronicles. [舞台剧《盗墓笔记》“存在”意义解析] In: *Chinese Theatre*. 2015(02) : 68-70.

Cheng, Lirong. [程丽蓉] 2017. *Transmedia Narrative and the Theory of Semio-narratology*. [跨媒体叙事对符号叙述学理论的挑战] In: *Cultural Studies and Literary Theory*. 2017(01) : 261-273.

Dena, Christy. 2018. Transmedia Adaptation, Revisiting the No-Adaptation Rule. In: Freeman M., Gambarato R. R. (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*. New York: Routledge. 195-206.

Euchner, Jim. 2016. The Medium is the Message. In: *Research-Technology Management*, 59:5, 9-11.

Gitelman, Lisa. 2006. *Always Already New*. London: MIT Press.

Hu, Ya Min. [胡亚敏] 2004. *Narratology*. [叙事学] Shanghai: Central China Normal University Press.

Jenkins, Henry. 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

— 2003a. *Quentin Tarantino's Star Wars? Digital Cinema. Media Convergence and Participatory Culture*. In *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transmedia*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

— 2003b. *Transmedia Storytelling: Moving Characters from Books to Films to Video Games Can Make Them Stronger and More Compelling*. MIT Technology Review. Retrieved from: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2003/01/15/234540/transmedia-storytelling/> 14.04.2022. n.p.

— 2006a. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York Univ. Press.

— 2006b. *Welcome to Convergence Culture*. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html. 10.04.2022. n.p.

— 2007. *Transmedia Storytelling 101*. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html 19.04.2022. n.p.

— 2011. *Transmedia 202: Further Reflections*. 31. 07. 2011. Retrieved from: http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html 09.04.2022. n.p.

Li, Xu. [李旭] 2019. Intellectual Property Analysis - Case study of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series. [“盗墓笔记” IP 开发案例分析] In: *Journal of Henan Institute of Education (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 38 (01) : 46-51.

Liang, Yuan Yuan. [梁媛媛] 2017. *The Research on IP Operating Mode in the Perspective of Transmedia Storytelling*. [跨媒介叙事视域下的 IP 运营模式研究] Doctoral Dissertation. Huazhong University.

Liu, Huan. [刘欢] 2011. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series Have Sold Nearly 10 Million Copies*. [《盗墓笔记》将出大结局 总销售量近 1000 万册] The Beijing News. Retrieved 05/03/2022, from <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/cul/2011/11-24/3482487.shtml>. n.p.

Liu, Yu; Zhang, Hongjun. [刘煜; 张红军] 2019. Transmedia Narrative and Its Logic of Spatial Construction. [遍在与重构 跨媒体叙事及其空间建构逻辑] In: *Journalism and Communication*. 2019, 26(09) : 26-37.

Liu, Xin Yi. [刘昕怡] 2016. *Research on Fandom Communication of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles From the Perspective of Subculture* [亚文化视野下的《盗墓笔记》同人传播研究]. Master Dissertation. Anhui University.

Long, Diyong. [龙迪勇] 2008. Transmedia Trends in Narratology Research. [叙事学研究的跨媒介趋势——跨媒介叙事学术研讨会综述] In: *Jiangxi Social Sciences* 2008(08): 57-66.

Ma, Hemin; Wu Ruijun. [马和民; 吴瑞君] 2002. *Network Society and School Education*. [网络社会与学校教育] Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1967. *The medium is the message*. New York: Bantam books.

Mikos, Lothar. 2016. Television Drama Series and Transmedia Storytelling in an Era of Convergence. In: *Northern Lights: Film & Media Studies Yearbook*, Volume 14, Number 1, pp. 47-64(18).

Moloney, Kevin. 2014. Multimedia, Crossmedia, Transmedia... What's in a name? In: *Transmedia journalism*, April 21, 2014. [online]: Kevin Moloney. Retrieved 10/07/2022 from <http://transmediajournalism.org/2014/04/21/multimedia-crossmedia-transmedia-whats-in-a-name/> n.p.

Ouyang, Youquan. [欧阳友权] 2008. *Introduction to Network Literature*. [网络文学概论] Beijing : Beijing University Press.

Ojamaa, Maarja; Torop, Peeter. 2015. Transmediality of cultural autocommunication. In: *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 18(1): 61–78.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. 2015. Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience? In: *Storyworlds A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7(2), 1–19.

Scolari, Carlos Alberto. 2009. Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative World, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production. In: *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 586-606.

Shao, Yanjun. [邵燕君] 2020. The Liberation of "Erotic Productivity" With the Opportunity of Media Transformation -- A New Understanding of the Development Motivation of Chinese Network Literature. [以媒介变革为契机的“爱欲生产力”的解放——对中国网络文学发展动因的再认识] In: *Literature & Art Studies*. 2020(10): 63-76.

Su, Bin. [苏滨] 2017. An analysis of the cross-industry development of China's book publishing industry -- a case study of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series. [探析我国图书出版业的跨行业发展——以《盗墓笔记》为例] In: *Science and Technology Communication* 9(06): 101-103.

Wang, Xin. [王鑫] 2015. On the Transmedia Narrative Logic of Film Art in the Age of New Media and Its Critical Transmation. [新媒体时代电影艺术的跨媒体叙事逻辑及批评转型] In: Journal of Chinese Studies, Xiamen University. 2015(01): 179-187.

Wangyi. [网易] 2011. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles' Finale Sold More Than A Million Copies In Its First Week.* [《盗墓笔记》大结局上市一周销量破百万] Wangyi News. Retrieved 05/03/2022, from https://3g.163.com/ntes_x/article/7MK1GHI200923P3U.html, n.p.

Yang Yi. [杨义] 1997. *Chinese narratology.* [中国叙事学] Beijing: People's Publishing House.

Yang, Xiang. [杨襄] 2016. *A Theoretical Study on Henry Jenkins' Fan Culture Theory.* [亨利詹金斯的粉丝文化研究理论] Doctoral Dissertation. Yangzhou: Yangzhou University.

Yi, Chafang. [易查方] 2017. On the Textual Adaptation and Audience Reception of The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Series. [论《盗墓笔记》的文本改编与受众接受] In: *Movie Literature.* 2017(20): 88-90.

Yin, Yiyi; Xie Zhuoxiao. 2018. The Bounded Embodiment of Fandom in China: Recovering Shifting Media Experiences and Fan Participation Through an Oral History of Animation-Comics-Games Lovers. In: *International Journal of Communication* 12(2018), 3317–3334.

Zhao, Qian. [赵倩] 2012. *Nearly a Decade Chinese Fans Culture Research.* [近十年中国粉丝文化研究] Doctoral Dissertation. Xinjiang University.

Zhou, Ying. [周莹] 2017. *Research on Production and Identification of Fans — the Case of Daomubiji*. [盗墓笔记吧的粉丝生产及认同研究] Master Dissertation. Nanjing: Nanjing Normal University.

Zhong, Ying. [钟颖] 2021. *Research on Fandom from the Perspective of Transmedia*. [跨媒体视域下的迷群研究] Master Dissertation. Shandong University

Zhu, Songlin. [朱松林] 2015. Fans Economy in Transmedia Storytelling. [论跨媒体叙事中的粉丝经济] In: *Editorial Friend*. 2015(02): 51-54.

Sources

Liang, Sheng Quan. [梁胜权] 2016. *Lao Jiu Men*. [老九门] China: Ciwen Media Group, iQiyi

Mao, Kun Yu; Li, Ze Lu. [毛鲲宇; 李泽露] 2018. *Tomb of The Sea*. [沙海] China: Shanghai Tencent Penguin Film Culture Communication Co., Ltd.

Xu, Lei. [徐磊] 2007a. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 1: Qi Xing Luwang Gong*. [盗墓笔记 1:七星鲁王宫] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2007b. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 2: Qinling Shenshu*. [盗墓笔记 2:秦岭神树] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2007c. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 3: Yunding Tiangong*. [盗墓笔记 3:云顶天宫] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2008. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 4: Shezhao Gui Cheng*. [盗墓笔记 4:蛇沼鬼城] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2009. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 5: Mi Hai Guichao*. [盗墓笔记 5:谜海归巢] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2010a. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 6: Yin Shan Gulou*. [盗墓笔记 6:阴山古楼] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2010b. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 7: Qionglong Shi Ying*. [盗墓笔记 7:邛笼石影] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2011. *The Grave Robbers' Chronicles Vol 8: Ending*. [盗墓笔记 8:大结局] Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2012. *Lao Jiu Men*. [老九门]. Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Press.

— 2013. *Sha Hai*. [沙海] Beijing: Xin Shijie Press.

Zeng, Peishan. Li, Rengang. [曾佩山; 李仁港] 2016. *Time Raiders*. [film] [盗墓笔记] China: Shanghai Film Group.

Zheng, Baorui; Luo Yongchang. [郑保瑞; 罗永昌] 2015. *Time Raiders*. [film] [盗墓笔记] China: H&R Century Pictures Co.,Ltd.

Zou, Xi; Ma, Xiao Gang; Wei, Li Zhou. [邹曦; 马小刚; 卫立洲] 2020. *Ultimate Note* [终极笔记]. China: iQIYI; H&R Century Pictures Co.,Ltd.

Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public

I, Jin Yan,
(author's name)

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to

reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archives until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

Transmedia Narrative and Fan Culture — the Example of The Grave
Robbers' Chronicle,

(title of thesis)

supervised by Phd. Elin Sütiste.

(supervisor's name)

2. I grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright.

3. I am aware of the fact that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2.

4. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

Jin Yan

12/08/2022