

Visual presentation of cultural symbols in the ninth art: a case study of the game *Where Winds Meet*

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Abstract. With the development of digital media technology, games as the "ninth art" have become a core carrier for the inheritance and communication of excellent traditional Chinese culture. Open-world martial arts games, with their immersive, interactive and narrative advantages, provide a new path for the visual transmission of traditional cultural symbols. Taking the domestic open-world martial arts game *Where Winds Meet* as the case, this paper adopts literature research, qualitative research (semi-structured interview + netnography) and comparative research methods, based on semiotic theory, encoding and decoding theory, game aesthetics and cultural communication theory. It sorts out four core types of cultural symbols in the game, analyzes their visual presentation mechanism from four dimensions, explores players' perception logic and cultural identity formation path, and constructs a "visual presentation—open world interaction—cultural identity" theoretical model. The study finds that interactivity is the core advantage of open-world games. Only by deeply integrating cultural symbols into gameplay, narrative and space design, rather than superficial "symbol stacking", can players achieve the transformation from visual reception to emotional resonance and cultural identity. This paper enriches the theoretical system of the ninth art cultural communication, and provides practical reference for cultural symbol design in domestic games.

Keywords: ninth art, cultural symbol, visual presentation, open-world game, *Where Winds Meet*, cultural communication

1. Introduction

In the era of digital economy and cultural industry integration, games have broken through pure entertainment attributes to become the "ninth art" with aesthetic, cultural and communication values [1]. According to the *2025 China Game Industry Report*, China's game user scale has reached 688 million, with over 60% being Generation Z users aged 18-35, making games the mainstream cultural consumption for contemporary youth. Meanwhile, national policies have been promoting the integrated development of "game + culture", encouraging domestic games to carry traditional Chinese culture through digital carriers.

As the mainstream game category, open-world games, with their large explorable maps, high interactive freedom and immersive narrative, have broken the limitations of traditional linear media in cultural communication. In recent years, domestic open-world games have achieved explosive growth, gradually getting rid of the imitation of Western works and exploring original development paths rooted in traditional

Chinese culture. However, most domestic works still stay at the superficial level of "cultural element stacking", with cultural symbols disconnected from gameplay and narrative, leading to the separation of entertainment and cultural attributes. Few studies have systematically explored the whole-chain mechanism of cultural symbol visual presentation in open-world games, as well as its impact on players' cultural identity [2].

This study has important theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it fills the research gap in the whole-chain analysis of "open-world game—cultural symbol—visualization", constructs a targeted theoretical model, and enriches the theoretical system of cultural communication and game aesthetics [3]. Practically, it provides practical reference for domestic game developers to design cultural symbols, helps realize the deep integration of entertainment and cultural attributes of games, and promotes the youth-oriented communication and living inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

This study adopts three core research methods: 1. Literature research method, which systematically sorts out relevant theories and research results to lay a theoretical foundation; 2. Qualitative research method, which combines semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 players and netnography of online player texts, with triangular cross-validation to ensure research rigor [4]; 3. Comparative research method, which compares representative Western and domestic open-world games to extract the uniqueness of cultural symbol presentation in Chinese games.

2. Theoretical foundation and core concepts

2.1. Core concepts

The aesthetic positioning of electronic games, an emerging art category after eight traditional arts, with interactivity as its core characteristic [1]. Different from one-way transmission of traditional art, games realize dynamic and personalized art experience through players' active operation, with functions of immersive aesthetics, narrative expression and cultural transmission.

External carriers of cultural connotation, divided into two levels: signifier (material form of the symbol, such as visual image, sound) and signified (cultural connotation, values and collective memory carried by the symbol) [5]. In this paper, it specifically refers to symbols carrying Chinese martial arts culture, Song Dynasty history and folk customs, and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in *Where Winds Meet*.

The whole-chain process of transforming abstract cultural symbols into perceptible, interactive digital content in open-world games, covering static scene art, dynamic narrative, immersive interactive gameplay and multi-sensory audio-visual design, with the core of realizing effective transmission of cultural connotation.

A high-freedom game category with a large seamless map, allowing players to break away from linear plot constraints and independently choose exploration routes and gameplay rhythm, providing a spatial carrier for panoramic presentation of cultural symbols [6].

2.2. Core theoretical foundation

It proposes a two-layer signification system of symbols: the first layer is denotative meaning (signifier and literal signified), and the second layer is connotative meaning (cultural myth and ideology carried by the symbol) [5]. This paper uses this theory to disassemble the two-layer connotation of cultural symbols in the game.

It divides media communication into encoder's symbol production and decoder's symbol interpretation, with three decoding positions: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional [7]. This paper uses it to analyze developers' encoding logic and players' decoding methods of cultural symbols.

Proposed by Janet Murray, it points out that the core charm of digital media is to create an immersive narrative environment and give players a "sense of presence" [8]. Open-world games build an immersive cultural experience field through spatial construction and interactive design, allowing players to internalize cultural symbols in active exploration.

2.3. Research gaps

Existing domestic studies mostly focus on the cultural communication value of Chinese-style games, or single-dimensional analysis of game art and narrative, lacking systematic whole-chain research on cultural symbol visual presentation in open-world games, with insufficient academic analysis of *Where Winds Meet* [2]. Foreign studies mostly take Western open-world games as cases, with very limited research on Chinese martial arts and Song Dynasty cultural symbols, and rarely combine the perception characteristics of Eastern audiences. On the whole, existing research has not constructed a mature theoretical model between cultural symbol visual presentation, player interaction and cultural identity, which is the core entry point of this study.

3. Core cultural symbol types in *Where Winds Meet*

With the late Five Dynasties and early Song Dynasty as the historical background, and the territorial disputes of the *Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun* as the narrative main line, *Where Winds Meet* has constructed a complete cultural symbol system with four core types:

The core system of the game, with the spiritual connotation of "Xia (chivalry)" as the core, including martial arts system symbols (free move matching, self-created martial arts), Jianghu ethical symbols (chivalrous plot, moral choice branches) and Jianghu scene symbols (taverns, escort agencies, martial arts halls), conveying the philosophy and spirit of Chinese martial arts culture.

Strictly based on historical documents, including Song Dynasty architectural symbols (designed in reference to Yingzao Fashi), urban market format symbols (Goulan Washe, teahouses, night markets), costume and diet symbols (Song-style costumes, Diancha, classic dishes), and festival and etiquette symbols (traditional Song festivals and etiquettes), presenting the social life and aesthetic culture of the Song Dynasty [9].

Deeply integrates national ICH items, including traditional opera and folk ICH (Nuo Opera, molten iron fireworks, shadow puppetry), traditional craft ICH (blacksmithing, tea making, porcelain making) and traditional music ICH (traditional Chinese musical instruments, Kunqu Opera elements), realizing the living digital presentation of ICH.

With the *Sixteen Prefectures of Yan and Yun* as the core, including historical and geographical spatial symbols (map restoring historical territory, landforms and urban patterns) and historical event symbols (plot based on major historical events such as the Chenqiao Mutiny), awakening players' collective memory of Chinese history and geography.

4. Visual presentation mechanism of cultural symbols

Where Winds Meet has constructed a whole-chain visual presentation system of "static space—dynamic narrative—immersive interaction—multi-sensory audio-visual" through four synergistic dimensions, breaking the limitation of static display of traditional cultural symbols:

The basic carrier of symbol presentation, realizing panoramic visual transmission through spatial narrative and symbol layout, aesthetic transmission of color and light in line with Song Dynasty aesthetics, and high-

precision detail restoration based on historical relics, ensuring the accuracy of symbol signifiers.

The core link from static display to living transmission, deeply integrating cultural symbols into main plot and side quests, making symbols the core element of plot promotion and character shaping, and strengthening the visual impact and connotation transmission of symbols through targeted lens language design.

The core advantage of the game, transforming cultural symbols into interactive gameplay such as life skills, martial arts combat, open-world exploration and NPC interaction, allowing players to change from passive viewers to active participants, and complete the in-depth internalization of cultural symbols in embodied experience [8].

The multi-sensory supplement, creating an immersive cultural atmosphere through scene-matched background music and realistic sound effects of Song Dynasty urban life, and integrating Song Dynasty calligraphy, seal cutting and painting into UI design, realizing full-scene visual transmission of cultural symbols.

The four dimensions form a complete synergistic system: scene art is the basic carrier, dynamic narrative is the core clue, interactive gameplay is the core driving force, and audio-visual UI design is the detail supplement. They cooperate with each other to break the superficial presentation of "cultural element stacking", and realize the effective transmission of cultural symbols from signifier to signified [5].

5. Qualitative empirical research findings

This study adopts maximum heterogeneity sampling, selecting 20 valid interviewees covering different game durations, cultural backgrounds, game preferences and demographic characteristics (core Generation Z players), meeting the information saturation standard of qualitative research [4]. It also collects 152,000 words of valid player text data from Bilibili, Weibo, Douban and TapTap. The interview verbatim manuscripts are analyzed through the three-level coding method of grounded theory, with triangulation, member check and peer review to ensure research reliability and validity. The core findings are as follows:

Players' perception of cultural symbols presents a three-level progressive hierarchy of "visual surface layer—experience middle layer—connotation deep layer", from initial signifier identification, to basic connotation understanding, and finally to deep cultural spirit perception and resonance [5].

There are significant differences in the cultural transmission effect of different visual methods, sorted by effect: interactive gameplay > dynamic narrative > static scene art > audio-visual UI design. Interactive gameplay has the best effect because it realizes the transformation of players' role from passive receivers to active participants [8].

Open-world interactive experience is the core mediator for players to transform from "visual reception" to "cultural identity", through three mechanisms: embodied experience to strengthen cognitive memory, emotional connection to awaken cultural resonance, and active exploration to stimulate cultural interest.

The formation of players' cultural identity follows a complete four-step path of "cognitive improvement—emotional resonance—identity establishment—behavioral transformation". 85% of the interviewees actively looked up relevant cultural materials after playing the game, 40% shared the cultural content with others, and 25% participated in relevant cultural activities such as museum exhibitions [3].

Players' decoding barriers to cultural symbols mainly come from three aspects: excessively high cultural cognitive threshold without clear explanation, disconnection between cultural symbols and gameplay, and insufficient transmission of symbol connotation and spiritual value [7].

The online text analysis results are highly consistent with the interview conclusions, verifying the universality and rigor of the research findings.

6. Cross-case comparison

To extract the uniqueness of cultural symbol visual presentation in Chinese open-world games, this paper conducts a cross-case comparison with representative Western and domestic open-world games, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Cross-case comparison of visual presentation of cultural symbols in open-world games

Comparison Dimension	<i>Where Winds Meet</i>	<i>The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt</i>	<i>Genshin Impact</i>	<i>Justice Online Mobile</i>
Core Symbol Types	Martial arts culture, Song Dynasty folk customs, ICH skills, late Five Dynasties historical geography	Western fantasy culture, medieval history, Norse mythology, Polish folk customs	Multi-regional cultural symbols, fantasy cultural symbols	Song Dynasty urban folk customs, martial arts culture
Core Visual Methods	Historical realistic restoration, full-dimensional synergy, deep integration into gameplay and narrative	Alternate worldview construction, symbols serving narrative and character shaping	Artistic reconstruction of regional culture, integration into scene and character design	Immersive urban folk custom restoration, integration into social and leisure gameplay
Cultural Core	Traditional Chinese chivalry spirit and family-country feelings	Western humanism, views of good and evil	Aesthetic value of diverse cultures, universal values	Entertainment-oriented expression of Song Dynasty citizen culture
Core Highlights	High historical restoration, solid cultural details, well-conveyed chivalry spirit	Excellent narrative, full character shaping, high integration of symbols and worldview	Outstanding art style, good cross-cultural communication effect	Vivid urban market atmosphere, rich leisure gameplay
Core Limitations	High cultural threshold for some content, insufficient connotation transmission of some symbols	Cultural barriers for non-Western players	Some symbols are superficial and entertainment-oriented	Insufficient depth of cultural symbols

The comparison shows that the visual presentation of cultural symbols in Chinese open-world games has unique characteristics different from Western works: the unity of historical authenticity and artistic creativity, the integration of entertainment attribute and cultural attribute, and the combination of individual interaction and collective cultural memory, forming the core logic of "conveying Tao through form, transmitting culture through gameplay" [2].

7. Conclusion and strategic suggestion

7.1. Core research conclusions

Where Winds Meet has constructed a complete cultural symbol system covering four core types: martial arts culture, Song Dynasty urban folk customs, intangible cultural heritage skills, and historical geography, with clear signifier form and signified connotation [5].

The game has built a whole-chain visual presentation system of cultural symbols through four synergistic dimensions, realizing the transformation of cultural symbols from static display to immersive experience, breaking the superficial "cultural element stacking".

Empirical research verifies the "visual presentation—open world interaction—cultural identity" theoretical model, and open-world interactive experience plays a core mediating role between visual presentation and players' cultural identity.

The visual presentation of cultural symbols in Chinese open-world games has unique characteristics, with the core logic of "conveying Tao through form, transmitting culture through gameplay" [2].

Current domestic games still have problems in cultural symbol presentation: insufficient connotation transmission, high cultural threshold for novice players, insufficient integration with gameplay, and insufficient attention to players' decoding needs [7].

7.2. Practical strategies

Dig deep into the cultural core of symbols, avoid superficial stacking, select symbols matching the game's worldview and theme, and ensure the consistency between symbol connotation and game core [5].

Strengthen interactive design, deeply integrate cultural symbols into gameplay, transform cultural knowledge into interactive experience, and realize immersive cultural transmission of "learning by playing".

Balance historical authenticity and game experience, reduce cultural cognitive threshold through narrative guidance and detailed explanation, and avoid oppositional decoding caused by excessive professional content.

Pay attention to players' decoding needs, optimize symbol design based on player feedback, strengthen connotation transmission, and guide players to realize dominant decoding.

Promote cross-cultural translation, balance domestic cultural empathy and overseas cross-cultural understanding, and help the overseas communication of excellent traditional Chinese culture on the premise of retaining the cultural core [3].

7.3. Research limitations and future prospects

This study has limitations in sample size and single case selection. Future research can expand the sample scope and include more types of Chinese-style games for multi-case comparative analysis, and conduct longitudinal follow-up studies to explore the long-term impact of games on players' cultural identity [4]. With the development of digital technology, games as the ninth art will play an increasingly important role in the digital inheritance and cross-cultural communication of traditional Chinese culture [1]. This study is expected to provide reference for domestic game developers to create high-quality works with both entertainment and cultural value.

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