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The People as Historical Subjects in Punishing: Gray Raven: A Marxist Analysis of Game Narrative

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Abstract. Digital games have now become an important cultural space for young people to encounter stories and understand values. Taking the Marxist people's history view as the theoretical perspective, this paper selects typical plot texts of Punishing: Gray Raven and conducts analysis from three dimensions: character building, ensemble narration, and media participation. The study finds that the game does not attribute historical action to a few salvation heroes, but presents the subject power of the people in pushing forward the historical process through the joint practice of diverse subjects such as researchers, soldiers, and workers; at the same time, multi-line narration, multiple perspectives, and character participation make this value expression move from "being watched" to "being experienceable". This narrative method of integrating the people's history view into character fate and collective action provides useful inspiration for domestic digital games to achieve value expression with warmth and less preaching.

Keywords: People's history view, digital game, Punishing: Gray Raven, ensemble narration

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of the domestic digital game industry, games have long ceased to be merely products of entertainment and pastime, and have gradually become important carriers for young people to encounter stories, feel culture, and understand values. The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China points out that we should "adhere to the people-centered creative orientation and produce more excellent works that enhance the people's spiritual strength". This creative orientation is not only reflected in traditional literary and artistic forms such as literature and film and television, but also provides a new observation perspective for understanding the value expression of digital games. In today's increasingly rich digital culture, a question worth thinking about is: as more and more young people experience stories and get to know characters in games, whose story is the game actually telling, and whom does it place at the center of historical narration?

Existing research has discussed the cultural symbols, narrative methods, and value communication of digital games a lot, but the research objects are more concentrated on head works with wide influence, and the attention to ACG games such as *Punishing: Gray Raven* is relatively limited; at the level of text analysis, related research also mostly starts from angles such as cultural symbols, interaction design, and narrative form, and rarely starts from the Marxist people's history

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view to examine how games write the fate of ordinary people and their historical subject role. In fact, although *Punishing: Gray Raven* takes the apocalyptic crisis and hero action as the basic framework of the story, it does not completely place the hope of civilization's survival on a few "saviors". Researchers, soldiers, workers, and ordinary survivors in the disaster also enter the center of the story again and again. They will fear, will hesitate, and may not have the extraordinary ability to change the world, but it is precisely the choices, labor, and sacrifices of countless ordinary people that jointly constitute the power for human civilization to continue in the story.

Based on this, this paper takes the Marxist people's history view as the theoretical framework, selects some typical plot texts of *Punishing: Gray Raven* for analysis, and focuses on answering two questions: first, how does the game present the historical subject status of the people through character building and ensemble narration; second, how do the participation mechanisms of the game medium, such as role substitution and perspective conversion, further make this value expression move from "being watched" to "being experiencable". On this basis, this paper tries to understand how the proposition that "the people are the creators of history" enters the specific stories of digital games, and further discusses the practical significance of digital games as a contemporary value communication carrier.

2. Literature review

2.1. Research progress review of the people's history view

The people's history view is the core proposition of historical materialism. In *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels put forward the landmark assertion that "historical activity is the affair of the masses", and expounded the basic principle that "the people are the creators of history" [1]. Under the exploratory practice of the Communist Party of China, Mao Zedong further established the core position of the people's history view in the Chinese revolutionary narration with the assertion that "the people, and the people alone, are the motive force in the making of world history" [2]. Entering the 21st century, domestic research on the people's history view shows a diversified trend. At the level of political philosophy, scholars point out that "only when the people master the spiritual weapon can they become a conscious and revolutionary material force", focusing on revealing the promoting effect of values such as the people's history view combined with material force on individual and national development [3]. In the field of culture and art, the people's history view is usually examined together with the excellent traditional Chinese culture such as the people-based thought, exploring the former's inheritance and transcendence of the traditional people-based view. It is worth mentioning that with the continuous emergence of mainstream literary and artistic works, some scholars have begun to pay attention to the expression of the people's history view in literary narration and film works. For example, in *The Legend of Zang Hai*, the ruling-class perspective of the traditional "hero history view" is subverted, and the story turns to focus on the people's creation of history [4].

2.2. Research progress review of digital game narration and value communication

In recent years, the narration and value communication of digital games have gradually become an important issue of academic attention. Some scholars examine the basic path of digital games in spreading Chinese culture from dimensions such as symbols, stories, and interaction [5], and some research also points out that the cultural expression of Chinese games is shifting from the relatively intuitive "symbol presentation" to a deeper "narrative construction" [6]. Compared with early

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domestic games that emphasized the direct display of pictures, gameplay, and cultural elements, the wide spread of works such as *Genshin Impact* and *Black Myth: Wukong* in recent years has brought more attention to how games carry cultural values through characters, stories, and worldviews. At the same time, research on the narrative connotation, aesthetic characteristics, and cultural ecological value of ACG literature and art also provides new ideas for understanding digital games as an emerging literary and artistic form [7].

However, existing research still has room for further expansion. On the one hand, related discussions are more concentrated on head works with high social influence, and the attention to the specific narrative practice of different types of ACG games is relatively limited [8]; on the other hand, existing research mostly starts from angles such as cultural symbols, narrative form, interaction design, and cross-cultural communication, and rarely discusses the historical view contained in game texts and its people-subject expression. In recent years, research on the new mass literature and art has also begun to rediscover the significance of "ordinary-people narration". Some scholars point out that traditional literary and art criticism tends to focus on core heroes and elite figures, while the survival, choices, and actions of ordinary people also have narrative value that cannot be ignored [9]. This research turn also reminds us: to understand a work, we should not only look at those who stand at the center of the story and finally resolve the crisis, but also see those who have no protagonist halo but jointly support the direction of the story.

From this perspective, the existing digital game research still leaves a question worth further asking: when ordinary soldiers, researchers, workers, and survivors begin to have their own choices, actions, and fate, what changes will take place in the history told by the game? *Punishing: Gray Raven* provides a relatively representative observation case.

3. Analysis and results

3.1. Character building: from hero protagonist to multiple subjects

A prominent feature of the plot narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven* is that it expands the subject of historical action from a few core heroes to different social groups. The game does not completely place the focus of the story on a few hero characters, but gives a large amount of space to characters such as soldiers, researchers, workers, and survivors who are usually at the edge of the narration. These characters are no longer just the background when the disaster occurs, nor just the objects waiting for heroes to save; their labor, choices, and sacrifices also affect the direction of the story. Thus, the answer to the question of "who is pushing history" also gradually expands from a few heroes to concrete and ordinary individuals.

In *Sea of Fire at the World's End*, a group of researchers and logistics personnel made a nearly cruel decision in the desperate situation caused by the Pamish virus: in order to maintain research to the greatest extent, they cut food supplies starting from the "unimportant departments" and concentrated limited resources on virus research. The plot does not simply shape this choice into a heroic act, but retains the sharp moral conflict within it. These researchers are not omnipotent heroes; what they face is not even a battle that can be won by courage, but a decision, as death approaches, about who to leave the limited food to and who to hand the unfinished research to. As the plot unfolds, the research results they left at the cost of their lives eventually become the basis for latercomers to continue to understand and fight the virus. What pushes history forward here is not a decisive hero moment, but the knowledge accumulation and responsibility persistence completed by ordinary workers at their own posts. This narration attributes the development of

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history to "the rational choice and self-sacrifice of ordinary people in desperate situations", which is a clear expression of the proposition that "the people are the creators of history".

If *Sea of Fire at the World's End* shows ordinary people participating in history with labor and knowledge, then *Monument of Fire, Forged Spine* highlights the shared bearing in crisis. In the early stage of the disaster, facing the sudden crisis, countless nameless soldiers delayed time with their lives to gain opportunities for the mother ship to evacuate; at the same time, Tilder, as a "mediocre person", preserved the fire of the future and finally went to death calmly. *A Better Tomorrow* further puts this subjectivity on more ordinary people. Facing the desperate situation where the red tide devours everything, warriors and old miners rushed to the front line, fighting for the chance of continued survival for the younger generation with their lives. The game does not shape these ordinary people into fearless "civilian heroes"; they will also fear and hesitate. Precisely because of this, the choices they finally make appear real and weighty, making the image of the people as the historical subject more concrete.

The identities of the characters written in the three chapters are different, and the ways to push history are also different. *Punishing: Gray Raven* does not deny the role of heroes in history, but puts more people behind the heroes back into the narration. In this sense, the "nameless ones" in the game are themselves part of the continuation of history. This also constitutes a relatively concrete game-narrative expression of *Punishing: Gray Raven* on the proposition that "the people are the creators of history".

3.2. Narrative structure: from hero-centered to ensemble co-construction

ACG games usually use character building as an important way to attract players, so core characters easily gain higher narrative weight in the plot, and form a narrative mode that promotes story development with a few characters. *Punishing: Gray Raven* also has distinct core characters, but its narration does not completely gather historical action on a few heroes, but leaves corresponding narrative space for ordinary characters other than heroes.

Even in a chapter like *Fading Day of Annihilation*, where a certain character finally resolves the world-ending disaster, the first half of the plot also spends a lot of ink depicting the order and humanity of ordinary people before the crisis: the elderly and children evacuate first, the wounded voluntarily cover the rear, and the survivors do not lose hope. The choices of these ordinary people constitute the emotional base of the story, and the final hero's behavior is more like a collection of ordinary people's will, rather than a miracle appearing out of thin air. *A Better Tomorrow* revolves around several students of a military academy, but also includes depictions of instructors, warriors, city workers, and city leaders. At the key turning point of the story, facing the rampant Pamish virus, the characters who resolve the crisis are not monopolized by the protagonist group, but warriors and workers step forward. They bravely go against the tide to deal with the infection source, leaving a future for the people behind them. This narrative arrangement breaks the narrative inertia of 'core characters solving all problems' and emphasizes the power of the people to change history.

This narrative characteristic also appears in the spontaneous discussions of players. Some players on the NGA community compared the ensemble narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven* with the "orthodox story" focused on the protagonist, and specifically mentioned the efforts and struggles of characters with different positions and different forces in suffering [10]. This player observation provides a concrete side for the ensemble narration of the game from the level of reception.

From the structural level, the ensemble narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven* is not a simple rotation of multiple people appearing in turn, but provides independent narrative space for different groups—*Nine Dragon Ring City*, the Far North Route, the Adilai Commercial Alliance, the

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Forgotten, and so on. The fate lines of each group are intertwined with each other, and finally flow into the grand theme of the survival of human civilization. This multi-line parallel narrative structure weakens the monopoly of a single hero on historical action, and makes different groups jointly enter the center of historical narration.

Therefore, in the ensemble narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven*, heroes still undertake key actions, but the labor, choices, and sacrifices of ordinary people also constitute an indispensable part of the story. When the force pushing history shifts from "completed by one person" to "co-constructed by the masses", the people become a component of the historical narration itself.

3.3. Media participation: from watching ordinary people to playing ordinary people

As a digital game, the expression of the people's history view in *Punishing: Gray Raven* is not limited to the plot text; the sense of participation brought by its interaction mechanism enables players not only to watch the stories of ordinary people, but also to enter the situations of ordinary people. Some scholars point out that the new era no longer merely regards heroes as a few elite individuals; hero narration needs to break out of the elite and sacred narrative shackles, return to the people's history view, and recognize that ordinary masses also have heroic character [11]. In the game narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven*, the "Chief Commander" played by the player is not an omniscient and omnipotent God, nor a unique chosen one, but a member of the collective—the leader of an elite squad. He needs to rely on the collaboration of construct partners, research teams, medical personnel, and ordinary soldiers to advance the mission. This role positioning weakens the status of the player's role as the "only savior" and places individual action in the relationship of joint collaboration among different groups.

The hero narration of the new era should adhere to the core of the mass hero view, that is, the ordinary makes the great, heroes come from the people, and ordinary people are brought into the center of hero writing [12]. The design of the "interlude" plot provides a concrete observation angle for this. Through the interlude plot, players can enter the perspectives of different characters and control non-protagonist characters such as refugees, ordinary soldiers, and other squad members, personally experiencing the difficulties and choices they face. This design not only supplements the main perspective centered on the "commander", but also makes the stories of multiple characters interweave with each other, enhancing the perceptibility of the people's history view. More importantly, the temporary conversion of identity shortens the "onlooker" distance between players and ordinary characters, enabling players to further shift from watching others' stories to participating in their situations and actions through role substitution.

At the same time, the multi-line parallel design of the plot also strengthens the narrative logic of "group collaboration". In chapters such as *Nine Dragon Ring City* and *The Decline of the Winter Crown*, the actions of different characters unfold along their respective story lines. Players are able to participate in the experiences of different characters, and see how seemingly scattered individual actions jointly point to the continuation of human civilization. This structure further weakens the narrative mode of the hero's "solo show", and presents history as a process in which countless individual actions are intertwined with each other.

In summary, through the expression methods specific to the game medium such as player role positioning, perspective conversion, and multi-line narration, *Punishing: Gray Raven* makes the people's history view no longer just a value concept told in the plot, but gains the possibility of being transformed into concrete game experience.

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4. Discussion

4.1. Why the game medium can make the people's history view "experiencable"

Compared with traditional media such as film and television and literature, digital games have unique advantages in the expression of the people's history view, mainly reflected in two aspects: interactive participation and immersive experience. The viewers of film and television works are always in the perspective of "onlookers", and there is always a certain psychological distance between the audience and the characters. In digital games that value plot text, such as *Punishing: Gray Raven*, players can personally manipulate characters to participate in actions and experience difficulties, and this interaction mode can make players more perceive the value connotation carried by the text. After players manipulate ordinary soldiers to fight with infected bodies, or manipulate refugees to avoid the pursuit of infected bodies, the immersion of the plot is often further deepened.

At the same time, the ensemble narration of *Punishing: Gray Raven* also echoes the attention paid to ordinary characters in the new mass literature and art in recent years. Compared with the hero narration that concentrates the power to change the world on the "chosen one", the story logic of "ordinary people supporting heroes" and "ordinary people can also become heroes" brings more ordinary people's lives, choices, and actions into the narrative center. Real cases such as ordinary riders participating in material transportation in the Chongqing mountain fire rescue also make "ordinary people forming strength in joint practice" a comprehensible social experience. The writing of collective collaboration and jointly holding up the future in *Punishing: Gray Raven* forms a certain echo with this experience.

4.2. Why the subject of game narration shifts from hero to people

The attention to ordinary characters in literary and artistic creation in recent years is not an isolated phenomenon; it echoes the prominence of the people's subject consciousness in literary and artistic expression. The traditional hero narration concentrates the key force to push history on a certain person, and the underpinning of its world view promotes that: history is decided by a few extraordinary figures, and the public is the object waiting to be saved.

At the same time, in recent years, literary and artistic creation has paid more attention to the emotional needs, life experience, and individual value of ordinary people. Contemporary literary and artistic creation must care for the survival experience of ordinary people, and the grand history needs to be revealed through the fate texture of ordinary people [13]. From the perspective of the people's history view, this narrative change is mainly reflected in three aspects: first, the awakening of the subjectivity of ordinary people—the people break through the role positioning of pure beneficiaries, actively participate in social practice, express their own interest demands, and carry out value judgment [14]; second, the re-affirmation of collective power—in the present where global risks and individual dilemmas coexist, the narrative of group collaboration can further present the relationship of "solidarity" and "mutual help" between individuals; third, the "popularization" of heroes—heroes should come from the people and return to the people, rather than be extraordinary beings above the people.

Through the narrative logic that "heroes can save the world because every small person paves the way for the hero", *Punishing: Gray Raven* makes a concrete literary and artistic presentation of the above three aspects. It never denies the role of heroes, but emphasizes that the hero's "appearance" relies on the paving and support of countless ordinary people. This "hero-people" relationship does not replace heroes with the people, but puts heroes back into the people.

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4.3. From "cultural symbol" to "value narration": implications for the value expression of domestic games

Punishing: Gray Raven provides a new value communication path for domestic digital games and wider literary and artistic creation: replacing shallow symbol piling and slogan-style propaganda with deep value resonance.

In the past, domestic games mostly relied on distinctive national-style visual elements, such as ink painting style, ancient architecture, and traditional clothing, in cultural output and value expression. This strategy enhances cultural recognition, but distinctive cultural symbols do not necessarily bring deep value identity. The deeper problem is that although some works heavily adopt national-style visual elements, their narrative core may still follow traditional frameworks such as individualism and heroism.

The inspiration brought by *Punishing: Gray Raven* is: it chooses a "de-symbolized" value expression path. The game does not deliberately pile up traditional Chinese cultural symbols (although some versions involve Eastern elements); its narrative core—the subjectivity of ordinary people, collective collaboration, the extraordinary in the ordinary, history created by the people, and so on—precisely constitutes a deeper value resonance with contemporary Chinese culture. This "value narration" transcends the simple "cultural narration", enabling players to naturally participate in the understanding process of the people's history view in the process of identifying with the story and characters. The significance of this path lies in: it provides new ideas for the value expression of domestic literature and art—not relying on "heterogeneous cultural symbols" to attract curious eyes, but embedding the value core to be expressed into the story itself through the fate of characters and collective actions, and handing it over to players to participate and experience personally.

5. Conclusion

From the resolve of researchers in *Sea of Fire at the World's End* who voluntarily cut their food, to the back of nameless soldiers in *Monument of Fire, Forged Spine* who calmly go to death, to the charge of officers and old miners in *A Better Tomorrow* who rush side by side toward the virus against the tide—*Punishing: Gray Raven* tells us with one story after another of ordinary people: history has never belonged only to heroes; it belongs to every ordinary person who tries their best to survive and live. The study finds that through multiple character building and ensemble narration, *Punishing: Gray Raven* expands the force of historical action from a few core figures to the joint practice of ordinary individuals. Thus, the presentation of the people's history view in digital games does not necessarily rely on direct theoretical preaching, but can be embedded in character fate, collective action, and player participation. The meaning it carries is not limited to entertainment, but also makes the abstract concept of "the people" obtain a more concrete and perceptible expression in digital games. And this may be exactly the most cherished value of literary and artistic works in the digital age.

Of course, this study has certain research limitations. The study mainly adopts plot text analysis, and has not yet examined the actual acceptance effect of players through questionnaires, interviews, and other methods; in the future, player research can be combined to further verify the relationship between different narrative mechanisms and value identity.

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