Pretty & Random: Anime-style Meta-narratives in the Age of Social Games

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Abstract

The creative mechanisms to accommodate multiple, often abundant characters in one narrative universe (and one productive franchise) for participatory and autonomous storytelling, which I call multi-characterism, is a distinguished feature of anime/ACG narratology that has been developed past the new millennium and is recently influencing the production in other content industries. Since the stagnancy of *NicoNico Douga* (http://nicovideo.jp) around 2016, the main platform and the most salient form of multi-character narrative have been shifting from NicoNico-style creative commons (aka. CGM) to platforms including mobile social video games (or "social games" [ソーシャルゲーム] in Japanese). In contrast to previous multi-character establishments like doujin or CGM, multi-characterism in social games is heavily influenced by gaming algorithms and corresponding game designs.

This research in particular investigates one such influence from the *gacha* (lucky-draw) systems on playable characters and key items, which is the typical module of the anime/ACG-style social game, correlating its computerized infrastructures to its narrative and cultural projections. While lucky-drawing and lottery are long-lasting practices in human culture and continue to prosper as a refuge for playful (re)enchantments in "the age of rational disenchantment" using Weber's words, recent social games elevated and reshaped impulses of such "secular magic" with increasingly delicate animated visuals and expansive narratives for representation, as well as remote but personalized random event generators on the algorithm side. This research analyzes the stage setting and narrative of exemplary *gacha* social games and contours the schemata of this important post-CGM massively multi-character narrative phenomenon. Analysis includes field data from "*gacha* occult" involving (playful) superstitions that correlate *gacha* results with originally peripheral data (e.g. date of lucky-draws in reality), fetishism towards desirable characters' attributes/*zokusei*, and even conspiracy theories (which is "re-enchantment arisen from bureaucracy"). Furthermore, this research identifies the natural hierarchy of characters (due to the algorithm-backed "rarity"), as opposed to parallelism in CGM-style grand characterization that resonates with the presence of the player within the narrative as the center of affects. Hierarchy of characters also strengthens ties between the characters and their sub-stages/backgrounds. Animation (as both form and aesthetics) ritualizes the above processes by providing re-enchanted spaces to the principally disenchanted randomizers, while time in *gacha* games imposes an additional layer of real time on the Azuma's game-style realism which serves as an epistemological foundation.

Biography

Chen, Qian Jason is an assistant professor at Film and Drama Studies Department in the School of Communication of Fujian Normal University in China. He is also an active dramaturgist, a core member of the contemporary art collective StageNoMore. His research interests include digital audiovisual cultures (with emphases on East Asian cybercultures), new media art, post-dramatic theatre, and contemporary representations of cultural heritages.