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Reframing Traditional Embodiment in the Digital Realm: The Gamified Transduction and Postmodern Expression of Cultural Symbols from an Affect Theory Perspective

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Abstract: Originating in Spinoza's philosophy and further developed by scholars such as Deleuze and Massumi, Affect Theory provides a novel analytical lens that transcends the traditional semiotic paradigm in cultural studies. By emphasizing pre-conscious, bodily, and relational intensities, Affect Theory allows for a deeper understanding of how cultural meanings are experienced and transformed beyond static signs. In the contemporary media landscape, digital games have emerged as dynamic platforms for cultural dissemination, distinguished by features such as multisensory embodied experiences, real-time interactive affective flows, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of postmodern symbols. These characteristics render digital games particularly well-suited for the generation, modulation, and transduction of affect, creating immersive experiences that engage players on both cognitive and corporeal levels. Despite this potential, there exists a notable gap in scholarly research regarding the gamified transduction and expressive mechanisms of traditional cultural symbols within digital games, especially when examined through the lens of Affect Theory. Addressing this gap, the present study analyzes representative Chinese game cases to uncover the deep mechanisms through which traditional cultural elements are effectively integrated into gameplay. The research emphasizes how postmodern expressive techniques, such as non-linear narratives, interactive symbolism, and embodied feedback loops, can mediate the integration of traditional culture into the player's operational and experiential engagement, thereby evoking bodily affect, enhancing immersion, and reshaping dynamic processes of "digital embodiment." Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the affective integration of traditional cultural symbols in games can achieve cultural communication effects that go far beyond mere visual reproduction or symbolic representation. By foregrounding affective experience and embodied interaction, the research provides critical theoretical insights into innovative pathways for cultural heritage transmission in the digital age, offering a framework for understanding how games can serve as transformative media for preserving, activating, and reinterpreting cultural traditions in contemporary society.

Keywords: affect theory; traditional culture; gamified transduction; digital embodiment

1. Introduction

Amidst the accelerating integration of globalization and digital technologies, the transmission, preservation, and innovation of traditional culture increasingly require novel pathways that resonate with contemporary societal dynamics and the experiential habits of younger generations. Digital games, as an emerging medium that combines

immersion, interactivity, and multisensory engagement, have become a particularly potent platform for cultural dissemination and experiential reconstruction. By leveraging interactive rule systems, narrative structures, and embodied gameplay mechanics, games provide unprecedented opportunities to connect traditional cultural heritage with contemporary youth audiences, offering both aesthetic enjoyment and meaningful cultural engagement.

Despite this potential, the effective transmission of traditional culture through gaming media faces two major challenges. First, there is often a failure of affective transmission, wherein many young players perceive traditional culture primarily on a symbolic or superficial level, lacking deep embodied engagement. This limited interaction reduces the likelihood of forming meaningful cultural identification and appreciation among local youth. Second, the cross-cultural efficacy of such transmissions remains constrained, as it is challenging for games to evoke profound emotional resonance and comprehension among players from different cultural backgrounds, thereby limiting the broader communicative potential of traditional cultural elements.

Affect Theory, which originates from Spinoza's philosophy and has been further developed by modern scholars such as Deleuze and Massumi, emphasizes pre-conscious, relational, and fluid bodily intensities. By focusing on affective potential and bodily responsiveness rather than solely on symbolic interpretation, this theoretical framework provides a robust philosophical and methodological foundation for examining cultural transmission in interactive media. Through the lens of Affect Theory, this study investigates how traditional cultural symbols embedded in games can utilize game rule systems, interactive mechanics, and embodied feedback loops to stimulate and guide players' deep affective responses. In doing so, digital games emerge as effective sites for living cultural transduction, enabling profound emotional connectivity, experiential understanding, and the dynamic re-interpretation of cultural heritage in the digital age.

This research ultimately aims to illuminate how games can function as active mediators of cultural affect, offering insights into innovative pathways for sustaining and evolving traditional culture through immersive and interactive digital practices.

2. The Mediatic Logic of Affect Theory-Enabled Gamified Transduction for Traditional Culture

2.1. Digital Games as Affective Fields for Transmitting Traditional Culture

The genealogy of Affect Theory traces its origins to Spinoza's Ethics, which defines affect as "the affections of the body by which the body's power of acting is increased or diminished, aided or constrained" [1]. Spinoza categorized affects into three fundamental types-joy, sorrow, and desire-and this foundational work precipitated a paradigm shift: the body came to be recognized not merely as a subordinate appendage of the mind, but as ontologically inseparable from it. Subsequent elaborations by Deleuze and Massumi foregrounded the "primacy" of the affect-generating body and the pivotal role of "intensity" in affective phenomena, thereby challenging content-centric cognitive frameworks. These theoretical advancements introduced affective strategies into traditional cultural studies, reclaiming "affective movement" and "bodily sensation" (elements long overlooked in traditional cultural research) and emphasizing their indispensability to cultural studies and transmission. Ultimately, the paradigmatic innovation of the "affective turn" lays the theoretical groundwork for conceptualizing digital games as "affective generators" in the transmission of traditional culture.

As an affective medium, digital games create virtual spaces that transcend physical reality. By integrating universally resonant values from Chinese traditional culture, they establish a distinctive field connecting culturally diverse performer-participant communities. Within this field, players assume virtual identities to engage in embodied practices, all while interacting with multisensory-integrated designs. Furthermore, shared experiences and emotional memories-forged with non-player characters (NPCs) and other

players are heightened through game narratives and quests. Crucially, players move beyond passive observation of cultural symbols to actively engage with and experience these symbols within the virtual world. Collectively, these processes enrich players' affective experiences, reduce the psychological distance to cultural expressions, and strengthen their cognitive acceptance of traditional culture.

Transmitting traditional culture through the affective fields of digital games involves leveraging game mechanics to transform cultural elements into operable, experiential, participatory, and meaningful content. Players' interactions and emotional investments converge to form robust affective fields centered on traditional culture, enhancing the appeal and impact of cultural transmission. As Chinese scholars Xie Qingwei and Li Wenyi observed in their study on cinema and affect: "Viewers re-examine relationships between physical corporality and individual volition, human values and rational cognition, as well as the steadfastness or vulnerability of subjective convictions amid mass culture represented by cinema" [2]. Digital games share this capacity: when traditional culture is reconstructed within them, it prompts a reassessment of cultural values. The heightened interactivity and depth of participation in games further strengthen players' emotional resonance with traditional culture.

2.2. Gamified Transduction Mechanisms for Traditional Culture: Embodiment and Interaction Postmodern Expression Reconstructing Gamified Transduction Practices for Cultural Symbols

As the core concept of this study, "gamified transduction" refers to the process of transforming traditional cultural symbols—including material forms (e.g., the guqin, Hanfu, and mortise-tenon joints) and intangible forms (e.g., ritual etiquette and philosophical concepts)—into operable, experiential, and participatory content within digital games. Guided by Affect Theory, this process leverages game mechanics to activate players' bodily perceptions and affective resonance. Its essence lies in transcending the mere visual reproduction of symbols, enabling the transmission and transformation of cultural meaning from "superficial symbolic cognition" to "embodied in-depth understanding."

Against the backdrop of digital cultural communication, gamified transduction addresses two key challenges highlighted in the introduction: it mitigates "affective transmission failure" by linking cultural symbols to tangible bodily experiences, and reduces "cross-cultural discount" by embedding cultural connotations in accessible game interactions.

Achieving gamified transduction of traditional culture requires connecting players' emotions to their bodily perceptions. Activating players' physical experiences intensifies their emotional cognition, ultimately fostering resonance with traditional culture. Affect emerges at the intersection of content and the body—and in digital games, this intersection is realized through virtual avatars: players typically control avatars to establish bodily connections, using finger gestures or controller operations. Certain Chinese games, such as *Justice in the Water*, enhance this interactivity via haptic feedback and sensor technology. For example, when players direct their avatars to perform on classical instruments like the guqin, the game triggers synchronized musical and haptic responses, transforming the interface into a simulated zither. Fingertip interactions on the screen generate authentic performance sensations, reinvigorating cultural symbols; even players unfamiliar with the guqin in real life can activate sensory channels through this process, forging deeper cognitive connections to Chinese traditional culture.

Similarly, *Justice in the Water* allows players to customize their avatars' outfits with diverse Hanfu styles—a design that aligns with T.L Taylor's (2002) insight into avatars as identity-building tools. Taylor notes: "Avatars, in fact, come to provide access points in the creation of identity and social life. The bodies people use in these spaces provide a means to live digitally – to fully inhabit the world. It is not simply that users exist as just "mind", but instead construct their identities through avatars" [3]. This identity-building

function becomes particularly impactful for cross-cultural transmission: after the "digital transmutation" (defined as the adaptive transformation of traditional cultural forms in digital media, preserving core meanings while optimizing for virtual interaction) of traditional culture, players from diverse backgrounds can temporarily embody "carriers of foreign cultures" in games, integrating their "intra-cultural self" (real-world cultural identity) with an "inter-cultural self" (virtual identity shaped by the game's cultural elements).

This identity integration begins as early as the avatar construction phase, as exemplified by the Chinese domestic game Justice in the Water. Initially, players build their in-game avatars through "character customization" (e.g., adjusting facial contours, selecting hairstyles) and by wearing culturally distinctive elements like Hanfu. The virtual facial features in the game's customization library are modeled after Chinese facial characteristics-meaning players with Western facial features in real life can instantly adopt cross-cultural facial images in the game. These visual differences guide them to develop new perceptions of Chinese cultural aesthetics, a process further deepened by the game's Hanfu trial function. Through gamified transduction, the detailed patterns and unique silhouettes of Hanfu enable players to gain novel digital embodied experiences at the sensory level.

Beyond individual customization, avatars also facilitate cultural embedding through social interaction: when changing attire, avatars display lifelike reactions (e.g., self-admiration), and players engage in social exchanges via in-game photo-taking. This transforms static cultural symbols (e.g., Hanfu as a clothing style) into dynamic social practices. By anchoring culture in bodily perception during gameplay, the sensory feedback from these interactions effectively reduces cross-cultural misunderstandings, bridging communication gaps stemming from cultural differences.

In addition to embodied interaction, virtual avatars' cognitive engagement with traditional culture is deepened through in-game reward-punishment mechanisms. Most exploration systems are paired with incentive structures, where rewards are granted after solving puzzles-and these puzzles often embed traditional cultural knowledge. Take the Chinese game Honkai: Star Rail as an example: its fictional realm "Luofu," inspired by traditional Chinese culture, features hidden "Rùi Záo Liù Hé" puzzle chests, whose design is conceptually rooted in mortise-tenon joint principles (a core technique in traditional Chinese woodworking). These puzzles consist of eight blocks arranged in a 2x2 Rubik's Cube-like structure; players solve them by manipulating rotational mechanisms on both sides to align solid and hollow blocks.

The combination of open-world exploration, puzzle-solving challenges, and post-solution reward stimulation delivers multidimensional sensory stimuli. Crucially, this form of gamified transduction transcends mere symbolic recognition of traditional craftsmanship, achieving a "symbol-to-knowledge" conversion. As Chinese scholars Li Yue, Niu Xueying, and He Wei note: "Digital games that demonstrate traditional cultural techniques while enabling step-by-step player participation represent a primary methodology for cultural transmission at the knowledge-realm level" [4]. When avatars engage in these culturally infused activities, "knowledge embodiment" occurs concurrently-affect-driven engagement intensifies the osmosis of cultural knowledge, while also enriching the depth of map exploration, driving cultural discovery, and conveying the wisdom inherent in Chinese traditional craftsmanship.

3. Postmodern Expression Reconstructing Gamified Transduction Practices for Cultural Symbols

3.1. Postmodern Deconstruction Mechanisms: Symbolic Pastiche and Parody

As a highly interactive emerging field for traditional culture transmission, electronic games exhibit profound postmodernity. Designated as "the Ninth Art," they must represent reality both materially and spiritually during cultural dissemination. Scholar

Hiroki Azuma proposed "ludic realism," asserting that games do not entirely detach from reality but actively re-present the real world [5]. Representing reality within games necessitates postmodern methodologies, with symbolic pastiche being a primary technique. This approach deconstructs traditional culture while amplifying its underlying values-free combining cultural symbols across eras, styles, and genres to liberate artistic and cultural significance from traditional contexts. Integration with in-game worldviews ultimately achieves dual representation of spiritual and material realms.

Taking the Chinese game Honkai: Star Rail as an example, its expansive universe requires protagonists to journey across planets via interstellar travel, developing narratives within diverse cultural settings. Each planet synthesizes real-world cultural blueprints: "Xianzhou Luofu" integrates Chinese cosmology, while "Penacony" merges 1920s American jazz-age metropolitan culture. Such cultural pastiche diversifies the game's expressive pathways. A concrete manifestation occurs in Luofu's design: this region transcends conventional planetary concepts, manifesting as a massive "immortal ark" inspired by the Taoist notion of "immortal mountains" -essentially an interstellar flagship. It merges mechanical propulsion technology with pervasive Chinese architectural elements. Embedding traditional culture within a cosmic vessel simultaneously aligns with the game's interstellar exploration framework and constructs a spatial juxtaposition of Chinese heritage within digital techno-spheres. This generates tension between cultural familiarity and futuristic estrangement, compelling players to re-examine traditional culture and heightening experiential engagement.

Beyond symbolic pastiche, digital games frequently employ parody to reinterpret traditional cultural significances, enhancing accessibility for global audiences. Revisiting Luofu in Honkai: Star Rail, the concept of "longevity" -a richly documented symbol in Chinese tradition-serves as illustration. The Chinese legend "Xu Fu's Eastern Voyage" recounts Emperor Qin Shi Huang's obsessive pursuit of immortality, dispatching Xu Fu with youths to seek elixirs, epitomizing imperial ambition. The game parodies this narrative: Luofu's ancestors seek blessings from the longevity-granting "Abundance Aeon", triggering catastrophic mutations from immortality's side effects. This sci-fi reframing advances the exploration narrative while critiquing historical tragedies rooted in imperial overreach. Such speculative reconstructions of historical lore constitute not only cultural re-creation but also cathartic reframing of traumatic legacies, enabling historically-informed perspectives.

The application of postmodern techniques like pastiche and parody in digital games allows tradition to inspire game development while rendering universal human themes embedded within culture more intelligible across audiences. Though the nuances of "Xu Fu's Eastern Voyage" may elude global players, the underlying motifs of longevity obsession and expansionist ambition resonate transhistorically. Similarly, while the mythical grandeur of "immortal mountains" may be culturally specific, their reimagining as cloud-kissed cosmic battleships conveys Chinese cultural magnificence palpably. Postmodern expression thus facilitates cultural reception and affective resonance by recontextualizing tradition within accessible frameworks.

3.2. *Embodied Narration: Affective Contagion and the Reconfiguration of Cultural Meaning*

In Brian Massumi's work *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (2002), he rigorously distinguishes between "Emotional Empathy" and "Affective Contagion" [6]. Massumi argues that affect possesses autonomy and transpersonality; it is essentially a self-propagating contagiousness that spreads through proximity or resonance between flesh-and-blood bodies and incorporeal forces. This means the carriers of Affective Contagion are not limited to physical bodies-environmental atmospheres, media signals, and spatial energies also serve as crucial vehicles for its diffusion.

Current scholarly research predominantly focuses on "emotional transmission" in narrative resonance, often overlooking the foundational role of Affective Contagion in

cultural communication. Specifically, the "emotional transmission" induced by the postmodern expression of traditional culture in games essentially involves presenting plots embedded with traditional cultural symbols through postmodern narrative techniques, allowing players to empathize with characters by understanding the story. In contrast, the "Affective Contagion" triggered by such postmodern expression deserves greater attention—it does not rely on lagged feedback from plot cognition but occurs in real time as players personally experience the game's narrative, penetrating cultural emotions through bodily perception as the starting point.

The "Class Dungeons" design in the Chinese domestic game *Justice in the Water* exemplifies this mechanism. Centered on the professional characteristics of each class, the game constructs exclusive dungeons based on the stories of renowned Chinese historical figures, enabling players to immersively experience the historical figures' mental states and the authentic scenarios of their stories. Among these, the Class Dungeon for the "Xuanji" profession takes Zhuge Liang—a prominent figure from the Three Kingdoms period—and his work *Chu Shi Biao* (Memorial on Departing the Expedition) as core materials, constructing a field for the occurrence of Affective Contagion through a dual design of "mechanical interaction + narrative reconstruction."

From a mechanical perspective, the dungeon naturally forms a "shared experiential space" for multiple co-present players: they must collaboratively step on and shift between different nodes of the Bagua formation within a specified time to conquer the dungeon. The corresponding penalty mechanism precisely aligns with the triggering logic of Affective Contagion—stepping on the wrong node or failing to complete the task on time results in the player's health depletion, accompanied by the character's painful groans as auditory feedback, while the screen displays a blood-red overlay due to reduced health. The visual warning of the blood-red screen and the auditory feedback of the character's groans create a strong sensory resonance. Meanwhile, the high-difficulty collaborative pressure of the dungeon further transforms individual tension into transmissible collective emotion, allowing every player to intuitively perceive the historical atmosphere of "a critical moment of survival" as depicted in *Chu Shi Biao*.

On a deeper level, the reconstruction of cultural meaning is reinforced through narrative ingenuity. Within the dungeon, Zhuge Liang's image undergoes a dual transformation of stance and mental state: initially, players must battle him—tormented by the regret of failing to restore the Han Dynasty in his lifetime, Zhuge Liang's spirit succumbs to inner demons and becomes a challenge within the dungeon. This setting often evokes inner conflict and resistance among Xuanji players: Zhuge Liang has always been portrayed as a positive and meaningful figure in various narratives, embodying loyalty, patriotism, and wisdom. As a result, players naturally feel "reluctant" to draw their swords against him. As the dungeon progresses, players collaborate to dispel Zhuge Liang's inner demons, helping him regain clarity and eventually forming an alliance. Together, they fulfill the unfulfilled dream of "unifying the world under the Han Dynasty" in the virtual realm. This narrative reconstruction allows players to experience the contrast in the character's stance, gaining an illusory yet intense sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Moreover, it deepens their three-dimensional understanding of Zhuge Liang as a flesh-and-blood, just, and kind traditional cultural icon.

The entire process clearly illustrates the core mechanism through which games trigger Affective Contagion using traditional cultural elements: every player is no longer a spectator of history but a participant in it. The Affective Contagion mechanism strips players of their sense of individual operational security, forcing the emergence of collaborative empathy. Ultimately, the spiritual core of the Three Kingdoms culture—"upholding loyalty and unity"—is elevated into a collective emotional ritual, achieving the creative reconfiguration of traditional cultural meaning.

4. Conclusion

Technological advancements have bridged games with lived experience and cultural heritage. Reconstructing digital embodiment within games and leveraging postmodern expressive methods for the gamified transduction of traditional culture can effectively foster global cultural exchange and mutual learning. Digital games excavate the contemporary value of traditional culture through their distinctive multisensory and highly interactive experiences. Concurrently, introducing Affect Theory into studies of cultural transmission and digital game media signifies an embodied turn that extends beyond purely artistic analyses of games and tradition. This approach prompts critical reflection on virtual-reality models, stimulates new theoretical and practical explorations of in-game avatars, and opens innovative developmental pathways for gaming technology applications. Ultimately, it achieves profound practical significance by utilizing virtual avatars to refine affective contagion and amplify cultural reconfiguration.

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