



This is a contribution from

Cultus:

The Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

2022: 15

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Cultus

THE JOURNAL OF INTERCULTURAL
MEDIATION AND COMMUNICATION

Narrativity in Translation

ICONESOFT EDIZIONI - GRUPPO RADIVO HOLDING
BOLOGNA - ITALY

Registrazione al Tribunale di Terni
n. 11 del 24.09.2007

Direttore Responsabile Agostino Quero
Editore Iconesoft Edizioni – Radivo Holding
Anno 2022
ISSN 2035-3111
2035-2948

Policy: double-blind peer review

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via Giuseppe Antonio Landi - 40132 - Bologna

CULTUS

the Journal of Intercultural Mediation and Communication

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Re-narration in a Video Game Adaptation of Romance of the Three Kingdoms

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Abstract

This article examines the re-narration of history in the adaptation of the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history (168 to 280 AD) in the video game Total War: Three Kingdoms. Employing three modes of engagement from adaptation theory, the article provides a close examination of the narration in the game. Its analysis of the different media in the game—text, audio, and video—and its interactive content reveals that along with the eight core features of narration summarized by Somers and Gibson and Brunner (1994, 1996), an additional feature, medium specificity, is necessary to analyze re narration in video games specifically.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the game and related history

The video game under discussion in this article is *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, an English game based on the Three Kingdoms period of Chinese history (168 to 280 AD). After the collapse of the Eastern Han dynasty, China was divided into three states—Cao Wei, Shu Han, and Eastern Wu—that were almost constantly at war with each other. There are two books of historical records for this period: *San Guo Zhi* (Records of the Three Kingdoms), written by Chen Shou in the third century; and *Book of the Later Han*, compiled by Fan Ye and others in the fifth century. However, this period was made popular in China and other East Asian countries through the novel *San Guo Yan Yi* (Romance of the Three Kingdoms), by Luo Guanzhong in the fourteenth century. More than 500 characters are depicted in this 120-chapter novel, which outlines the turbulent events of this period and the waxing and waning of the three states. The novel itself has since been the subject of a variety of adaptations, translations, and related cultural products, of which games are an important part. For example, the famous *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* video game series developed by Koei, a Japanese game developer, has had fourteen

installments since 1985, with the latest being released in 2020. *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, released in 2019 as a new addition to the commercially successful *Total War* game series, is a turn-based strategy, real-time tactics game developed by Creative Assembly, a UK-based company founded in 1987. The game allows players to control one of thirteen factions, led by warlords mostly based on historical figures, such as the crafty Cao Cao and the generous Liu Bei, with the aim of eliminating the other factions and reunifying China. The game was a great success, with over one million copies sold in the first week of release¹, and is by far the largest concurrently played strategy game on the PC gaming platform Steam.

1.2 Transmedia storytelling and video game adaptation

Since the original novel has already been adapted into multiple cultural products, including comics, fan fiction, television episodes, and games, it is natural to consider the English game *Total War: Three Kingdoms* as an integral part of transmedia storytelling of the ‘Three Kingdoms’ theme. First proposed by Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is a process in which “integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins, 2007; see also Jenkins, 2003). If we take a closer look, however, *Total War: Three Kingdoms* does not strictly fit the mode of the transmedia storytelling of modern media companies.

First of all, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* is not owned by any commercial entity, so there is no centralized effort to expand the story or to create a “Three Kingdoms franchise.” In other words, the “synergy” between various stories is not as strong as in other examples of transmedia storytelling, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. More importantly, the content of this game is more of an adaptation than an expansion of the original novel; and the story remains largely the same. Players will find familiar scenes, such as the ‘Oath of the Peach Garden’ or the ‘Battle of Red Cliffs’, and the overall aim of the game, as noted above, is to destroy all other competing factions and to reunify China. On the other hand, the game does contain certain elements of transmedia narratology.

For example, the Creative Assembly game company needed to consider the economic viability of its product during development, and therefore designed the faction leaders on a more objective basis, making them equally attractive or playable for players, and free from the moral values or cultural preferences inscribed in the original historical records and novel. The game also provides a

¹ <https://steamdb.info/app/779340/graphs/>

different access point for players to experience the story of the Three Kingdoms period, and enables them to alter details of that history by allowing them to play as different historical or even fictional figures.

1.3 Narrative and modes of engagement

Game adaptation in this case fits two elements of Jakobson's broader definition of translation (Jakobson 1959/2012: 127): it displays intralingual and intersemiotic modes of translation. Image and sound in the game are based on the original historical records or novel (probably English translations) or related cultural products, to render, interpret and mold the stories and characters. To analyze the story-telling, narrative could be a useful lens. Narrative is a crucial theoretical concept in many disciplines and has attracted a wide range of research interest. Scholars applying narrative theory to translation studies have made use of a set of categories that represent the construction and functioning of narratives. Eight core features of narrative, namely selective appropriation, temporality, relationality, causal emplotment, particularity, genericness, normativeness, and narrative accrual, have been summarized by Somers and Gibson and Brunner (from Baker, 2020: 154).

To look in detail at how the story of the Three Kingdoms is re-narrated in this video game adaptation, three modes of engagement are considered. Modes of engagement are ways in which a story is presented, and the corresponding ways in which that story is received and experienced by an audience. As summarized in Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013), the three modes of engagement—telling, showing, and interactive—allow us to look at adaptation as a process and to analyze how adaptations “tell, show, or interact with stories,” (Hutcheon and O'Flynn, 2013: 22) each in a range of different media. The telling mode involves the printed or displayed word, the showing mode encompasses visual and aural elements, and the interactive mode entails the audience's participation in the narration of the story. Importantly, video game adaptations involve all three modes.

In addition to interacting with a game's content, players also experience the story through text, in-game cinematics, music and voice-overs. The telling and showing modes are typically used to present the story to the player in the opening and closing sections of each chapter of the game. Nevertheless, these modes are also crucial during regular gameplay to the players who rely on subtitles. The interactive mode is also integral to the story-shaping process, as player input leads to a variety of consequences, unlocks different branches and endings, and creates numerous individual narratives in a virtual space. The selection and use of different media is thus at the centre of the game's narration. As a result, it can be argued that one additional feature of narrative theory, medium specificity, needs to be introduced to fully explain re-narration in video game adaptations.

The following section investigates in detail how different media are employed and integrated to shape the player-specific narration in *Total War's* adaptation of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. More specifically, the descriptions of the characters in the novel and the game are compared, with the latter being conveyed through profile text assets, voice-overs, and introductory cinematics. The ways in which the novel narrative is reconstructed in the game by both the developer and the player is also explored. The developers were evidently influenced by the cultural and aesthetic values of the novel, as well as other adapted cultural products, and they incorporated their understanding of these products into their adaptation. The player, meanwhile, has considerable freedom in selecting their characters and shaping their own version of history through gameplay, which may in turn encourage them to learn more about the history underlying the plot of the game. This re-narration can thus be seen as the collective creation of all the parties involved, across a range of social and cultural backgrounds. As a result, the Three Kingdoms era is no longer simply a circumscribed historical period, but is also open to being reshaped in the present, and possibly the future.

2. The telling mode: reshaping the characters

The three modes of engagement outlined above adapt stories to varying degrees. “Being shown a story is not the same as being told it—and neither is the same as participating in it or interacting with it, that is, experiencing a story directly and kinesthetically” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013: 12). Firstly, adaptation takes place between the telling modes of different media, that is, from the telling mode (in the historical records and novel) to the telling mode (the text assets introducing the characters or settings in the video game). In both telling modes, the reader’s or player’s engagement begins in the realm of imagination, yet at the same time is influenced and directed by the precisely selected words of the text. Two key differences between the two telling modes can be identified, however. One is that the characters or events depicted in the game’s text assets accommodate the demands of the game and the player via additions or deletions, strengthening or diminishing certain impressions; the other is that the text assets perform their function with the help of images of the characters or battles being described, that is, with the showing mode also involved.

Total War: Three Kingdoms includes over a dozen characters from a variety of factions, each of which has a distinct profile and is equipped with different unique skills to complete the final reunification of the kingdom. To analyze the game’s re-narration of the Three Kingdoms’ story in a new digital form, this section compares the descriptions of the main characters in the historical records, the novel, and the game by examining the adaptations evident in the character profiles. As mentioned above, one notable feature of this re-narration is the objectivity of the descriptions of the various faction leaders. In particular, a number of characters

who are portrayed negatively (or deliberately distorted or stigmatized) in the historical records or in the novel are presented in a neutral way in the game, in order to allow the player to rewrite the fate of those characters. One faction leader, Yuan Shu, who is far less prominent in the novel than major characters such as Liu Bei or Cao Cao, is accorded the same status as these more established characters in the game. The introduction of Yuan Shu, displayed alongside his image, is as follows:

Yuan Shu: Ambitious Powermonger

Yuan Shu watches the ascent of Dong Zhuo, and believes he has the means and the right to wield such power instead. He hails from the prestigious and wealthy Yuan family, which weighs upon his shoulders, as does the braggish blustering of his half-brother, Yuan Shao. Only through demonstrating his legitimacy to others can Yuan Shu prove his right to rule².

According to *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, Yuan Shu came from the well-known Yuan clan, like his brother Yuan Shao, and served in a number of high-level positions as a general: “He was recommended by his virtues to serve as a civil and military official, including as Senior Secretary to the Emperor, a field officer, and Head of the Imperial Court Guard Corps” [举孝廉，除郎中，历职内外，后为折冲校尉、虎贲中郎] (Chen, 2010: 173)³. Descriptions of his character are mostly negative, however, such as “full of knighthood in his youth yet fond of entertaining with other young men from rich families and did many immoral things later in his life” [少以侠气闻，数与诸公子飞鹰走狗，后颇折节] in *Book of the Later Han* (Fan, 2011: 1957). Negative assessments of his personality can also be seen in comments by other characters in *Records of the Three Kingdoms*, such as Chen Deng’s remark that “Yuan Shu was too arrogant and aggressive to be a capable king in an era of chaos” [陈登：“公路骄豪，非治乱之主”] (Chen, 2010: 729), and Peng Yue’s observation that “Yuan Shu is courageous yet indecisive at critical times” [蒯越：“袁术勇而无断”] (Chen, 2010: 176). Historians have also appraised Yuan Shu rather negatively. For example, Chen Shou ascribes Yuan Shu’s tragic end to his living a “luxurious life without abstention” [奢侈放肆，荣不终己，自取之也] (Chen, 2010: 180). The well-known critic Pei Songzhi also has harsh words for Yuan Shu: “Yuan Shu, with neither crucial achievements nor good deeds, remained furious and even ascended to the throne by himself, which was despised by lofty men and even ghosts. Though he later tried to be modest and frugal, his tragic end could not be avoided” [袁术无毫芒之功，纤介之善，而猖狂于时，妄自尊立，固义夫之所扼腕人

² All descriptions of the characters come from Creative Assembly (2019).

³ All translations from Chinese sources are my own unless otherwise stated.

鬼之所同疾。虽复恭俭节用，而犹必覆亡不暇] (Chen, 2010: 180). In the introduction to Yuan Shu in the game, however, this negative characterization is entirely absent. The sentence “He hails from the prestigious and wealthy Yuan family, which weighs upon his shoulders, as does the braggish blustering of his half-brother, Yuan Shao” underscores Yuan Shu’s eminent background and his suitability for taking on the burden of reunifying and governing the state. He is placed on the same level as his brother Yuan Shao, though in the original history and the novel he is shown to be no match for his brother in terms of either martial ability or political impact. This sentence also reveals Yuan Shao’s personality, which is summarized as “braggish blustering,” which echoes the word “flamboyant” in the introduction of this character. From these descriptions, it can be seen that Yuan Shao is consistently characterized in a negative light, while Yuan Shu is presented neutrally, even slightly positively. The transformation of Yuan Shu’s character provides the player with a way to rewrite history through a different use of the characters involved.

Similar situations also extend to even more minor characters in the original novel. Take Gongsun Zan and Kongrong for example:

Gongsun Zan: The Iron Fist General

In the cacophony of rising chaos, Gongsun Zan is heard like a clarion call above the fray. He stands firm in his beliefs and is unafraid to do what he feels is right. A childhood friend of Liu Bei, Gongsun Zan earned a reputation as a fierce warrior, defending the empire against foreign foes beyond the border. Gongsun Zan rules his lands with the same martial mindset with which he governs his forces on the dangerous fringes of the empire, military precision in all things must be observed.

Kong Rong: Master Scholar

The bureaucracy of China can only succeed through the support of education; this is what Kong Rong earnestly believes. Kong Rong is focused on wisdom and learning that it might better the people, and the economy—in Qing Province he is establishing schools to rehabilitate the population in the wake of the devastating Yellow Turban rebellions. Now, as chaos consumes China once more, Kong Rong knows that only through knowledge and insight will prosperity prevail once more.

The historical Gongsun Zan was a brave warrior with high moral values, as can be seen in the account of his decision to accompany the governor Liu Qi when Liu was exiled. Yet Gongsun was also considered rather poor at managing his army and governing the prefecture of You Zhou. This was shown by his refusal to save his soldiers, expecting them to fight on their own as courageously as possible and

also by his suppression of intellectuals because he did not believe that they would show him any gratitude, given their family background. “These people all got wealthy due to family status or personal talent, and will not show any gratitude towards my kindness” [皆自以职分富贵，不谢人惠] (Fan, 2011: 1895).

Romance of the Three Kingdoms, in contrast, emphasizes his courage in battle and his defense of the Han dynasty, noting that he and Liu Bei studied under the same mentor, but provides a very simplified account of his historical actions. This simplification and positive characterization function as a form of literary narration, since Gongsun’s main function in the narrative is as a background character, secondary to the principal character Liu Bei. In *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, meanwhile, Gongsun Zan is made notably fiercer, and is even given added governing ability that he did not actually possess in reality. This transformation facilitates the player’s control of the character and enriches their playing experience by allowing them to change Gongsun’s fate.

A similar transformation occurs in the case of Kong Rong, who in the historical records and the novel is described as a man of lofty ideals who despised Cao Cao yet lacked any military expertise. In the game, however, the character as a leader in governor fraction are described to be intensely focused on wisdom and learning; and also his extreme adherence to rituals and norms is accentuated in the adaptation. It is worth noting, however, that although the player can choose Kong Rong to complete the reunification of China, the process is far more difficult than with other characters with greater martial ability.

The updated version of the game (released on 27 May 2021) saw a number of new characters added, including Liu Chong, Liu Yan, Shi Xie, Sha Moke, and Mu Lu. These new characters, however, can be viewed as adaptations of others from either the historical records or the novel, as many traits of those real characters have been borrowed in the design of the new ones.

Liu Chong

Prince Liu Chong is a warrior whose dedication to his people is matched only by his formidable skill in battle. Whilst other imperial princes choose not to actively govern, Liu Chong gladly rules over his territory, and through his energetic nature and genuine concern, is beloved.

As trouble now brews in the imperial court and in the provinces, Liu Chong knows his primary concern is for his people. A prestigious warrior, unafraid of a fight, he readies himself for whatever may come with confidence and zeal!

Shi Xie

Shi Xie has wisely, and insidiously, kindled the favour of the Han, for he is cunning of mind and a barrier against threats from distant lands. His rise was won through the strength of his family’s deep and noble lineage, and not-insignificant personal favours to the powerful.

Shi Xie benevolently welcomes the needy and the destitute to his lands, all-the-while planting his own family members into positions of power. For as surely as Shi Xie gives generously, he also takes advantageously ...

The newly added Prince Liu Chong is not mentioned in any record or novel, but is composed of traits belonging to several real historical characters. From the sentence “Whilst other imperial princes choose not to actively govern, Liu Chong gladly rules over his territory,” we can see that this character is intended to provide a contrast to other members of the imperial family, such as Liu Bian or Liu Xie, who were cowardly and at the mercy of powerful ministers or generals. The prince’s personality also borrows elements from the virtuous Liu Bei, as indicated by the sentence “His primary concern is for his people.” Liu Bei is well known for his benevolence and love of his people. His popularity is illustrated by an incident related in *Record of the Three Kingdoms* (Chen, 2010: 732) in which a large number of local people wanted to follow his retreating army: “Most of Liu Zong’s men and the local people of Jing Zhou voluntarily followed Liu Bei; by the time they arrived at Dang Yang, his followers numbered one hundred thousand, with the total equipment weighing five hundred kilograms, marching only ten miles a day” [琮左右及荆州人多归先主。比到当阳，众十余万，辎重数千两，日行十余里]。 This event is depicted in greater detail in chapter 41 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Luo, 1996: 248): “Liu Bei brought over one hundred thousand local people and three thousand soldiers, slowly marching together to Jiang Ling.... (Jian Yong said) ‘My Lord, it would be better to abandon these local citizens and flee immediately.’ Liu Bei said, ‘They have followed me from Xin Ye all the way here. How can I abandon them with no pity in my heart?’ [玄德引十数万百姓、三千余军马，一程挨着往江陵进发... (简雍) “主公可速弃百姓而’玄德曰：‘百姓从新野相随之，吾安忍弃之?]. Similarly, the description of the new character Shi Xie, which includes descriptors like “insidiously” and “cunning of mind,” suggest a similarity to the counselor Zhuge Liang, while the sentence “His rise was won through the strength of his family’s deep and noble lineage” may remind the player of Yuan Shao or Yuan Shu, both of whom came from noble clans. It is also worth examining how each character’s story is developed in the game.

This process gives the player a varied but plausible set of characters to identify with and adopt. Although the relations between characters at the initial stage of the game are closely in line with the real history or the descriptions in the novel, the player can still complete the game and rewrite the ending without pursuing the same relationships as the novel. For example, the player can choose Liu Bei to build their empire and unite the country without the help of Zhuge Liang, who in both the original history and the novel was a key figure. Another example is that Zhao Yun has a strong relationship with Gongsun Zan at the beginning of the game, but will instead turn to Liu Bei at a certain point. But the point at which this

change occurs, and when it occurs, is decided by the player, and may therefore differ from the real history, in which Zhao Yun followed Liu Bei in 192 AD, after Liu left Gongsun Zan.

3. The showing mode: the multimodal context

In the showing mode, language is not the only way to express meaning or narrate stories. Images, music, and sound work together with written language to build up a world that is presented to the eyes and ears of the audience. In video games, background music provides aural equivalents for the narrator or reflects characters' emotions, and provokes affective responses in the player. Voice-overs either reinforce or contradict the written descriptions of characters or events expressed and imagined in the telling mode. Image and voice play a crucial role in the showing mode of engagement, especially in role-playing games, and the use of natural, idiomatic language in a game's animation is essential to convey the gameplay experience and allow players to fully enjoy the game.

It is also very important to establish an appropriate tone in the voice-over dialogue. At the beginning of the announcement trailer for *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, for instance, Luo Guanzhong's name and a quotation from chapter 4 of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* are displayed in bold on the screen, remaining there for a few seconds to strengthen the player's impression on the grand and tragic background of the game. The quotation, "Heaven is to be rent asunder, earth shall fall away" (皇天将崩今后土颓) (Luo, 1996: 21), is uttered by Tang Ji, Emperor Shao's wife, who sang a farewell song for her husband before Dong Zhuo's aggression against the royal court. The voice-over in the subsequent animation uses a female voice to complement the quotation from Tang Ji. In addition, a number of key elements and events from the historical records and the novel feature in the imagery and narration, which not only present the player with a sense of the real history—as is the case with the image of peach blossom and Liu, Guan, and Zhang's swearing of an oath of brotherhood in the peach garden—but also establish the background to the game, such as the mention of the alliance against Dong Zhuo.

The introductory cinematics of each character always start with the same four sentences setting out the background of the game, which are followed by an introduction to the character in question. Take the cinematic introducing Cao Cao as an example:

[Background Introduction]

Embers rise, stark against the night. The tyrant Dong Zhuo wields the flames of destruction. Luoyang burns, Chaos ignites as the power of the eunuchs is crushed. In the pyre, the Han falters.

The images on the screen, such as of the embers and of the night, reflect the words in this voice-over. The image of the embers is also closely related to the phrase “Luoyang burns” in the following sentence, which combine to convey a sense of chaos. Historical events, such as the chaos of the ten eunuchs in the imperial court and Dong Zhuo’s tyrannical rule after he was asked to help kill the eunuchs, are connected and conveyed by the use of metaphor: embers, flame and burning. The rhetorical devices and literary descriptions, which more or less follow the epic style in the Western literary tradition, contribute to the game’s fighting atmosphere and prime the player to immerse themselves in the forthcoming battles. Also, the intertextuality with other games, in terms of the language and narration style used, should not be ignored. In the case of role-playing games, most of the terminology originates in tabletop role-playing games, which in turn derive from epic and fantasy novels, such as J. R. R. Tolkien’s renowned trilogy *The Lord of the Rings*. This can be seen in the trailer’s references to the “embers” and “pyre”, which feature prominently in many role-playing games, such as *Oblivion*, *Kings of Chaos*, *Kingdom Hearts*, and the *Final Fantasy* series.

Sound also plays a crucial role in the game’s re-narration of the history. The game creates an immersive experience with innovative, layered audio elements, large-scale and responsive armies set against illustrated backgrounds. The game uses the sounds of a horse’s hooves and the crying of soldiers in battle as a constant audio element, which is interwoven with the narrative voice-over. Interactive elements are associated with distinct sounds, so that, for example, selecting the icon representing Cao Cao’s skills triggers the appearance of Cao Cao’s image, together with a voice-over clip, such as “Order will be restored, no matter the cost,” or one of the famous sayings attributed to him, such as “In peace I shall be an able subject, in chaos a crafty hero,” and the visual presence of a flag or the sound of hooves.

In addition, the game, which is adapted from both *Records* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, is set in an elaborate paratextual context, designed to facilitate the immersive engagement of the player, a context that includes announcement trailers, maps, a glossary of places, people, and items; and a list of literary intertexts. For example, a map appears in the centre of the screen when a character is selected and introduced. The initial location of the character on the map is generally preset by the developer, and is often, though not always, faithful to the original novel and historical records. For instance, Dong Zhuo’s starting point is Liang County, in the west of the country, while Liu Bei begins in Dong Ping and Le’an. In the original

history, however, Liu had no fixed place to stay until he occupied Jing Zhou. The profile markers and colouring on the map, representing the various territories and alliances, give the player a clear sense of the backstory before they start playing, and helps to establish a more distinct and vivid world.

When playing a first-person role-playing game and “becom[ing] an active character in a narrative world and viscerally experience[ing] the action” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013: 27), an individual responds differently than when they reading a book or watching a television series. Technology contributes to this difference. Video games often feature cutting-edge graphics, elaborate soundtracks, and witty and fast-flowing dialogue. These features involve multimodality and allow the player to enjoy a much more intense and evocative gaming experience. On the one hand, the smooth transition of mode caters to the nature of the video game as well as the current technology. On the other hand, multimodality also strengthens the immersive environment of history rewriting in a world rebuilt by the developer and the player. Medium specificity, which focuses on the change of medium in the story-telling as well as the effect, helps to extend the framework of narrative theory, as it accommodates the adaptation of works into video games and also contributes to the re-narration of history via various media in a multimodal environment.

4. The interactive mode: retelling the stories

Interacting with a story in a video game is different from being shown or told it, as the sense of coherence is spatial and is created by the player within a game space that is not merely imagined, or even just perceived, but also actively engaged with (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013: 51). In the case of *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, however, the story is experienced differently “not only because of the more immediate kind of immersion [the game] allows,” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013: 25) but also because the story can deviate or even be changed completely from the original narrative familiar from the historical records or the novel. This section examines how the re-narration strikes a balance between the requirements of the game and fidelity to the historical records or novel, as well as how it accommodates player demands.

Traditionally, historical novels in the West often use a single principal character to develop the plot and place the climax at the end when the character completes their task. In *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, however, the climax takes place at the point when Zhuge Liang, the last hero of Shu Han, dies, yet is followed by several more chapters before the end of the novel, when the Sima clan succeeds the state of Wei, established by Cao Cao, and reunites China. While “readers’ interest diminishes drastically when the main protagonists of the Kingdom of Shu all die out in the novel” (Kwon, 2013: 129), the video game helps to solve this issue and gives the player the chance to rewrite this history by intervening in key events at various stages.

The game has two modes: campaign mode and battle mode. The former takes the whole Three Kingdoms period as its timeline and involves the player choosing a leader from the four different factions with the aim of bringing about the reunification of China. Battle mode, on the other hand, focuses on the six major battles of the Three Kingdoms period: the Battle of Xingyang, the Conquest of Jiangdong, the Siege of Xiapi, the Stand at Changban, the Battle of Red Cliffs, and the Invasion of Jing Province. In battle mode, the player is unable to choose their character or faction, but must use the preset options for each battle.

For example, in the Battle of Red Cliffs scenario, the player is automatically placed in the role of Sun Quan and must fight against Cao Cao and his army. However, many of the well-known events from the novel, such as Zhuge Liang's borrowing of the East Wind and a clever plot to borrow arrows from Cao Cao by boats with cargos of the bales of straw, are either simplified or omitted. Interestingly, these deviations from the novel in fact bring the content of the game closer to the original history. In fact, the account of this battle presented in the novel is itself a re-narration of the real events, in which many of the contributions made by Sun Quan and Zhou Yu are instead attributed to Zhuge Liang, so as to underscore and beautify Liu Bei's forces and accentuate Zhuge Liang's wisdom.

The second re-narration represented by the video game also relies less on the adaptations of the novel and brings the narrative closer to the original version in the historical records. In general, in battle mode, the player is able to enjoy a quick battle and experience the established historical events in the game without changing the course of the battle or the final result. So, unlike in campaign mode there is less freedom to re-narrate the plot.

The character of Dong Zhuo in campaign mode serves as an example. What makes this character different is that all the other characters are supposed to rebel against him, and he is set to defeat them all. As the voice-over narration explains when Dong Zhuo is selected as a character:

Those traitors still rise against you, and they have convinced the people of your guilt. There can be no mercy for traitors. Cao Cao is most capable, but his ambition will destroy him. Yuan Shao may lead this coalition, but he lacks the resolve to oppose me. I will utterly crush him.

Some events triggered in the course of gameplay are based on real history and the novel itself, such as Dong Zhuo's melting down of the twelve *jin ren* (valuable bronze sculptures) of the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, to make coins to cover the cost of building his own castle. Yet the general plot allows more freedom for the player with many possibilities of winning over other characters, which consequently rewrites history. Also, the whole process is transformed into a defense against the traitors, which seems to be loftier and more positive than the description in the historical records, in which Dong Zhuo was a villain and a tyrant, being attacked by many heroes and warlords.

The game strikes a balance between the preservation of well-known events and the rewriting of history, which strengthens the entertainment effect. Some important events such as Zhao Yun's saving of Liu Bei's son and wives at Changban Po are represented in the game and are programmed to always occur during the play. This does not mean that the players follow the same combination of events. For example, the most fierce warrior Lü Bu can be recruited into the player's team using a number of methods, one being to be tricked into a marriage.

Furthermore, the highly complex and decisive role the players play in the re-narration of the history should be noted. For example, the players tend to join and build online communities to share ideas and specific techniques regarding how to complete the unity of the empire. Indeed, players are sometimes heavily critical of the quality of a game. As soon as a new downloadable content of a game is released, it is analyzed in detail by gamers in their discussion forums, and their verdict can influence other players' decisions or playthroughs. Sometimes, when voiced loudly enough, their opinions can be heard by developers, who usually take their comments into account. This was the case with developer Creative Assembly, who opted to make changes to the character Zheng Jiang after they had received comments on Facebook by fans (Grace_CA, comment on Grace_CA 2018).

The re-narration of history is often influenced by form, spacetime, and the identity of participants. Firstly, the materiality in the medium and mode of engagement restricts the adaptation in terms of its possible forms. The various descriptions of characters in the historical records and in the video game serve different purposes, one for history writing and recording, the other for better playing experience and for more profit. Secondly, the original historical records and the game adaptation were created between 1,400 and 1,600 years apart, and are also separated by the different languages and cultural backgrounds of their adapters. Finally, the participants, including both game developers and players, influence the extent and visibility of the adaptation in a collective, interactive yet often indirect way.

On the one hand, game developers are influenced by the cultural and aesthetic values of the historical records and the novel or other adapted cultural products, which they then incorporate (according to their understanding) into the adaptation. The adaptation of characters and the transformation of plot in the game are also driven by the business market and user demand. As Hutcheon and O'Flynn (2013: 30) point out, "a further framing of adaptation across all modes of engagement is economic." For example, a developer considering the business outcome of the large Chinese market, takes, what I have called (Peng, 2021) a homecoming approach to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, whereby original expressions from the novel, composed in the classic Chinese style, were incorporated into the Chinese localized version of the game in order to cater to Chinese players. This strategy to some extent draws the adapted game back to the original historical records and the novel, and reduces the degree of adaptation in the classic atmosphere.

On the other hand, players have considerable freedom in selecting their character and shaping their own narrative when playing, which may in turn attract them to the historical records or the novel. Developers and players both give their feedback of the game in online forums, and game adaptation is taken further in the form of hotfixes, updates, and downloadable contents, which creates more, albeit indirect, interaction between the two in the medium of the game itself. Over the course of the game, players can create as many virtual histories as they want, but within an underlying understanding of what really happened in the original history.

5. Conclusions

This article has used the three modes of engagement from adaptation theory to explain the role of medium specificity in the re-narration of historical facts and stories. The study of re-narration moves beyond an analysis of linguistic items and traditional comparisons between texts with regular patterns to consider adapted video games, whose narratives also incorporate modality transformation and medium specificity in the playing experience. Medium specificity provides an important perspective from which to investigate the (re-)narration of stories, particularly in the current digital era. The medium not only serves as the material means of expression between the sender and the receiver, but also “includes and constitutes them” (Hutcheon & O’Flynn, 2013: 34). In the case of *Total War: Three Kingdoms*, the historical facts and stories of the Three Kingdoms period are conveyed to the player with certain adaptations to accommodate the demands of both the material and gameplay. These facts and stories are experienced interactively, with the player able to take on the role of narrator and rewrite the original history in their playthrough. This interactive engagement, which allows the player to experience the narrative multiple times, may even influence (consciously or unconsciously) their perception of the real history, including their opinion of certain historical characters and of the effects of famous battles. In this way, the Three Kingdoms period and its related works are preserved, even if through being transformed into new cultural products, such as, as in this case, historical role-playing games, videos uploaded by streamers or television series based on the rewriting in online communities. Different media not only enrich the means of expression but also, to varying degrees, incorporate the re-narrator and receiver into the overall narrative.

In the adapted video game, a relatively new medium, the traditional perception of history or historical facts is challenged. How should the word ‘history’ be defined? Should it refer only to those records of events written by the ancients and archived in a library? As we have no direct, unmediated access to history, our access is filtered through the stories historians narrate to us. Moreover, the history that historians narrate not only mediates our access to history, but also participates

in configuring that history. In most narrated versions of history, we show or tell stories in various ways, but in a video game, we interact with history. As Baker (2020: 154) notes, “A focus on the narratives being elaborated within and across the texts allows us to engage with the potential motives for both repeated and individual (one-off) choices.” This is particularly the case in the Three Kingdoms–related role-playing games, which give the player a large number of choices and alternative paths to retell the history and change the fate of the characters, even sharing their experiences with other players or the developer in the online community. The interactive mode of engagement of the video game inscribes the re-narration of the history with many more possibilities and scope for imagination.

The appearance of various Three Kingdoms–related products has contributed to the maintaining and increasing of popularity of this historical period. The traditional perception of history, which is often narrated by historians in written form, is now being challenged by constant re-narrations in video games by various agents, including developers, and online communities. The fact that the progress, the character, and the ending of the story can be rewritten in numerous ways brings new vitality to the old history, which is now told and remembered through the constant shifting between the collectively acknowledged version in books and the adapted versions in different cultural products.

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