

Imagination Consumption as a Driver for Cross-Media Adaptation of Game IPs: A Case Study of Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory

Xingzhu Guo*

Guangxi University, Nanning 530000, Guangxi, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

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Abstract: In the context of digital media culture, “imagination consumption” as an emerging paradigm of cultural consumption is gradually becoming a key driving force behind transmedia storytelling. Taking Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory as the research object, this paper explores how, during the process of animation adaptation, game IPs facilitate an identity shift from “controlling subject” to “emotional spectator” through user participation, narrative restructuring, and visual translation. “Imagination consumption” not only shapes the modes of user engagement but also restructures the production mechanisms and communication pathways of cultural products. This study aims to provide a practical reference and strategic insights for the cross-media development of original IPs in the current media environment.

Keywords: Imagination consumption; transmedia storytelling; game adaptation; Honor of Kings

Online publication:

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of rapid advances in digital culture and media convergence, the forms of cultural consumption are undergoing a phased transformation. As human material production and daily life continue to be increasingly satisfied, and as people pursue a richer spiritual and cultural existence, imagination and creativity have become deeply embedded in contemporary cinematic artistic creation, emerging as a significant consumer product for the general public—namely, imagination consumption^[1]. As an emerging mechanism of user participation, imagination consumption has increasingly become a major topic in contemporary media studies. It not only redefines the relationship between users and cultural texts but also triggers profound changes in content production, IP operations, and narrative strategies. Users are no longer passive recipients of information; rather, they participate deeply as “meaning co-constructors” in the construction and re-creation of cultural content, thereby driving a paradigm shift from traditional “one-way communication” to “co-creative collaboration.”

As a phenomenally successful domestic mobile game in China, Honor of Kings has, since its launch in 2015, leveraged its expansive world-building framework and continuously expandable character roster to attract hundreds

of millions of users who engage in emotional projection and cultural re-creation. Its official spin-off series, *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory*, garnered widespread public attention upon release. As a significant representative of cross-media adaptation of a domestic Chinese game IP, *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* demonstrates how “imagination consumption” drives the successful translation of game content into the medium of animation. In terms of narrative structure, visual style, and emotional mechanisms, the series actively responds to and strategically designs users’ imaginative frameworks. This paper takes this animated work as a core case study to systematically analyze how the mechanism of “imagination consumption” is practically transformed in transmedia storytelling, and to explore the development pathways and practical challenges of original Chinese IP development under the impetus of this mechanism.

2. Imagination consumption: The intrinsic driving force of transmedia storytelling

2.1. Imagination consumption: A new consumption paradigm in the digital cultural context

With the deepening development of media convergence and digital culture, users’ cultural consumption behaviors are undergoing a structural transformation. The traditional consumption model aimed at “information acquisition” or “entertainment and relaxation” is gradually shifting toward a mechanism of “imagination consumption” characterized by imaginative participation, emotional projection, and meaning co-construction. This type of consumption is no longer a unidirectional “text-audience” structure; rather, it presents a dynamic cultural cycle of “text–user–retext”^[2].

Games, especially MOBA games with well-developed worldviews and high levels of participatory mechanisms, represent the most typical platform for imagination consumption. Since its launch, *Honor of Kings*, with its multi-layered world settings, character backstories, and non-linear textual structures, has provided users with vast room for re-creation. In the “Chang’an Year” storyline, the settings of the mechanist arts and the entanglements of love and hatred among the heroes, though presented only in fragmented form within the game, have been continuously spliced and reconstructed by players in online spaces, forming a folk-constructed “*Honor of Kings* universe.” When launching the new hero Lan, Tencent produced a CG animation titled *Target*, which became highly popular at the time, constructing a backstory for the new hero while also attracting a large number of new users. Subsequently, many CG animations received widespread acclaim, laying a broad grassroots foundation for the subsequent launch of the spin-off series *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory*.

Behind this phenomenon lies a transformation in users’ cultural identity. From early “content receivers,” they have evolved into “meaning co-constructors”; from “consumers” in the platform economy, they have grown into “reproducers of symbolic capital.” “Imagination consumption” is precisely the theoretical reflection of this transformation trend.

2.2. Transmedia storytelling: Practical pathways and transformation mechanisms of imagination consumption

The concept of “transmedia storytelling” was first proposed by Henry Jenkins in his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, referring to “a story that unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. Ideally, each medium does what it does best”^[3]. This means that each media form must leverage its unique narrative functions to stimulate and sustain users’ imaginative participation jointly.

Driven by imagination consumption, how to effectively translate the game’s quest mechanisms and character settings into the plot and conflicts of the animation is key to the success of the adaptation. In *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory*, the “mechanist city,” familiar to mobile game users, is not only visualized and constructed to enhance spatial narration but also undertakes the core function of expanding the worldview. The user’s “controller identity” in the game needs to be transformed into an “emotional participant” in the animation. Through first-person shots, quasi-interactive narrative structures, and the setting of key visual nodes, the adapted work must achieve an identity shift of “emotional identification” while preserving user immersion. The Mode of formation for the collective consciousness is also related. Finally, the purpose of transmedia storytelling is not to release a single work but rather, through the connections among all these media

platforms, it aims to allow users to rebuild story threads, relive the charm of characters, trigger memories, and finally attain a sense of identity via “consensual narration” across the platforms. The reason that “Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory” can attract non-game audiences is that it has successfully spread emotions on all sides of social media.

3. Adaptation practices driven by imagination consumption

3.1. Foundation of adaptation: Dual logic of IP universe construction and audience expectations

Honor of Kings has incrementally added more world-building materials over time, which now include character backgrounds, space and time settings, cultural systems, racial hierarchies, etc., and these materials are available for use in numerous other forms of media. Its worldview includes mythology, history, and fantasy; the characters are closely linked, and it has good structural flexibility and potential for the recombination of cultural symbols.

Based on the actual demands of consumers, a more diverse group of cultural consumers has been added in recent years. The first group of people is very familiar with the settings and seeks detailed restoration and character consistency; the second group is more concerned about the plot, character emotions, and visual experience. Therefore, the adaptation will use a dual-track narrative system of “driving the main plot + expanding branches” to meet the demands of fans and attract a large number of people.

Animation is a type of non-interactive but visually rich material that can prolong the life of a game’s intellectual property and have a multiplying effect in the spread process of short videos, community discussions and user-generated content (UGC). Therefore, the release of Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory is not only based on the original IP’s story but also a good move for the new digital content model.

3.2. Adaptation strategy: Synergistic transformation of narrative structure and visual presentation

When transforming a game IP into an animation, it should be in line with the character design and world-building of that game. Honor of Kings has a large number of characters with rich but not always connected backgrounds; thus, it is somewhat difficult to adapt them to a particular style. The first problem is how to take the dispersed and irregular environment of the game and build a complete, regular narrative system, as well as how to create new experiences for the audience in the language of pictures that meet their desire for “immersive viewing”.

Some scholars have pointed out that current film-game integration remains at the primary stage of “visual grafting” rather than “narrative interaction,” with technical investment concentrated on visual spectacle while neglecting the underlying architecture of game-based narration^[4]. The reliance of animation media on images and visual spectacles makes artistic design an important aspect of adaptation. The animation integrates Eastern architectural elements, steampunk mechanical styles, and traditional Chinese color tones in the construction of Chang’an’s mechanist city. This is not only a visually distinctive system but also a reshaping of cultural style. Through the localized expression of visual style, it constructs a narrative context with a distinctive Eastern aesthetic identity, guided by “cultural distinction” rather than “replication and restoration,” achieving a cross-media transformation from “functional scene” to “narrative space.”

3.3. Structural tensions: Realistic dilemmas amid the satisfaction of imagination consumption

Although Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory has a relatively high degree of completion in its adaptation strategy, as a game IP adaptation into animation, it inevitably still faces structural tensions and dilemmas.

The first is the structural tension of audience stratification. Core players and general audiences have obvious differences in their reception pathways. The former prefer detailed settings and character restoration, while the latter focus more on plot smoothness and emotional resonance. If the adaptation leans too much toward one side, it may damage the experience of the other side, leading to evaluation divergence. Existing research has pointed out that in current cross-media adaptations of IPs, it is necessary to take into account both game players and animation audiences, so that the work evokes the exploratory desire, anticipation, and love for the IP itself on both the creator and receiver sides, thereby achieving part

of the intended goals of IP development^[5].

Second is the dissonance caused by the misalignment of media logics. Game logic emphasizes “immediacy” and “system feedback,” while animation focuses more on “rhythmic layering” and plot progression. The different rhythmic tempos of the two, if not handled properly, can easily lead to structural jumps and abrupt motivations in the adaptation. For the sake of visual impact alone, excessively lengthy battle scenes, no matter how exquisite, will lack sufficient motivational foreshadowing, greatly diminishing emotional response.

Finally, there is the balance challenge between commercial logic and cultural responsibility. An animated work not only bears the function of content dissemination within the industrial chain but also shoulders the responsibility of shaping IP value and extending cultural symbols. *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* must simultaneously meet performance indicators such as viewership and click-through rates while maintaining the consistency and aesthetic depth of the IP’s worldview. It must strike a balance between commercial objectives and narrative quality, which often creates a difficult-to-resolve tension.

3.4. User experience: Mechanisms of identity shift and emotional co-construction

Under the leadership of “imagination consumption,” the role of culture in people’s lives has changed from that of “passive receivers” to that of “meaning co-constructors,” and through emotional structure, visual memory and character redesign, *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* has made users “emotional projectors” rather than just “controlling identities” in the game.

The animated show has a number of different storylines, and thus multiple reasons for viewing emotions or morals. Now, people are not only interested in the development of a work but also care deeply about the characters’ lives and choices. After release, as a popular IP animation, many users have voluntarily spread their feedback and created their own works based on it on social media and other user-generated content platforms; thus, an open content co-creation model has been formed and developed, transforming “IP reception” into “cultural participation”.

In this way, the vitality of intellectual property can be enhanced and a three-way relationship among users, platforms and content will be formed to extend and realize transmedia storytelling of culture.

4. Path insights and experience refinement from the adaptation of “Chapter of Glory”

4.1. Content logic guided by imagination consumption

The content logic of the animation practice for *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* has fundamentally changed; it is no longer driven by the content itself but by users, and it has shifted from narration to world-building. The main reason for this change is that “imagination consumption” has been deeply rooted.

In terms of the Design of narrative units, the animation no longer has to be closed-loop causal. It will be easier to construct an open narrative by means of tension in space, symbol and character. Animation has extended the world-building part of “mechanist arts” by means of pictures and structures. Expansion is not only a problem of technical display but also needs to be deeply rooted in various factors, such as the time-space environment and the ideals of heroes, in order to form a rich semantic system. The content logic is relatively simple; it will be easy to interpret in several ways.

For character design, there will be fewer explicit settings for the people in the animation; their stories and origins will be more open-ended. For example, in *Suiyue Chapter (The Chapter of Broken Moon)*, the psychological reasons for Haimen and the change in attitude of Shangguan Wan’er are not explicitly stated or intentionally concealed. It is in this way that the audience will add their own imaginative content and feelings. As such, it has begun to take root in content driven by imagination consumption.

4.2. Typical problems and reflections in adaptation practice

Although *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* demonstrates a relatively high level of industrial production quality and

content integration capability, it still faces multiple practical dilemmas in its adaptation practice. These issues are not only relevant to this animation but also, to a large extent, reflect the institutional bottlenecks prevalent in the cross-media development of Chinese game IPs.

Ensemble characterization is a significant feature of *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory*, and it also caters to players' enthusiasm for the characters. However, during the narrative progression, due to the large number of characters and uneven density of relationships, some characters fail to form effective interaction structures after their appearance. *Suiyue Chapter* and *Mingyun Chapter* (*The Chapter of Fate*) feature Li Bai and Kai as protagonists, respectively. Yet, in order to serve the plot, the supporting characters are to some extent weakened. For example, Qiao's emotional arc loosely ties to the main plot, and Athena's transformation lacks foreshadowing, failing to form a complete emotional arc. In future adaptations, the design of character relationships should be strengthened so that every character serves the main storyline rather than functioning as a decorative prop for the plot.

Game rhythm is primarily driven by interactivity and combat, emphasizing immediate feedback, whereas animation emphasizes audiovisual rhythm and emotional accumulation. In some battle scenes, although the animation achieves skill restoration that facilitates player immersion, it does not simultaneously accomplish the necessary emotional foreshadowing, leading the audience to experience a sense of fragmentation—visually exciting but narratively puzzling. This phenomenon of excessive visual stimulation accompanied by insufficient emotional connection has become common in recent game-to-animation adaptations. To achieve genuine rhythmic coordination, adaptations should convey character attitude changes through action details during combat and present the consequences of actions and emotional reactions after combat.

4.3. Strategic recommendations for the cross-media development of game IPs

Most current game IPs do not systematically consider the feasibility of adaptation to animation, film, and other platforms in the early stages of development, leading to the need for major modifications to settings or supplementary logic during later adaptation, which easily results in “setting fractures.” As game-to-animation adaptation has become a trend, it is advisable to establish “setting pivot zones” and “character blank-leaving areas” during the game development phase, providing nested and supplementable structural space for subsequent adaptations. Additionally, developing documents such as “setting timelines”, “character development files” and “lists of unresolved conflicts” can enhance the sustainability and openness of the content system.

In the past, users of game-adapted animations were merely terminal recipients of content, but in the context of “imagination consumption”, users are also participants in and reproducers of narrative structures. Platforms can appropriately establish institutionalized methods such as co-creation activities for character fates, crowdfunding mechanisms for branching plots, and reward programs for fan works, guiding users to generate secondary content on social and video platforms, thus forming a “socialized extended narrative” of the IP. This achieves IP empowerment, attracts “free (voluntary) publicity” through the IP, and simultaneously feeds back into the game IP through the animation, helping to build sustained content popularity and cultural stickiness. In the game IP adaptation animation *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory*, each episode featured popular characters highly requested by players, which is also a reason for attracting audiences.

5. Conclusion

The practice of cross-media adaptation for *Honor of Kings: Chapter of Glory* shows that “imagination consumption” is playing both a new role and a different way in the current cultural industry: it is a new form of user participation that reorders the logic of content reception, and at the same time, it also constitutes a new logic for content development and shapes the synergistic paths of media narration. Under the lead of this mechanism, various platforms have cooperated to build a cultural ecosystem centered on “emotional belonging”, “symbolic reconstruction” and “world co-construction” in the form of games, animations, and social media, etc.

At present, the adaptations of game intellectual properties still have the problems of scattered settings and weak character connections. To achieve a high-quality narrative leap in IP adaptation, we need to make strategic changes and convert game IPs from “product development” to “cultural construction”, and have “imagination consumption” continuously propel the vitality of culture.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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