The materiality on the hermeneutics of Chinese character-based playable media

Yue-Jin HO
The Open University of Hong Kong
+852 31202498
yjho@ouhk.edu.hk

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INTRODUCTION

This paper suggests the materiality of Chinese characters (including Kanji and Hanja in Japanese and Korean) in playable media (e.g. Chinese text-based interactive artworks and games) not only affects but is an essential factor on how the players interpret the meanings of the texts in a work and the work as a whole.

In "Material Hermeneutics", Don Ihde (2005) suggests a perceptual hermeneutics which "while including texts, goes beyond texts", by including new information that "came into vision through instrumental magnifications". According to Ihde, the role of instruments go beyond simply depicting reality but co-determining what could be interpreted (1999, Verbeek). Ihde (2005) introduced three trajectories to demonstrate the different conditions of textual-material interrelation in such perceptual hermeneutics: material and textual hermeneutics in contrast, opposing each other, or the textual hermeneutics being absent.

In this paper, I will apply Ihde's model to analyse how audiences/participants may interpret the meaning of several Chinese text-based games and interactive artworks. In these cases, the literal and/or metaphorical meanings of the text (characters) in or parasitic to a specific work partly or significantly contradict with their material hermeneutics of the same work. Such material hermeneutics is presented or embedded in the physical setting and/or the interactive mechanism of the works. The tension between the textual and material interpretation in these works is partly due to the materiality of Chinese characters to certain extent. As a writing system, there is a radical disjuncture between the western alphabetic system and the Chinese character-based one, and Cayley suggests that the differences of their linguistic structures are transported into the digital and interactive environment (cited in Stefans 2003). For example, modern computer systems are based on alphabetical languages, so all popular Chinese computer systems need to go through the process of "reinterpreting and rendering" (Cayley 2003, 281). All characters are listed as alphanumeric codes in the Unicode table and being decoded/encoded into characters when the users input the corresponding codes and the programs output the texts. The structure of the characters and the interaction mechanism with the characters contribute to the, sometimes contradicting, multi-layered interpretation of the works.

One of the examples is Keith Leung's (a.k.a. Gaybird) *Home* and *Home?* series. This work is composed of a few dozens of identical playable sound sculptures which resemble the character of "home" in Chinese. The main component of the character

"home" is the hieroglyph of "pig", and the metaphorical representation behind this hieroglyph changed significantly when this work moved from Australia (2017) to Hong Kong (2019) with a new setting. The difference of the political and cultural connotation of "pig" among these two places plays a part, as the logogramic nature of Chinese allows language-specific materiality interpretation when the participants interact with the work in the new physical space.

By applying the idea of material hermeneutics to analyse various Chinese character-based playable works, this paper will highlight several characteristics on the materiality of Chinese language as an inscription system in a playable and interactive environment.

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