(Early) Modern Forms of Chinese Literary Play:

Database, Interface, and Iconic Characters in *Outlaws of the Marsh* and *Gensō Suikoden*

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The video game series *Fantasy Outlaws of the Marsh* (J. *Gensō Suikoden* 幻想水滸伝; hereafter *Suikoden*), a popular series of role-playing games produced by the Japanese media giant Konami, is purportedly based on the late Ming novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳; hereafter *Outlaws*).[1] Indeed, the game, first

ABSTRACT: The Ming-dynasty novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* famously tells the tale of 108 heroes who band together to fight official corruption from their hideout in the marshes of Mount Liang. In the sixteenth-century novel, these characters are firmly embedded in a narrative that poses the initial assembly and final disbanding of this group of heroes as inevitable. But can we also think of these characters outside of the necessity of plot and the demands of fate? This paper examines these questions through one of the most popular remediations of *Outlaws*, the Konami-produced Japanese video game series *Gensō Suikoden.* To do so, this study draws on terms often associated with contemporary digital culture—database, interface, and algorithm—to question our assumptions about the novel, in particular the way we have prioritized the structure of plot over the charismatic attraction of characters, whether as individuals or as a group of 108.

摘要:《水滸傳》中的一百單八好漢誕生於宋江起義的曆史背景以及明代的章回小說。但於古代讀者而言，他們的人格魅力不局限於此。本文著眼於日本電子遊戲《幻想水滸傳》，通過現代數字文化來分析明代小說，解讀其中獨立於故事情節的特點進而探討如何看待人物形象。

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[1] Between its launch in 1995 and the last published version in 2013, the series has seen five main iterations and six spin-off versions. With some notable exceptions (*Suikoden III* included a storyline divided over three different characters; Suikoden Card Stories

released for Sony's PlayStation in 1995, has borrowed the title of the novel rather prominently. And yet, at first glance it would seem the late twentieth-century video game series and the sixteenth-century novel have nothing in common. The novel, based on a popular rebellion that happened during the rule of Emperor Huizong 徽宗 (r. 1100–1126), is set in the historical Song dynasty and takes place in the peripheral but still identifiable margins of Shandong Province, China.[2] In contrast, the story world of the *Suikoden* games offers its own temporal structure, called the "Harmonian Solar Year Calendar," is set on four completely fantasy-derived continents, and offers as many imaginary countries as it does political systems of government: the "Gaien Dukedom," the "Tinto Republic," and the "Aronia Kingdom." In terms of narrative, we find little in common between the games and the novel, and neither do the characters in the game seem to share much with their *Outlaws* counterparts. How would one compare the *Suikoden I* and *II* game character Valeria with her *Outlaws* "equivalent" Wu Song 武松? The blond-haired female Valeria is "a skilled fencer who trained under Roundier Haia" after which she enlisted with "the Scarlet Moon Empire" to be "eventually assigned to Kwanda Rosman" as a lieutenant. In contrast, Wu Song, a hypermasculine, tiger-slaying, sister-in-law-murdering ruffian, is none of those things.[3]

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emphasized collectable cards and incorporated those into a new battle system), gameplay has been quite consistent across the various versions of the game. For this article, I have focused primarily on *Suikoden II*, released for the PlayStation in 1998. This iteration, according to the video-game sales tracking website VGChartz.com, represents one of the best-selling editions of the game (680,000 units worldwide), accessed December 4, 2023, https://www.vgchartz.com/game/4405/suikoden-ii/. To gain insight into the phenomenon of *Suikoden*, see *Gensō Suikoden daijiten* 幻想水滸伝大辞典, ed. Konami CP jigyōbu コナミ CP 事業部 (Tokyo: Futabasha, 2001); the best English-language resource about the game online is Suikoden Wiki, a FANDOM Games Community website, accessed November 21, 2023, https://suikoden.fandom.com/wiki/Suikoden_Wiki.

[2] In English, the best introduction to the novel remains Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel: "Ssu ta ch'i-shu"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987). For an analysis of the various textual predecessors that eventually were incorporated into the novel, see Richard Gregg Irwin, *The Evolution of a Chinese Novel: "Shui-hu-chuan"* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966). For a recent study that investigates the way the novel became central to the definition of Japanese literature, see William C. Hedberg, *The Japanese Discovery of Chinese Fiction: "The Water Margin" and the Making of a National Canon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019). The nineteenth-century "pictures of the floating world" (*ukiyo-e* 浮世絵) prints of *Outlaws* scenes are arguably as important as the text of the novel (or its various rewritings) in Japan. For a discussion of those prints, see Inge Klompmakers, *Of Brigands and Bravery: Kuniyoshi's Heroes of "Suikoden"* (Leiden, Nld.: Hotei Publishing, 1998).

[3] Despite obvious differences, the characters do share some characteristics of their

That said, the twentieth-century game *Suikoden* and the sixteenth-century novel *Outlaws* share one prominent feature—a large cast of characters. In fact, like the novel, the game offers the player an exact total of 108 different, highly individualized, nicely colorful, and purposefully memorable characters. Indeed, though novel and game share little in plot, what they do share is the quest to bring together all the heroes into a single "band of brothers," offering player and reader a satisfying climax when the magic number of 108 has been reached. Both in terms of the novel and the game, moreover, this cast of characters—both as individual members and as a collection of 108—have been the focus of remarkable fetishization by readers and players. To be sure, there are notable differences between the fetishization as it plays out in the novel and the game, not only between individual heroes (once again, Wu Song is not Valeria) but also in terms of the mechanisms by which these characters have been produced, collected, and appreciated. The deliberate and global merchandizing typical of the late twentieth-century collectible cards and action figures associated with the video game is not the same as the careful textual cataloging and ranking of individual characters found in the paratextual materials of the seventeenth-century editions of the novel.[4] Still, it is remarkable how often, throughout its long history, *Outlaws* has been appreciated not simply as a cohesive narrative but also as a set of characters. Consequently, we may well ask, can we take the idea of a central cast of characters as the beginning of a comparison?

In this article, I want to begin thinking through the relationship between old media and new media, vernacular novel and digital game.

Outlaws predecessors. In the case of Valeria, for instance, she is classed as a formidable warrior like her *Outlaws* counterpart. Similarly, the character Wu Yong 吳用, who in the novel functions as the main strategist of the band of outlaws, is a military genius in each of the different reincarnations of the game (Mathiu Silverberg in *Suikoden*, Shu in *Suikoden II*, Ceasar in *Suikoden III*, and Elanor in *Suikoden IV*). Li Kui 李逵 is reincarnated as Fu Su Lu, a warrior wearing a tiger mask, wielding two battle axes, and known to eat a lot. The overlap between *Outlaws* and *Suikoden* characters tends to decrease with each new iteration of the game.

[4] On the twentieth-century culture of collecting Japanese cultural objects, see Anne Allison, *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). To give one example of the way that the listing of *Outlaws* heroes became a staple of late imperial literary culture, consider how, from the late Ming era into the Qing, contemporary poets were often ranked by comparing them to the 108 heroes of the novel in rosters called "lists of ranked generals" (*dianjianglu* 點將錄); see Yaquan Zhang, "*Dianjianglu*: Literary Criticism with Distinct Chinese Characteristics," *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 3.4 (2009): 628–47.

I do so not to prove that the game has inherited qualities associated with the novel but rather to explore whether any of the aspects that we associate with contemporary video games (and, more generally, digital culture) can be employed to shed new light on late Ming vernacular fiction. Though I will employ terms such as character and plot, in and of themselves these features are decidedly not the basis of my comparison; rather, they are the terms that I seek to redefine through the study of the game.[5] More broadly speaking, I will apply some of the insights gained from looking at a twentieth-century digital game to one of the most famous literary masterpieces of the Ming dynasty so as to question calcified reading habits and long-established scholarly premises. By mapping the most recent remediation of a timeless masterpiece, I aim to alter our understanding of that literary classic by reading it as embedded in and informed by forms of play that tempt us to cross boundaries between literary and ludic media forms, classical and digital scriptural culture, as well as early modern and postmodern time periods.

To do so, I will concentrate on qualities that are often considered exclusive to contemporary digital culture—database, algorithm, and interface—and apply these concepts to the early-modern novel. Specifically, I will argue that novel and game share a management system—a database consisting of a limited set of 108 characters—that, through elementary algorithmic permutations of selection and recombination, allow for the production of a seemingly boundless but clearly defined number of narratives. In addition, I argue that the novel/game provides the reader/player with an interface that promises access to the deep structure of the database itself. Both the novel and the game present this sense of access as a higher level of understanding, a transcendental way of comprehending the world that pierces through the veneer of verisimilitude to reach a deeper set of principles. Of course, this "higher" way of thinking operates differently in the seventeenth versus twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Whereas in the contemporary age this way of thinking is based on algorithms—that is, a mode of thinking that transforms the world into calculable numbers—in

[5] For an overview of the ongoing debate, see Matthew Wilhelm Kapell, "Introduction: The Ludic and Narrative as Dialectic About 'What Games Do,'" in *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies: Critical Essays*, ed. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), pp. 1–16.

the seventeenth century this transcendental mode of thought is better understood as "logorhythmic," meaning literally the "repeated pattern of words." The logorhythmic way of apprehending the world was based on permutations governed by Neo-Confucian, Buddhist, and aesthetic principles: most notably, *li* 理 (principle), *fa* 法 (law), and, in particular, *wen* 文 (pattern or text). Finally, I argue that the combination of interface, database, and logorhythmic thinking is expressed through a fetishization of character by the reader or player. Rather than appreciate characters as embedded in the narrative, the reader is asked to regard these heroes as monadic elements that can be isolated from diegetic space-time. The result is a mode of reading and writing, playing, gazing, and collecting that I term iconic.

Database at Play and the Logorhythmic Logic of *Wen*

I employ the term database to describe the logic that governs the way both the novel and the video game manage their casts of characters. A database, Lev Manovich informs us, is "a structured collection of data . . . organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer."[6] As a result, a database should not be understood as a categorization of knowledge in a Foucauldian sense—that is, as a way of formalizing power by consolidating supposedly fixed categories. Rather, it is a mechanism explicitly geared towards profligate production, a way of organizing different elements that, through a logic of selection and recombination, allows for the rapid construction of a large number of different products and experiences. In the case of the game, for instance, this database logic can be thought of as a way of allowing a single game to employ a cast of different characters to produce endless variations of playing experience. In the case of the novel, we can think of the database as the way a limited set of characters, much like the characters that populate the DC or Marvel universes, still allows for the production of innumerable rewrites, sequels, and retellings across different media.

[6] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p. 208. Crucially Manovich defines the database in contradistinction to narrative, which he considers the primary cultural form of an earlier (cinematic) age.

In the case of the game *Suikoden*, this notion of a database can be employed specifically in two ways. First, and most obviously, the player can draw on a group of 108 different elements, the characters. From this number, the player chooses six characters each time he goes adventuring, allowing the production of a large variety of different formations—the game's battle parties. Second, each of the 108 elements, every individual character, can also be understood as a mini database—that is, a bundle of numerical data that the computer (and the player) can access in order to perform a series of different algorithmic functions.[7] Since both battle parties and individual characters can be constantly reconfigured, the number of permutations that can be produced from these basic elements is arguably unlimited.

The notion of the database makes visible what in literature only too often becomes a problem—that is, the mistaken idea that a character in a novel or play is an actual person, as opposed to an assembly of shared linguistic codes.[8] In the case of video games, we have little problem reconciling the seemingly unique "individuality" of the character with the programmatic nature of the statistics that determine the character's "functionality." Players notoriously identify with the character they play as, yet still feel completely comfortable juxtaposing this visceral identification with the abstract manipulation of numerical statistics.[9] *Suikoden II*, for instance, neatly combines the striking, individual visual appearance of Valeria, on the one hand, with a series of programmatic numbers, on the other: strength 118, hit points 432, defense 161, and the like (fig. 1).

In fact, though some players choose their character primarily on their outer appearance, or "skin," for many players a good deal of the

[7] For an analysis that highlights the notion of characters as composites of elements culled from a database, albeit in a decidedly postmodern fashion, see Hiroki Azuma, *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals*, trans. Jonathan E. Abel and Shion Kono (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[8] For a series of essays that explore the notion of the database in terms of literary analysis, see the articles by Ed Folsom, Jerome McGann, Katherine Hayles, and Jonathan Freedman in "Remapping Genre," ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins, special issue, *PMLA* 122.5 (2007): 1369–647. These essays suggest Manovich may have overstated the distinction between database and narrative.

[9] See David Owen, *Player and Avatar: The Affective Potential of Videogames* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017). Though the close identification between player and character is often considered a truism, we should read such narratives with caution since the impact of new media forms is often registered through similar tales, such as film audiences scared by the sight of an onrushing train, children inspired to moral action by tales of their favorite hero, or country bumpkins failing to understand the artifice of theater.

FIG. 1 Database Numbers and Visual Appearance in Individual Character Profile for Valeria from *Suikoden* II. *Source*: Lotus Prince, "Valeria and Anita in Suikoden II–Lotus Prince Presents," posted November 5, 2020, YouTube video, 0:35, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bT1SLtYjPp4. © 2024 Konami Digital Entertainment B.V.

attraction of the game comes precisely from managing the numbers found in the database hidden underneath.[10] To begin with, there is the combinatory pleasure of creating the strongest possible six-character battle party from the total array of 108 characters, a decision that is made first and foremost by calculating what permutation of attack and defense capabilities will make for the strongest possible combination (fig. 2). Then, on an individual level, there is the ludic pleasure of training and equipping each character so as to have him or her achieve the highest possible statistics. In short, within the game, the player may well identify with his characters, but, in the end, most of the play and quite a bit of the pleasure comes from manipulating database numbers.

Though such an ironic double reading of both surface and depth may seem inapplicable to late imperial Chinese culture, the same kind

[10] On websites dedicated to *Suikoden*, the different ways of enjoying the game can be more easily separated, with some sites offering the complete overview of the characters' statistics across the various iterations of the game and others hosting elections that allow one to choose one's favorite character based on their appearance and back story; see, respectively, *Sutētasu jōi sha: Gensō Suikoden* 2 ステータス上位者: 幻想水滸伝 2, on the website RRPG gēmu kōryaku saito RRPG ゲーム攻略サイト, accessed November 21, 2023, https://rrpg.jp/genso_suikoden_2/higher.html; and *Gensui sōsenkyo* 2023 幻水総選挙 2023, accessed November 21, 2023, https://election.suikoden.info.

FIG. 2 Six-Character Battle Party Confronting Tigers in *Suikoden* II. *Source*: Lotus Prince, "Valeria and Anita in Suikoden II–Lotus Prince Presents," posted November 5, 2020, YouTube video, 0:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bT1SLtYjPp4. © 2024 Konami Digital Entertainment B.V.

of play with surface traits and underlying identity is clearly found throughout *Outlaws* as well. Take, for instance, the character Li Kui, arguably the most violent and anarchistic member of the novel's band of outlaw heroes. In the novel, this character makes a dramatic entrance in chapter 38, when, after creating a ruckus in an inn, he is led up the stairs to be poetically introduced to the heroic leader of the group, Song Jiang 宋江 (and, of course, the reader):

> There is a poem that may serve as testimony:
> His home is in Yizhou, east of the Jade Hills.
> Killing, arson, and violence give him his thrills.
> No need to blacken his face, he's black as a whole,
> His eyes are as red as a burning coal.
> Down by the great riverbank, he grinds his great axes.
> At a pine on the cliff edge, he idly hacks.
> He's strong as a wild bull, rigid as steel.
> The name of Iron Ox strikes universal chill.[11]

[11] Shi Nai'an 施耐庵, *Yibai ershi hui de Shuihu* 一百二十回的水滸, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983), v. 1, p. 70; Shi Nai'an and Luo Guanzhong 羅貫中, *The Tiger*

This brief poem nicely introduces a singular hero, the one and only Iron Ox Li Kui. Upon reading, any reader will immediately recognize this man for the exceptional figure he is and bask in a brief moment of pure, poetic identification. Yet note how this distinctively unique character is composed of a series of separate elements—a black face, a set of axes, a violent disposition, a hometown identified as Yizhou—and finally the all-important moniker "Iron Ox" (*Tie niu* 鐵牛), a name that, like the appreciative gaze of Song Jiang, bestows on this collection of iconic features a semblance of unifying identity.

What is remarkable about characters such as Li Kui, however, is not simply that—like all characters in literary texts—they are constructed from discrete linguistic units and archetypal elements but rather that during the late Ming there was a clear recognition of the portability of such elements.[12] In *Outlaws*, the best example of such a recognition of—as well as play with—these identifying elements is found in chapter 43, when Li Kui meets his counterfeit double, Li Gui 李鬼, a lowlife who has copied all of his characteristic moves and identifying visual marks, including his telltale swarthy face, signature double axes, and trademark moniker.

> Iron Ox [Li Kui] looked at him [Li Gui]. His hair was tied in a red silk bandanna and he wore a robe of rough cloth. He carried a pair of axes and he had blackened his face. Iron Ox shouted back: "Who the fuck are you? And what makes you think you can rob highways here?" The other said, "Want to know my name, do you? Well, it'll frighten you out of your wits! I am the Black Whirlwind, that's who I am!"[13]

In the previous quote, the appreciative gaze of Song Jiang, given lyrical poetic form, turned a series of identifying marks into a single unit,

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Killers: Part Two of "The Marshes of Mount Liang," trans. John Dent-Young and Alex Dent-Young (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1997), p. 314.

[12] As pointed out by Stephen H. West, play with such outward signs of personal identity may well have originated in Song theatrical culture; see "Playing with Food: Performance, Food, and the Aesthetics of Artificiality in the Sung and Yuan," in *HJAS* 57.1 (1997): 67–106, https://doi.org/10.2307/2719361. For an actual example of such displays on the stage, see the *Outlaws* opera *Li Kui Carries Thorns* (*Li Kui fu jing* 李逵負荊) by the Yuan-dynasty author Kang Jinzhi 康進之 (ca. 1250–1300), translated by J. I. Crump, in James Irving Crump, *Chinese Theater in the Days of Kublai Khan* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1980), pp. 200–45.

[13] Shi, *Yibai ershi hui de Shuihu*, v. 1, p. 76; Shi and Luo, *Tiger Killers*, p. 451.

the hero Li Kui. Here, in contrast, the ironic gaze of Li Kui, presented in prose, deconstructs the fake semblance of a hero into nothing more than a slapdash collection of counterfeited signs.[14] For readers, the text offers multiple pleasures, the humor of seeing the fake hero Li Gui unmasked, for instance, or the pride of identifying with the true hero Li Kui. There may even be, as Andrew Plaks would suggest, the joy of irony that recognizes that the true heroism of the hero is in the end not all that different from the base mimicry of the counterfeit.[15] Yet I argue that beneath all those pleasures there is the pleasure of recognizing the way the text can construct or deconstruct a character at will, a playing with the codes of outlaw heroism that resembles that of a child assembling and disassembling the blocks that make up a Lego figurine.

If the narrative surface of *Outlaws* merely plays with such character codes, Jin Shengtan's 金聖嘆 (1610?–1661) seventeenth-century *pingdian* 評點 (critical and editorial) commentaries on the novel turn such play into philosophical thought, expanding the codes that make up the characters to encompass the text as a whole.[16] In his commentaries on the famous moment Wu Song fights the tiger at Jinyang Ridge in chapter 22, for instance, Jin meticulously counts the number of times the author of the novel mentions Wu's signature prop, his wooden staff.[17] In similar fashion, Jin carefully keeps track of all the various verbs

[14] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the important difference between poetry and prose in the text. On understanding vernacular-language Ming-dynasty fiction as a collection of different linguistic registers, see Wei Shang, "Writing and Speech: Rethinking the Issue of Vernaculars in Early Modern China," in *Rethinking East Asian Languages, Vernaculars, and Literacies, 1000–1919*, ed. Benjamin A. Elman (Leiden, Nld.: Brill, 2014), pp. 254–302.

[15] Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, pp. 319–20, 323–27.

[16] For a study of Jin Shengtan's commentaries in terms of philosophy, see Scott W. Gregory, *Bandits in Print: "The Water Margin" and the Transformations of the Chinese Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023), esp. chap. 5, "'The Subtle Art of Phrasing Has Been Extinguished': The Jin Shengtan Edition," pp. 109–34. The most authoritative study of Jin Shengtan's commentaries (and *pingdian* commentary in general) is David L. Rolston, *Traditional Chinese Fiction and Fiction Commentary: Reading and Writing Between the Lines* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); see esp. chap. 2, "Dealing with Jin Shengtan and the Rest of the 'Four Masterworks,'" pp. 51–84.

[17] *Shuihu zhuan huipingben* 水浒传会评本, ed. Chen Xizhong 陈曦钟, Hou Zhongyi 侯忠义, and Lu Yuchuan 鲁玉川, 2 vols. (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1981) [hereafter *SZH*], v. 1, pp. 421–26. For an early study and a translation of the famous passage from Jin Shengtan's commentary on chap. 22 of *Outlaws*, see John Ching-yu Wang, *Chin Sheng-t'an*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972), pp. 75–80.

used to describe Wu's poses associated with the staff: "grasping" (*chao* 綽), "brandishing" (*ti* 提), "dragging" (*hengtuo* 橫拖), "tucking" (*wan* 綰), "laying aside" (*yi* 依), and "swinging" (*lun* 輪). At the climactic moment that Wu Song aims his staff at the tiger's head and Jin has counted sixteen mentions of the noun "staff" and eight different ways of holding it, the narrative is interrupted with a loud "CRACK" when Wu breaks the staff clumsily on a low-hanging branch and, as a result, is forced to engage the tiger mano a mano. Like the mirror-image of a video-game player who punches his way through a series of preprogrammed button combinations, Jin Shengtan here deconstructs the magic of a literary action scene into a sequence of calculable elements, a literary algorithm.

By keeping track of the seemingly fleeting moments when the staff is mentioned, however, Jin Shengtan's discussion of Wu Song's set of motions does not simply remind us of a video-game player frantically mashing buttons. More importantly, Jin's emphasis on programmatically counting words guides us into moving away from a straightforward appreciation of the novel's surface narrative and instead towards an appreciation of the work the text does to create this narrative. To a degree, this shift is expressed by moving from an appreciation of fictional character to another "human" construct—that is, the "genius" Jin consistently evokes as the mind behind the text, Shi Nai'an (ca. 1296–1372), the putative author supposedly responsible for composing the text. Yet in the end, Jin's algorithmic craft of counting words focuses not on any "person" but on the techne of writing itself, not on any humanistic genius of authorship but rather on taking pleasure in the mechanistic principles of the text itself, or what Jin enthusiastically and repeatedly calls "marvelous writing" (*qiwen* 奇文).[18]

Jin's delight in the marvelous principles of the text once again illustrates a similarity between contemporary game and early modern text. For the "true" reader/player, there is not simply an appreciation of the surface of the novel/game. Nor is there, on a deeper level, merely an appreciation of the principles that structure the novel/game. Rather, for the "true" reader/player there is a close and deeply felt identification with those very principles. The principles that govern the novel/

[18] The emphasis on writing is easily seen in Jin's opening essay for chapter 22, where the term for writing (*xie* 寫) appears some twenty-odd times. The term *qiwen* appears 257 times in the entire text.

game are felt to determine not only the composition of the characters but also the identity of the reader/player themself.

In video game studies, this identification between player and game is most lucidly explained by scholars such as Ted Friedman and Alexander Galloway, who point out that video games and their players should never be understood as two separate entities, computers that compute and players that play. Rather, Friedman and Galloway suggest that the constant interaction between player and computer cause an ever-greater symbiosis between man and machine. Friedman, for one, points out that this symbiosis operates both on the levels of perception and of thought process. After playing video games, we do not simply *see* the world the way the game prompts us to, we start *thinking* about the world the way a computer does.[19] Building on this idea, Galloway suggests that a video game does not consist of a computer and a player—one machine, one human—but rather of a machine and what he calls an "operator," with the two synchronizing their tasks in what is best thought of as an elaborate cyborg dance.[20] By constantly calculating the odds, by relentlessly comparing statistics, and by pleasurably chasing after ever-better scores, the player is taught to mimic the logic of the algorithms that we associate with the game's computer.

In similar fashion, Jin's commentaries show how the principles that govern the text are more than distant abstractions; they are universal principles that ultimately govern both cosmos and self. Of course, the seventeenth-century novel does not teach the same algorithmic logic that drives twentieth-century computer games. Jin may carefully count numbers in his analysis of *Outlaws*, but—unlike us moderns—he does not think of human beings (or the world) as consisting of a series of those numbers: 120 bpm heart rate, 170 mg/dL cholesterol levels, a Dow Jones index of 27,000, or an unemployment rate of 14%.[21] Rather, Jin thinks of human beings and the universe as

[19] See Ted Friedman, "Civilization and Its Discontents: Simulation, Subjectivity, and Space," in *On a Silver Platter: CD-ROMs and the Promises of a New Technology*, ed. Greg M. Smith (New York: New York University Press, 1999), pp. 132–50.

[20] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 17.

[21] It is important to differentiate between computation and computational thinking. A computation is merely a mathematical formula, an algorithm. In contrast, the belief that all thought and all experience can be explained by such calculations is computationalism; see David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

guided by another system of logic, one determined by the clear set of governing principles characteristic of late Ming syncretism and what I call "logorhythm"—the discernable, repetitive patterns produced by words. Sometimes, borrowing from Buddhist philosophy, Jin refers to these principles as *fa*, or "law." Other times, in more Neo-Confucian fashion, he equates the core of these principles with *li*. (Jin actually often employs the term *shen li* 神理, "god-like principle.") For my purposes, I would emphasize yet another term, the idea of *wen*—that is, "(decorative) pattern," "text," or, to employ a useful paraphrase, "the material instantiation of principle," meaning principle as embodied in text.[22] And just in the same way computer games teach the twentieth-century player to think like a machine, so does the seventeenth-century literary text, guided by Jin's commentaries, pleasurably and imperceptibly teach the reader to think in principles of *fa*, *li*, and ultimately *wen*. Simply put, Jin Shengtan's overriding emphasis on mastering the art of reading and writing—that is, the mastery of *wen*—does not speak of a distant appreciation of an artfully created aesthetic object. Rather it speaks of a civilizing project that aims to teach those arts so that their core logorhythmic principles can become part of the self.[23]

If all of this sounds abstract, it may be useful to turn to Jin's preface to the novel. There, faced with the question of the novel's sprawling cast of characters, Jin consistently emphasizes that the database of *Outlaws* may be extensive, but still is based upon clear, fundamental principles:

> *Outlaws of the Marsh* tells of 108 men. Each man has his disposition and each man has his own temperament. Each man has his appearance and each man has his own voice. Now, if I were to paint a good number of faces with a single hand, then they would all have the appearance of brothers. If I were to give life to several voices with a single mouth, I could not help but create repetitive echoes. And yet, Shi Nai'an with a single movement of his

[22] For the way in which Jin Shengtan's notion of *wenfa* 文法, "the law of the pattern or text," supplies unitary power to the dispersed narrative, see Plaks, *Four Masterworks*, pp. 314–18. For the philosophical distinction between *wen* and "essence" (*zhi* 質), see *Zhexue da cidian* 哲学大辞典, ed. Feng Qi 冯契, 2 vols. (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu cubanshe, 2001), v. 2, p. 1545.

[23] The idea that the inner core of identity, imperial governance, and the practice of writing are tightly connected is made fully explicit in the first line of the first preface: "The invention of script by the ancient sages was that with which the hearts of people were united and the way of governance was brought forth" 原夫書契之作, 昔者聖人所以同民心而出治道也; Jin Shengtan, "Xu yi" 序一, in *SZH*, v. 1, p. 1.

> mind created a perfect 108 different characters. How can this be? He simply observed the organization of things for ten years and then one morning the things were organized. Thereupon he lifted his single brush and painted 108 characters, not finding this difficult in the least! The organization of things has its rule; you ought to know it.[24]

Couching his defense of the genius of *Outlaws* in the philosophical language of *The Great Learning* (*Da xue* 大學), Jin explains how such teeming diversity can be apprehended by a single mind, as long as that mind apprehends the core principles of the cosmos. What follows is a lengthy explanation of those principles, beginning with *fa*, which is founded in the morality of loyalty (*zhong* 忠) and empathy (*shu* 恕), that next finds expression in text through *wen*, or pattern, and then is fully apprehended by the heart (*xin* 心) of the reader.[25]

Simply put, for Jin Shengtan and his like-minded contemporaries, *wen*, *fa*, and *li*, like the algorithmic logic that dominates our modern-day thinking, represents more than simply an aesthetic technique, a textual logic, or the playful appreciation of a novel. Rather, these ideas represent a set of logorhythmic principles that govern text, cosmos, and human alike. As such, the work of the text, according to Jin, is to turn every novice reader into an expert reader, and the genius of *Outlaws* is that—like a game—the text does so in a seemingly unselfconscious, playful, and pleasurable fashion. The result of this symbiosis of human and text, I would argue, is a reader who not only appreciates the craft of *wen* when he sees it before him, instantiated in text, but who also has incorporated those logorhythmic principles into his very being—that is, someone who has become literally a "text-human," a *wenren* 文人.

[24] Jin Shengtan, "Xu san" 序三, in *SZH*, v. 1, p. 9. The constant shifting of terms here is typical of late Ming syncretism, where guiding principles can constantly be moved from one framework to the next. For an exploration of such thinking, see Ling Hon Lam, "Cannibalizing the Heart: The Politics of Allegory and *The Journey to the West*," in *Literature, Religion, and East/West Comparison: Essays in Honor of Anthony C. Yu*, ed. Eric Ziolkowski (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005), pp. 162–78.

[25] Note how the introductory essay to chapter 43 in which Li Kui is ambushed by his double is similarly an expansive philosophical treatise of the notion of "sincerity" as the way in which the principles of "loyalty" and "empathy" are instantiated; see *SZH*, v. 2, pp. 788–90. For discussion of this preface, see Gregory, *Bandits in Print*, pp. 125–130.

The Stone Interface: Text and Paratext, Diegetic Order, and Extradiegetic Play

If the "database" of characters is one feature that the novel shares with the video game, a second, equally striking feature shared by *Outlaws* and *Suikoden* is the "interface" through which the novel/game presents this database to the reader/player. In both the early modern text and the modern game, this interface is presented to us as the Stone Tablet (*Shijie* 石碣) on which the names of all the characters are carved in a clear, hierarchized fashion.[26] At first, such a list-like form may seem static, but as the term interface reminds us, the Stone Tablet is better understood in a more dynamic sense as a mechanism that allows reader and database to interact. Such interaction offers the player or reader a sense of control, but it is crucial to understand that the interface, by delimiting the choices that can be made, as well as by capturing the player or reader's attention in the first place, in turn controls them as well. As both Alexander Galloway and Branden Hookway note, an interface is hardly a see-through window or innocent doorway that gives direct access to the data beyond. Rather, it is a mechanism that allows us to exert a sense of control over the machine, even if the machine imperceptibly also shapes us by determining how we interact with it to begin with.[27]

The emphasis on control posited by Galloway and Hookway explains a curious tension found at the heart of the stone interface in *Outlaws* and *Suikoden*. On the one hand, the very materiality of the stone promises an immutable archaic order, a suppression of the unruly forces of the characters locked within (or underneath) its surface. Yet, on the other hand, this static order is also capable of releasing an incredible, dynamic power. On the level of production, the cast of *Outlaws* and *Suikoden* characters and their exact number may be carved in stone, but—once put into play—even such a dry enumeration nevertheless allows ever more variations built upon the same cast of characters. On the consumption side, the reader/player who is

[26] For an analysis of the role the mythic Stone Tablet plays in *Outlaws* (and late imperial vernacular fiction in general), see Jing Wang, *The Story of Stone: Intertextuality, Ancient Chinese Stone Lore, and the Stone Symbolism in "Dream of the Red Chamber," "Water Margin," and "Journey to the West"* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), pp. 251–68.

[27] See Branden Hookway, *Interface* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014) and Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).

offered the menu of 108 heroic men is given an illusory yet still pleasurable sense of control, both because they can choose from the roster of men and because they feel they have direct access to the mysterious inner workings of the database.

The process through which the Stone Tablet balances the playful impression of diversity with a clear sense of unitary order involves the interpellative power of the roll call, the magic of identification enabled by the process of naming. Though the characters offered in the game are numerous and range from a dog-like kobold named Gengen to the female ruin-hunter Lorelai, the repetition of a celestial name for each one (in the cases of Gengen and Lorelai, they are Chitan Star and Chikatsu Star, respectively) nevertheless endows this diverse body of characters and names with a clear sense of categorical unity. The late Ming novel similarly employs play with names to balance a diverse and colorful array of monikers with a rigid and unitary set of celestial names.[28] Winged Ghost Li Gun 李滾 and Blackface Sun Xin 孫新 would seem to have little in common, for each is endowed with a seemingly unique identity and a singular moniker, until we realize that both of them are incarnations of heavenly spirits, as revealed by their celestial names—Speeding Earth Star (*Di zou xing* 地走星) and Numbers Earth Star (*Di shu xing* 地數星), respectively.

The tension between the diversity of characters' colorful individual monikers and the unitary structure of their eternal star names is symptomatic of the deeper tension between unruly diversity and centralized order that governs much of the narrative of *Outlaws*. This tension is clear both in terms of the novel's surface narrative as well as in its underlying textual composition. In terms of its narrative, the celestial names are revealed in the novel's central chapters, at the moment when all the heroes with their own memorable monikers and colorful backstories have gathered together and are transformed into members of a unified and fearsome collective. At this point, the previously unruly nature of the individual heroes is decisively subordinated to a single leader, Song Jiang, who—after "discovering" a heaven-sent meteor inscribed with the names of the heroes in a clear hierarchical fashion—implements absolute authority and selects different members of his band to take up

[28] For an investigation into the various names and nicknames, as well as the order in which they appear on the Stone Tablet, see Ma Youyuan 馬幼垣, "Liangshan toumu paizuoci mingwei wenti fawei" 梁山頭目排坐次名位問題發微, in *Shuihu er lun* 水滸二論 (Taipei: Lianjing chubanshe, 2005), pp. 325–78.

various tasks in his domain. Rather ironically, the resulting structure of Song Jiang's domain mimics much of the imperial governance the bandits have been trying to escape for so long.

This imposition of order on the diegetic level of the narrative in turn mimics the underlying structure of the novel, which is the end product of a long genealogy of diverse picaresque stories, oral and otherwise. Only in the late Ming text did the novel gather these disparate tales devoted to a single hero or quest into one overarching narrative. Originally, *Outlaws* is famously based on an actual episode of Song dynasty history associated with a single outlaw leader identified as Song Jiang.[29] By the Yuan dynasty, popular storytelling, *zaju* 雜劇 opera, and literati commentaries had expanded the number of heroes to a clearly defined, ritually satisfying number of thirty-six.[30] For most of the Ming period, both the exact number of heroes as well as the names of the individual members of the band were in play; it was only with the printed novel that the number of 108 became sacrosanct and the identities of the individual heroes were permanently settled. As all this makes clear, the process of imbuing each hero with a similar-sounding celestial name as well as a supposedly preordained rank in a list of 108 characters not only functioned as an ordering device within the exegesis, allowing Song Jiang to take control of his band of men. The procedure also settled a lengthy historical process of cultural accumulation through episodic storytelling and operatic diversification, allowing the text of the novel to subdue the unruly multivocal structure of its diverse source materials.

In the game series, the listing of names similarly serves to balance order and chaos, yet the purpose of such naming is organized not by the logic of the imperial bureaucracy that undergirds the structure

[29] *Shuihu ziliao huibian* 水浒资料汇编, ed. Ma Tiji 马蹄疾 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2005), pp. 456–57.

[30] The earliest anecdote regarding storytelling versions of *Outlaws*, found in *Chatterings of an Old Drunkard* (*Zuiweng tanlu* 醉翁談錄) by the early Yuan-dynasty author Luo Ye 羅燁, identifies these stories not by the name of any overarching tale, but by the names of the individual heroes, including: "The Black Faced Beast" (*Qingmian Shou* 青面獸), referring to Yang Zhi 楊志; "The Tattooed Monk" (*Hua Heshang* 花和尚), referring to Lu Zhishen 魯智深; "Traveler Wu" (*Wu Xingzhe* 武行者), referring to Wu Song; and "Rock" (*Shitou* 石頭) Sun Li 孫立, respectively; see Liu Tianzhen 刘天振, *Shuihu yanjiu shi cuo lun* 水浒研究史脞论 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016), p. 5. The first time that a particular number of heroes is associated with these heroes is in the preface by Gong Kai 龔開 (1222–ca. 1302) to his "Encomia for the Thirty-Six Men of Song Jiang" ("Song Jiang sanshiliu zan" 松江三十六讚), as recorded by Zhou Mi 周密 (1232–1308); see *Shuihu ziliao huibian*, pp. 452–55.

of the novel but rather by the logic of late twentieth-century capitalism. In the *Suikoden* franchise, each new entry in the series introduces a new set of 108 freshly minted characters and a roster of delightfully diverse, unique names: Lepant in *Suikoden* turns into Boris and Ridley in *Suikoden II*, only to transform into Sasarai (*Suikoden III*), who turns into Lino (*Suikoden IV*), who turns into Raja (*Suikoden V*). Yet by preserving the celestial name of each character, each new game promises to preserve the basic structure of the older games: Lepant, Boris, Ridley, Sasarai, Lino, and Raja are all reincarnations of the same, singular Tengou: Star of Conflagration, Lu Chun I, the Jade Unicorn.[31] In this fashion, the sense of cohesion produced within the game can be extended beyond the boundaries of any single iteration. Arguably, an infinite production of variations of the *Suikoden* series is possible, all based on the same game engine, a "rinse and repeat" program of repetitive choices that is lucrative for producers, comfortably familiar for consumers, and sanctified by the monolithic laws of copyright and trademark.[32]

In this process of balancing the tension between diversity and unity, the Stone Tablet plays a crucial symbolic role, being a material instantiation that dutifully invokes an earlier medium to carve the unruly cast of characters into a sacred unchanging order. In the novel, the Stone Tablet is inscribed with tadpole script (*kedou wen* 蝌蚪文), a mysterious, archaic-looking form of writing. In the game, the Stone Tablet similarly calls upon the seeming permanence of stone, hiding its interactive nature by referencing the canonical power of the earlier late-Ming novel. This sense of keeping the threat of diversity in check is felt especially in the Ming dynasty novel where a version of the Stone Tablet appears twice—once, as noted above, at the end of the novel when the characters are united under the leadership of Song Jiang and once at the beginning of the novel when a greedy official unearths a

[31] For an overview of the character's transformation, see "Tengou Star (Star of Conflagration)," Suikoden Wiki, accessed November 26, 2023, https://suikoden.fandom.com/wiki/Tengou_Star_(Star_of_Conflagration).

[32] The video-game giant Electronic Arts is infamous for producing endless iterations of the same sports game, updated each year only so as to include the latest cast of NFL players. For a critique of this "rinse and repeat" mode of production, see Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 35–68. The game universe of *Suikoden* is much more inventive; each iteration offers new storylines that cumulatively create an ever richer and more complex story world.

tadpole-inscribed tablet, releasing the bandit heroes to wreak their vengeance upon the world.[33] By locating the tablet at the beginning and end of the novel, the text presents it as the most basic of interfaces, an on-and-off switch that sets the boundaries within which the play of narrative can unfold.

Yet rather than regard the stone simply as un unchanging set of laws, it is also possible to regard it as generative of narrative, an interface that makes a variety of choices possible. This sense of open-endedness is particularly palpable in the video game, where the stone does not appear at the beginning or the end but rather midway, suggestive that a sense of exploring playful possibilities coexists with a feeling of working within boundaries set by an inevitable telos. (In Japanese the tablet is called the "Stone Tablet of Promise" [*Yakusoku no sekiban* 約束の石板].) This sense of open-ended play is reflected in the way the game registers names on the tablet; the regular names of characters are only added to the list once the player has located and recruited a new character, thus holding out a consistent promise of fulfillment that the player can work towards. Meanwhile, as characters are added to the roster, the player also unlocks ever more possibilities for different battle parties. Inevitability and an open-ended sense of play are both given form in the way names appear on the Stone Tablet, an immutable rock that nevertheless dynamically allows seemingly infinite variations of play.

As is clear from the preceding discussion, the Stone Tablet functions in the game as an interface that allows the player to access the entire roster of characters and the data associated with each character, and then to make a calculated selection on that basis so as to get ready for the next adventure. Normally, this kind of action would be presented as an extradiegetic set of data and commands; players make and input choices on the basis of menus that are situated outside the imaginary world of the game itself.[34] Rather remarkably, however, by

[33] This ending is the result of Jin Shengtan's aggressive elision of the chapters that follow, thereby foreclosing the kind of play that is possible after the ritual reassertion of the original number of characters. In the 120-chapter version of *Outlaws*, the later chapters instantiate the recombination of characters through repeated campaigns that heavily feature constantly shifting battle formations.

[34] For a game-specific understanding of diegetic and extradiegetic functions (and their theoretical implications), see Galloway, "Gamic Action: Four Moments," chap. 1 in *Gaming*, pp. 1–38.

including the Stone Tablet into the world of *Suikoden*, the game can present this extradiegetic control by the player as an integral part of the diegesis. Like the visual overlay that offers both data about the world and choices for interacting with the world, the Stone Tablet offers the player a portal that stands between the world of the game and the world of the player. However, the Stone Tablet is more than simply a gate, a passage through which the player or reader can enter the world of *Outlaws* or *Suikoden*. As an interface, the tablet not only offers the player access to the world of data but also promises the player the power to interact with that data through a series of choices. In short, the mechanism of the Stone Tablet offers the player a sense of magical control.[35]

Again, the game's use of the Stone Tablet as a menu located within the diegesis is useful to think through some of the idiosyncrasies of the Ming dynasty novel. Though located within the narrative of the text as a stone tablet, the list of characters is, for all intents and purposes, a paratextual feature. Indeed, the insertion of a similar list in the first chapter of the novel represents a relatively late addition, a convenient table of contents that Jin Shengtan, inspired by similar features included in opera performances, appended to the end of the first chapter. Like the "wedge" (*xiezi* 楔子) acts of the operatic stage, Jin Shengtan's list serves both as an appetizer for the coming action as well as a summary that contains a convenient overview of the entire plot.[36] Moreover, because the list—like the chapter headings it summarizes—includes both plot events and character actions, it not only offers a synopsis of the narrative but also neatly functions as a list of dramatis personae, becoming an editorial principle that serves to manage the teeming mass of characters that will appear on the stage.

[35] In analyzing interface and stone, both Branden Hookway and Jing Wang combine elements of myth and machinery. Though Hookway is first and foremost a scholar of media technology, he traces the liminal power of the interface to Roman mythology; see *Interface*, esp. the section "Janus and Jupiter," pp. 19–24. As a trained anthropologist, it is not surprising that Jing Wang traces the function of the Stone Tablet back to a diverse array of mythical origins, but she also sprinkles her analysis with surprisingly technological terms, such as the "mechanism of cosmic design"; see *Story of Stone*, p. 262, and throughout the book.

[36] As noted by various scholars, the wedge is situated at a peculiar space in between the make-believe world of the diegesis and the extradiegetic space occupied by the audience; see Casey Schoenberger, "Storytellers, Sermons, Sales Pitches, and other Deceptive Features of City Life: A Cognitive Approach to Point of View in Chinese Plays," *Journal of Chinese Oral and Performing Literature* 38.2 (2019): 129–64.

As such, the list may resemble a table of contents, a playbill, or, if placed in the context of early modern Chinese theatrical culture, the ever more elaborate editorial principles appended to operatic libretti.[37] That said, we should recall that in early-modern performance practice the listing of operatic scenes and available actors was also a standard procedure that did not so much resemble a static playbill or list of editorial principles (*fanli* 凡例) as it did a menu. Opera troupes, seeking to please their patrons with a sense of choice, would routinely provide audiences with a convenient list from which to choose their favorite scenes and characters. By including such a list at the beginning of the narrative, the novel mimics such performance practices to offer the reader a broad array of options even while presenting them in a fashion that also resembles the editorial praxis of creating a clear sense of ordered progression.

By being part of the novel/game world itself while at the same time representing its database structure, the Stone Tablet offers the reader a glimpse piercing the illusory mimesis of the fictional world and into the sacred principles that guided the composition of the illusion spun from these principles. As such, the Stone Tablet, like the commentaries of Jin Shengtan analyzed in the previous section, functions as a remarkable interface, a portal that connects the diegetic with the extradiegetic world. Even as it entices us to enter the world of the narrative, it draws us back from the excitement and chaos of the ephemera that make up the mimesis of *Outlaws/Suikoden*, promising us access to the seemingly eternal order and unquestionable rules upon which this illusory world is built.[38]

[37] Two mid-seventeenth-century operas, Kong Shangren's 孔尚任 (1648–1718) opera *The Peach Blossom Fan* (*Taohua shan* 桃花扇) and Hong Sheng's 洪勝 (1605–1704) *Palace of Everlasting Life* (*Changsheng dian* 長生殿), are famous for their elaborate use of prefatory materials to create complex schema that not only serve to bestow order on the opera itself or reveal the work that went into the creation of the libretto but arguably also serve to organize even the world the opera is supposed to represent. For a reading of the way Kong employs his prefatory material to control the unruly vernacular language and the supposedly equally unruly actors, see Sophie Volpp, *Wordly Stage: Theatricality in Seventeenth-Century China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2011), pp. 244–46.

[38] As such, the stone interface in *Outlaws* and *Suikoden* resembles two concepts theorized by Dennis Tenen. The first is metaphor, which refers to the way new media include icons of old media as a way of allowing the user to conceptualize the use of the new medium. For instance, the image of a trash can on your home screen works as a way of conceptualizing the disposal of folders. The second is laminate, referring to the way a pdf offers a single, seemingly-transparent layer of text but really consists of many layers, some

Yet, whereas the *pingdian* commentaries of Jin Shengtan function as interface by relying on a frame of *wen*, *fa*, and *li*, both game and novel create this link between diegetic and extradiegetic world, text and paratext by appealing to completely different sets of values based on distinct notions of the sacred. In the case of the novel, the first Stone Tablet is presented as part of an ancient prophecy and is located at the heart of a Daoist temple situated at the foot of the sacred Longhu 龍虎 Mountain of China. The second Stone Tablet appears after all the heroes have been gathered and the leader of the group performs sacrifices to Heaven. In response, the Stone Tablet descends from the Eye of Heaven (*Tian yan* 天眼), its celestial provenance authenticating the order it prescribes on the cast of characters, though only after the leader of the band has deciphered the unreadable runes in which the list is written. In *Suikoden II*, the Stone Tablet similarly appears amidst an atmosphere of otherworldly magic. After the player has assembled enough characters and established a home base, the Keeper of the Gate Rune, Leknaat, descends amidst Heavenly Music and a Celestial Glow to bestow the Tablet on the player and remind them of their destiny.[39]

The mystification that is at the heart of this moment serves to bestow a sacred aura on the proceedings and, indeed, on the rules of the game's narrative itself. Yet as the two monikers of Leknaat also make clear, her presence hints at some of the tensions that are central to the game. As Keeper of the Gate Rune, her name suggests that she can connect the world of the diegesis with the promise of access to the database of codes. Meanwhile, her role as Watcher of the Great Balance serves to remind us, however implicitly, that her function is to bring together a sense of inevitable destiny and order, on the one hand, with the player's ability to creatively and freely engage with this

material, some computational, and some legal, all embedded in the surface of the text itself; see Dennis Tenen, *Plain Text: The Poetics of Computation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 23–54, 131–164.

[39] The figure of Leknaat may have been borrowed from the Mystic Lady (*Xuanü niangniang* 玄女娘娘), who first appears in the novel in chapter 42. In *Outlaws*, she bestows three Heavenly books (*Tianshu* 天書) on the leader of the bandits. In the earlier *Lost History of the Xuanhe Period* (*Xuanhe yi shi* 宣和遺史), the three books dutifully record the names of thirty-six of the heroes. In *Outlaws* this list is migrated to the Stone Tablet that falls from heaven in chapter 71. For the figure of the Mystic Lady in the novel as well as in Daoist thought, see Peng Liu, "'Conceal my Body so that I can Protect the State': The Making of the Mysterious Woman in Daoism and *Water Margin*," *Ming Studies* 74 (2016): 48–71.

order, on the other. In short, both in novel and game, references to the sacred play a similar role; they create an unquestionable boundary that serves to hide the arbitrary limits that are set on the free play of narrative within the novel/game itself.

Iconic Characters

> Once, in my youth, I collected all of my breakfast money for a month to buy a set of cigarette cards of the 108 generals (the printed pictures roughly as big as a matchbox). I loved them so much that I simply could not let them out of my hands for even a second. Even though I had heard of some of these heroes, there were others whose names and monikers I did not know. Still, I worshipped them. And just as I found myself drunk with this enraptured appreciation, my father and mother heard that I was not doing well in my studies, that I was buying cigarette cards to gamble, and, in a fury, they confiscated all of my 108 generals. Before my very eyes, I saw them torch these cards, and I was left humiliated, full of sorrow, and with pain in my heart. . . . This was my childhood years' first calamity. Who could have known that a few decades later our beloved fatherland would suffer a similar calamity . . . Dai Dunbang 戴敦邦

I have thus far noted how the novel *Outlaws* and the game *Suikoden* employ a variety of features that are remarkably similar. Both text and game offer the reader a rich database of characters that they can "interact" with. Both text and game build their narratives around the idea of collecting these characters so as to make an absolute number, 108 to be exact. And both text and game employ the interface of a stone tablet to visualize this database of characters, breaking the boundary of the diegetic and the extradiegetic, the textual and paratextual, in the process. As a final point, I want to elucidate one more feature that is essential to both novel and game—that is, the way in which their features of database and interface lend the characters an aura that allows them to transcend the boundaries of the narrative world in which they make their appearance. Indeed, a good deal of the attraction of the *Outlaws/Suikoden* story is derived, I argue, not from the way the reader/player is absorbed into the world of the narrative but rather from the way they feel enabled to lift the characters from the novel/game into their own life world, a feature I call "iconic."

The quote above from the "Afterword" to *Portraits of the 108 Characters of The Outlaws* (*Shuihu renwu yibai ling ba tu* 水滸人物壹百零捌圖) by Dai Dunbang (b. 1938), a major painter of characters derived from traditional fiction, illustrates the way in which *Outlaws* becomes emotionally real to those who interact with the characters, not by immersing themselves into the world of the narrative but rather by lifting the characters out of the text and bringing them into their own world.[40] Much can be observed in this short quote: the way Dai associates his attraction to the characters with childhood; the way he associates their destruction by his uncomprehending parents with the destruction wrought on traditional culture during the Cultural Revolution; the way he sacralizes his spiritual veneration of the 108 generals, first by sacrificing his breakfast money for a whole month to buy the cigarette cards their images are printed on, and then afterwards when the cards—and the generals—are subsumed by fire on a funeral pyre by parental authority. There is even the irony of his parents suggesting that young Dunbang has lost himself in gambling and drinking, failing to recognize that his intoxication is actually spiritual and aesthetic.[41]

What interests me most, however, is the way these characters, so famously associated with the Ming dynasty novel, are made real for the young child by being distanced from the original text and given material and visual form in his own world. There is clearly a palpable sense of physicality and materiality to these characters. They are printed on cigarette cards (which still serve as collector's items nowadays), the exact size of which Dai vividly recalls many years later. This materiality is matched by physical engagement, as Dai tells us that he never let them "out of his hands." Yet this sense of material reality seems predicated upon a distancing of these characters from the canonical text they are usually associated with. To be sure, the young Dai is familiar with the names of some of the characters from the story, but he emphasizes that he only learned of them through oral transmission ("I had heard of . . . "), not reading. Even more striking, as if to emphasize that

[40] Dai Dunbang, "Hou ji" 后记, in *Shuihu renwu yibai ling ba tu* (Tianjin: Yangliuqing huashe, 1981), p. 109.

[41] Many of the values Dai inscribes into this little vignette—ignorant authorities, (youthful) rebellion, the indulgence in certain vices that somehow, due to the innocence of the character, is deemed pure—are reminiscent of the values celebrated by *Outlaws*.

a vague acquaintance with the heroes through earlier stories is insufficient, Dai insists that there were many characters whose name and moniker he did not know. Simply put, Dai shows us that, for a child, the (re)collection of the characters only becomes complete and their presence only becomes real—physically and materially—when interacting with them through the collectible cards, an act that has nothing to do with the famous text of the novel itself.

Dai's remembrance of his collection illustrates a feature that I argue is typical of the attraction of *Outlaws*, one that works quite differently from the way we usually theorize that readers make a text or game come to life. Usually, we think of the way texts or games become real as a process of immersion—that is, the reader enters the illusion of the world spun by the narrative.[42] In video games, this immersion of the player is often theorized in visual terms (even if audio attractions and haptic encapsulation are often added for good measure). As an example, take the following quote culled from the cyberpunk author William Gibson that the game scholar Marti Lahtti employs to illustrate the sense of attraction as visual immersion:

> [In arcades] I could see in the physical intensity of their postures how *rapt* these kids were. It was like one of those closed systems out of a Pynchon novel: you had the feedback loop, with photons coming off the screen into the kids' eyes, the neurons moving through their bodies, electrons moving through the computer. And these kids clearly *believed* in the space these games projected. Everyone who works with computers seems to develop an intuitive faith that there's some kind of actual space behind the screen.[43]

Here the two-dimensionality of the screen belies the three-dimensional attraction of the game, which promises the technological dream of fully immersing oneself into the world behind the monitor, a fantasy (or nightmare) that has played out endlessly in cinematic imaginations of virtual reality, from early movies such as *Tron* to the more recent *Matrix* series.

[42] For the importance of immersion, absorption, and saturation in world-building, see Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2012).

[43] Martti Lahti, "As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 157.

In literary studies, this sense of losing oneself in the attraction of the text has similarly been associated with an immersion into the fantasy world that the printed book offers.[44] In Western literary theory, such ideas of immersion used to be coupled with the now seemingly antiquated notions of realism and mirrors, and in recent years they have become ever more associated with notions of virtuality and world-building (both terms conspicuously associated with game studies).[45] In Chinese literature, Wai-yee Li's work on enchantment and disenchantment stands out, as does Judith Zeitlin's discussion on the notion of the strange, both offering ways of comprehending how readers enter and exit the fantasy of the text. In Li's case this involves a mesmerizing reading of *Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), a labyrinthian novel that self-consciously builds a fantasy world out of a scholar's garden, in which a deluded "reader" famously loses himself in a mirror-induced erotic reverie.[46] In contrast, Zeitlin shows us that it need not take an expansive one-hundred-and-twenty-chapter vernacular novel to produce this sense of mimetic absorption. Focusing on a brief classical tale from Pu Songling's 蒲松齡 (1640–1715) seventeenth-century *Tales from the Liaozhai Studio* (*Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋誌異), she analyzes how the reader, much like the child being absorbed by the television screen in the film *Poltergeist*, can find themselves entering a world painted on a wall.[47]

Here, in contrast, I want to suggest a diametrically different way of thinking about the methods through which literary texts, and particularly the characters in them, can become real—not by the reader

[44] I emphasize printed books and fictional prose writing, but arguably a similar emphasis on absorption and world-building is found in the study of (Chinese) opera and the visual arts; see Jonathan Hay, "World-Making in Performance and Painting: An Intertwined History," in *Performing Images: Opera in Chinese Visual Culture*, ed. Judith T. Zeitlin and Yuhang Li (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2014), pp. 30–43; and Kristina Kleutghen, *Imperial Illusions: Crossing Pictorial Boundaries in the Qing Palaces* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015).

[45] See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); and *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, ed. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Nöel Thon (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014).

[46] See Wai-yee Li, *Enchantment and Disenchantment: Love and Illusion in Chinese Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[47] Judith T. Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange: Pu Songling and the Chinese Classical Tale* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 183–99. Zeitlin notes that this notion of entering a painting is actually a playful reversal of its opposite theme—namely, figures, whether horses or women, coming to life in a painting and crossing over into the real world.

entering the fantasy produced by the text but rather by taking elements from the text out of the narrative and giving them material and visual shape in the actual world. The term I employ to characterize this way of interacting with the text—iconic—is one that combines features associated with medieval religious icons (the focus on a single character, the materiality of the image, the narrative referentiality, and the image's sacred aura) with the sometimes overlapping, sometimes diverging features associated with contemporary computer icons (their alluring interactivity, endless reproducibility, instant recognizability, and pixelated abstraction). Most important for me is the way in which icons not only represent a portal to enter and come into communion with another world but also the peculiar ways in which an element from that other world is made tangible and real in the world of the viewer or user.[48]

To illustrate this iconic quality specifically in terms of *Outlaws* characters, let me employ a series of images drawn from the long history of the novel. The first, culled from the *Augmented and Corrected Completely Illustrated Edition of the Loyal and Righteous Outlaws of the Marsh with a Forest of Commentaries* (*Jingben zengbu jiaozheng quanxiang zhongyi Shuihu zhizhuan pinglin* 京本增補校正全像忠義水滸志傳評林), belongs to the category Ma Tiji entitles "inserted illustrations" (*chatu* 插圖), also known as "picture on top, text at the bottom" (*shang tu xia wen* 上圖下文)."[49] As the illustration shows, in this kind of juxtaposition the picture and character it depicts are both firmly embedded in the text (fig. 3). On the top of the page, the heroic figure Wu Song battles a tiger, meanwhile the caption next to it ("Wu Song ascends the hill and beats the tiger to death"), as well as the text below—in particular, the lengthy poem describing the action—both serve to frame the picture by narrating exactly what happens.

[48] For a study of religious medieval iconography, see Herbert L. Kessler, *Experiencing Medieval Art* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); for computer icons, see William Horton, *The Icon Book: Visual Symbols for Computer Systems and Documentation* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), pp. 1–32.

[49] For an early publication that lists most of the major editions, see Ma Tiji, *Shuihu shulu* 水滸书录 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986). For a good overview of the major trends of illustrated editions in the Ming, see Hu Xiaomei 胡小梅, "Ming kan *Shuihu* banhua chatu yanbian" 明刊《水滸》版画插图衍变, *Heze xueyuan xuebao* 菏泽学院学报 36.4 (2014): 18–24, 31. For a general history of book illustrations and concepts of visuality in late imperial fiction, see Robert E. Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

FIG. 3 **Example of an "Inserted Illustration" (*chatu* 插圖) of Wu Song Battling the Tiger from *Outlaws of the Marsh* (1594).** *Source*: *Shuihu zhizhuan pinglin*, ed. Luo Daoben 羅道本, 25 *juan* 卷 in 8 vols. (Beijing: Wenxue guji kanxingshe, 1956), v. 2, j. 5, p. 12b.

The second image, drawn from the Yuan Wuyai 袁無涯 edition, belongs to the second category of *Outlaws* illustrations, the so-called "full picture" (*quantu* 全圖) category (fig. 4). Here as well, the hero Wu Song is depicted in the middle of action, fighting the tiger, but this time very little text frames the picture. Instead, the illustration stands alone, a full page that includes a detailed landscape of mountains, trees, and mists, which situate the character amidst an imagined world (and remind the reader of the tasteful quality of the imprint). At the same time, selected elements (a broken staff, the broken branch, the tiger, the rock, and the slowly descending sun) still imply a temporal emplotment that places the picture within the narrative frame of the novel.

The third illustration, by the famed late-Ming artist Chen Hongshou 陳洪綬 (1598–1652), belongs to the third category associated with *Outlaws*, that is the "character illustration" (*xiutu* 繡圖) (fig. 5). Once again, Wu Song is identifiable, thanks to his heroic appearance and the crucial, brief descriptive phrase that flanks the illustration. Yet in all other respects, the character is completely divorced from the actual plot of the novel. This Wu Song is free to go wherever he pleases, insert himself in any narrative, play any role; his moniker, coincidentally, is "Traveler" (*Xingzhe* 行者).[50]

In the case of Chen's Hongshou's illustration, the way in which the character is separated from the text of the narrative to become part of the material and physical world of the viewer becomes particularly apparent in the ludic function of the illustration as a game card. As detailed by scholars such as Andrew Lo and Tamara Bentley, the conceptual basis of Chen's collection of 40 *Outlaws* characters was not necessarily the novel (even if the illustrations were often included in later editions of the text) but popular playing cards associated instead with the game of "sparrows" (*madiao* 馬吊), a late Ming-dynasty

[50] The emphasis on movement, encapsulated in Wu Song's moniker, is not only emblematic of the way game cards work but also of how the *jianghu* 江湖 (lit. rivers and lakes), the mythic realm of martial arts heroism and outlaw brigands, operates. It is possible, as Liangyan Ge has demonstrated, inspired by an off-hand comment of C. T. Hsia, to argue that including particular geographic locations in such narratives (nodes such as inns, mountain strongholds, and the like) creates a situated, physical world. More important, arguably, is the structure of the movement and meetings of the characters themselves, with the physical structures playing only a secondary role in the construction of such a world; see Liangyan Ge, "In Search of a 'Common Storehouse of Convention': Narrative Affinities between *Shuihu zhuan* and the Judge Bao *cihua* Cluster," in *The Interplay of the Oral and the Written in Popular Chinese Literature*, ed. Vibeke Børdahl and Margaret B. Wan (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2010), pp. 31–59.

FIG. 4 Example of "Full Picture" (*quantu* 全圖) Illustration of Wu Song Battling the Tiger from the Yuan Wuyai Edition of *Outlaws of the Marsh* (1614). *Source*: *Zhongguo gudai banhua congkan* 中國古代版畫叢刊, ed. Zhonghua shuju Shanghai bianjisuo 中華書局上海編輯所, 5 pts., 44 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1959–60), pt. 1, v. 1, p. 10b.

FIG. 5 **Example of a "Character Illustration" (*xiutu* 繡圖) of Wu Song (1633).** *Source*: Chen Hongshou, *Shuihu yezi* 水滸葉子, ed. Yuan Jianxia 袁劍俠, (Zhengzhou: Henan mishu chubanshe, 2016), p. 32.

predecessor of the game mahjong.[51] To be sure, as Bentley suggests, Chen Hongshou's set represented an elite variation of such cards and, as such, possibly were never intended for actual play. As such, the way we view the cards now, carefully printed together in a single booklet that contains all forty cards in a neat, frozen order, may not be that far removed from the way late-Ming literati would have encountered Chen's set of characters. Indeed, as pointed out by Hu Xiaomei, this association with an elite, literate audience may well explain the prominent presence of the calligraphed names and monikers alongside the character illustrations, names that, as time progressed and the novel became ever more important as an imprint, increasingly matched lines from the novel itself.[52]

That said, if we imagine these illustrations of *Outlaws* characters as actual game cards, it becomes clear that, compared with the illustrations that usually accompany the novel, their structural function, aesthetic pleasure, and human–object interactivity have radically shifted. We might not have game cards from the time of the late Ming, but collections of playing cards from the late Qing, preserved in the American Museum of Natural History, offer us a good sense of what such cards, once actually in play, may have looked like. Though it is still possible to recognize some of the heroes (for instance, with his rough beard and pair of axes, the character on the 50,000 strings of cash card still betrays a hint of the original Li Kui), no names are attached to any of the cards. The flowery phrases that accompany Chen Hongshou's designs, not to mention the laudatory encomia (*zan* 讚) that later accompany the illustrations of characters in printed versions of *Outlaws*, are missing. Instead, a series of symbols at the top and bottom of each card allows the player to immediately recognize their game value (also expressed in the strings of cash attached to each card) and their ludic function. Indeed, the mirrored symbols at top and bottom allow immediate recognition, even if the card is held upside down.[53] Like icons on an iPhone, the presence of these characters is crucial yet also ephemeral; their purpose is, as Felix Sockwell argues in the context of computer icons, "all about getting the user from point A to point B as quickly

[51] Andrew Lo, "China's Passion for *Pai*: Playing Cards, Dominoes, and Mahjong," in *Asian Games: The Art of Contest*, ed. Colin Mackenzie and Irving Finkel (New York: Asia Society, 2004), pp. 216–32.

[52] See Hu, "Ming kan *Shuihu* banhua chatu yanbian," p. 24.

[53] I would like to thank Linda Rui Feng for this insight.

FIG. 6 A Selection of *Madiao* 馬吊 Playing Cards Featuring *Outlaws* Heroes (late-Qing dynasty). *Source:* Catalogue No. ASIA 0415C, Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, New York. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History.

as possible"—the destination, in this case, being the experience of the game played.[54]

The visual appearance of the cards is, of course, only the most obvious element that reminds us that the order of these cards is not determined by the narrative structure of the text but instead by the rules of the game. As Jonathan Hay reminds us, our twentieth-century penchant for visual reproduction has increasingly pushed us to appreciate objects as two-dimensional pictures, devoid from the three-dimensional, haptic, and contextual presences they originally possessed.[55] As such, the rough, thick quality of the cardboard-like paper, their convenient finger-length size, as well as their long rectangular shape, all make it clear that these cards are meant to be shuffled, picked up, held, and discarded in continuously changing combinations of hands.[56] Unlike the frozen order of the novel's narrative where characters appear in a single, linearly unfolding fashion, the game cards suggest an order of value where circulation, not stasis, is prized. This is not to say that there is no order and there is no value. The different numbers of strings of cash associated with each character make it clear that there is a hierarchy, just as the monetary value associated with each card makes it clear

[54] Felix Sockwell and Emily Potts, *Thinking in Icons: Designing and Creating Effective Visual Symbols* (Beverly, MA: Rockport, 2017), p. 15.

[55] See Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010).

[56] The fact that so many sets have cards missing reminds us of the fact that these were objects in constant motion, as well as how difficult it is for institutions to collect games as opposed to books.

that, despite the urge to pick up and discard them, each of these characters possesses the attraction of treasure, the possibility of holding on, delaying the play, freezing the moment. Indeed, for many contemporary players, the twentieth-century incarnation of this Ming-dynasty game, mahjong, has become exactly what Chen Hongshou immortalized in his tasteful set of game cards—a decorative set of exotic characters not meant to be used for actual play but instead to be treasured as part of a collection.[57] What is most important for us is that these cards, while still representing characters from *Outlaws*, have become completely divorced from any narrative, circulating as material objects that obey a completely different logic.

Do I mean to suggest that the order of games and the attraction that characters hold once they are detached from the narrative is meaningless for our understanding of text, useless for trying to explain the perennial attraction of *Outlaws*? Far from it, I would argue that the way character cards function as iconic elements in games, detached from the narrative order but still subjected to the rules of play, holds important lessons for our understanding of *Outlaws*. Most notably it suggests an alternative way of reading the novel that highlights not the unifying structure of the narrative but instead emphasizes the attraction of the characters divorced from this rigid temporal organization, as charismatic presences who transcend the spatiotemporal boundaries of the narrative world.[58]

This alternative mode of reading serves as an antidote to the usual way we understand the relationship between character and narrative, as exemplified by the chronological order in which I placed the three illustrations above. In the standard way of reading, we move from a character fully embedded in text, exemplified by the earliest "inserted illustrations," to a moment where characters are finally liberated from the text, as suggested by the "character illustrations." In this explanation, chronology determines order and the narrative text of the classic *Outlaws* stands central, while the paratextual materials—whether we think of these as the illustrations, commentaries, or transmedial

[57] See Ann M. Israel and Gregg Swain, *Mah Jongg: The Art of the Game* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Press, 2014).

[58] Studies of transmediation only too often present the story as a question of what is transposed from one medium to another; see Jesper Juul, "Games Telling Stories? A Brief Note on Games and Narratives," *Game Studies* 1.1 (2001), https://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

adaptations (sequels, TV series, and video games)—are relocated to the margin. Yet there are good reasons to believe that the order suggested by these images—an order that begins in text and ends in illustration, or that begins with narrative and ends with character—does not represent the full story.

To begin with, we should acknowledge that in terms of chronology, the appreciation of the characters of *Outlaws* as game cards may well predate its printed narrative. The first reference to card games based on the characters, Lu Rong's 陸容 (1436–1494) *Random Jottings of the Bean Garden* (*Jiao yuan zaji* 椒園雜記), predates the first known publication of the novel by roughly half a century.[59] Even more strikingly, the first textual reference to *Outlaws* as a set of characters takes the form of a series of illustrations and poems by the late Song–early Yuan scholar Gong Kai, called the *Encomia for the Thirty-Six Men of Song Jiang*. As such, the preface Gong wrote, or at least the way it is recorded by the Song-dynasty author Zhou Mi, is of import, not only because of its early date but also for the way it differentiates its own tasteful appreciation of characters from the more vulgar street-level enjoyment of the narrative. As Gong writes:

> The affairs of Song Jiang can be observed in the alley talks and street conversations; this is not worth paying attention to. Yet they have also been transmitted in painting by people like Gao Ru and Li Song, and the grand gentlemen do not dismiss them. In my younger years, I thought these persons splendid and vigorous, and I wanted to preserve them in painting and encomia. But because I had never seen any reliable facts about them, I did not dare do this lightly. Then, at another time, I saw how *The Brief Affairs of the Eastern Capital* included *The Biography of the Vice Minister Hou Meng* [1054–1152] in which there was a letter that laid out the plan to suppress the bandits:
>
> "Song Jiang and his thirty-six men are running rampant across He, Shuo, and the Eastern Capital, and even in an army of ten thousands, there are none who dare stand against him. . . . His talent must surpass that of ordinary men. So there is nothing to be done but entice him to surrender

[59] Tamara Heimarck Bentley, "Authenticity and the Expanding Market in Chen Hongshou's Seventeenth-Century Printed Playing Cards," *Artibus Asiae* 69.1 (2009): 147–88; Liu Tianzhen, "*Shuihuzhuan* banhua chatu yanjiu shulüe"《水滸传》版画插图研究述略, *Shuihu zhengming* 水滸争鸣 10 (2008): 437–49.

and send him out to campaign against Fang La. Thus he can redeem himself and perhaps have the rebellion in the Southwest pacified."

Only after this did I realize that Song Jiang must have enjoyed a remarkable reputation in his time. Upon this, I produced a laudatory encomium for each of the thirty-six men, including an admonition with them.[60]

Here Gong Kai affirms the usual chronological narrative, noting that stories from what we now call *Outlaws* circulated widely in oral performance as early as the late Song period. Yet Gong clearly disdains such vulgar narratives, instead insisting on writing encomia praising the thirty-six heroes associated with what—never mentioning the title *Outlaws*—he calls "the events of Song Jiang." What for vulgar minds merely serves as an enjoyable tale about outlaws becomes for Gong an exercise in unearthing an ever more elaborately nested set of texts that eventually allow him to recognize individual talent. Thus, as an echo of Hou Meng 侯蒙, who judged the qualities of Song Jiang hundreds of years earlier, Gong composes thirty-six encomia as a way to capture the essence of these heroic men of an earlier age, display his own talent in doing so, and offer a model of moral conduct for those who will come after.

As the preface by Gong Kai makes clear, the early dates of the playing cards, paintings, and poems about the heroes, both as individuals and as a group, are important not because they allow us to change the chronology of *Outlaws* culture but rather because they show that from its very beginning there was already a literary, poetic, and ludic tradition of appreciating these various characters precisely by separating them from the narrative, vulgar or not. Such a literary praxis, moreover, existed not simply due to the early date of some of these efforts or the idea that more full-fledged narrative forms, such as the novel or the earlier pseudo-historical account entitled *Lost History of the Xuanhe Period,* still awaited textual invention. This tradition seems to have existed precisely as an alternative praxis, a separate lineage that goes back to the earliest accounts of "the events of Song Jiang."

Indeed, the practice of appreciating the outlaws as either individuals or, preferably, well-defined sets of individuals has continued, on both elite and popular levels, from the early days of the Yuan dynasty

[60] Zhou Mi, "Guixin za shi xuji" 癸辛雜識續集, in *Shuihu ziliao huibian*, pp. 452–55.

until today. Some such literary appreciations take the form of paratextual material, as is the case in the elaborate appreciation of individual characters that Jin Shengtan appended to his commentaries on *Outlaws*.[61] Others take the form of completely separate literary productions, such as Zhang Henshui's 張恨水 (1895–1967) *Discussion and Appreciation of Outlaws Characters* (*Shuihu renwu lunzan* 水滸人物論贊), a serialized reappraisal of some ninety different heroes that, only towards the end of its production, culminated in a full-fledged narrative rewrite of the original novel, *The New Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihu xin zhuan* 水滸新專).[62] Some of these take the form of individual entries in literary memoirs, such as Zhang Dai's 張岱 *Encomia of Outlaws Heroes* (*Shuihu renwu zan* 水滸人物讚), while others creatively straddle the boundary between literary analysis and fan culture, such as Ma Youyuan's *The Outlaws Heroes Most . . .* (*Shuihu renwu zhi zui . . .* 水滸人物之最……).[63] Whereas the kinds of appreciation exhibited here differ in terms of literary sophistication, form, and date, they all share one single characteristic: they show their appreciation of these heroic characters by isolating them from the narrative and presenting them as monadic figures, arrayed in catalogue fashion, often ranked and inevitably lauded according to some perceived, essential, and unchanging quality that the author discerns from within the chaotic clutter that is the popular narrative.

What is at play here, I argue, is not historical priority but rather a mode of literary appreciation and production that is fully the equal of narrative, yet one that—like playing cards—obeys fundamentally different rules. Whereas narrative employs a mode of appreciation that draws the reader into the world of the story, the various poetic and visual collections of *Outlaws* heroes produced over the ages instead emphasize the reader's ability to lift the characters from their narrative

[61] See Jin Shengtan's opening essay, "Du diwu caizi shufa" 讀第五才子書法, in *SZH*, pp. 17–20.

[62] As Zhang points out in his preface to the collection of characters, the writing of these individual essays took place over more than ten years, starting in 1927 and lasting until 1944. In his preface to *A Discussion and Appreciation*, Zhang notes that he did not start writing *The New Outlaws* until 1943; see Zhang Henshui, *Shuihu renwu lunzan* (Nanjing: Wanxiang Zhoukanshe, 1947), pp. 1–2. For more on Zhang's *Discussion and Appreciation*, see Tang Zhesheng 汤哲声, "Zhang Henshui *Shuihu renwu lunzan* zhi pinwei ji sikao 张恨水《水浒人物论赞》之品味及思考," *Chizhou xueyuan xuebao* 池州学院学报 30.2 (2016): 6–10.

[63] Ma Youyuan [Y. W. Ma], *Shuihu renwu zhi zui* (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2006).

world and introduce them as iconic individuals. To a degree, such individuals, at least overtly, are appreciated because of the moral principles they embody, which in turn allows the author or painter to present such principles as a guide to future readers. Yet as Gong Kai's (and Dai Dunbang's) reference to youthful appreciation suggests, beyond the didacticism and even when textualized, such poetic creations often emphasize the visual aura of the character to such an extent that they take on an almost object-like, charismatic presence. In fact, I would argue that the best analogy of this kind of literary and visual endeavor is found in the contemporary production and consumption of action figures, characters often associated with popular narratives but whose attraction is found precisely in the fact that they can be bought, collected, and displayed in all their glorious, plastic-encased isolation.[64]

Though such a nonnarrative mode of appreciating characters is most easily understood visually or ludically, I would argue that this impulse toward appreciating the characters as isolated from the narrative can be found even within the novel. And never is this impulse more evident than during those moments in the novel when a character first appears, the narrative stops in its tracks, and the narrator engages the imagination of the reader directly by bursting out into poetic song.[65] Here, for instance, is the way the text introduces the reader to the character first introduced in this essay, Wu Song the tiger killer:

> Song Jiang was now able by the light of the lamps to get a better look. Truly he was a real hero. Behold:
>
> His stature is awesome, his bearing deeply impressive; the eyes blaze like winter stars, the brows are an unbroken line drawn in lacquer; the chest so broad ten-thousand foes could never throw him down, the speech forceful, evidence of a soaring ambition; the spirit so brave you'd think the lion which shakes heaven had descended from the clouds, the frame so powerful

[64] Teri Silvio, "Pop Culture Icons: Religious Inflection of the Character Toy in Taiwan," *Mechademia* 3 (2008): 200–220; "Animation: The New Performance?," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 20.2 (2010): 422–38.

[65] My reading of this scene is indebted to Chun Mei, who has theorized these moments as theatrical. By emphasizing their ludic elements, I want to emphasize not only the materializing potential as opposed to the visual appreciation of such scenes, but also the combinatory logic that informs entire casts of characters as game icons and characters themselves as a combination of essential features; see Chun Mei, *The Novel and Theatrical Imagination in Early Modern China* (Leiden, Nld.: Brill, 2011).

you'd imagine you were confronting the beast which shatters the world.
Truly this seems a god walking the earth, a veritable Mars among men.

When Song Jiang looked upon this person, he liked what he saw exceedingly.[66]

Framed through the fetishistic gaze of his newly found, appreciative "friend," Wu Song is presented as a timeless icon plucked from the heavens. For a brief moment, time is suspended and the progress of narrative forgotten, as the reader is asked to appreciate a heroic character in all his isolated, star-like eminence. Such poetry certainly is not elegant. Indeed, in the later, more exclusive edition of the novel, this poem was immediately singled out for deletion. That said, with all its rich descriptive language and hyperbolic praise, the poem offers us not only a good look at this eternal heavenly body, this "Mars amongst men"; it also offers us a brief glimpse of an alternative literary mode of appreciating *Outlaws*, a ludic and essentially anti-narrative mode of appreciation that isolates the heroic characters located at the heart of early modern Chinese fiction.

Conclusion

In some ways, the comparison between video game and novel I have sketched here is particular to *Outlaws* and *Suikoden*. Adaptations of popular premodern novels into other media—film, comic book, internet fan fiction—may be a dime a dozen, but rarely are they as radically divergent (and hence arguably as thought-provoking) as the case presented here. Each of the "Four Masterworks of Ming Fiction" (*Si da qishu* 四大奇書) has at this point been adapted as a video game. Yet only *Outlaws* can claim to have had an actual game associated with it as early as the Ming dynasty, and no other novel can claim a ludic lineage as eminent, for ultimately being so closely associated with the rise of the "quintessentially" Chinese game of mahjong.[67] No other novel (or game) highlights the combinatory logic of its characters by

[66] Shi, *Yibai ershi hui de Shuihu*, v. 1, p. 1; Shi and Luo, *Tiger Killers*, p. 2.

[67] For the history of how mahjong became "quintessentially" Chinese, see Maggie Greene, "The Game People Played: Mahjong in Modern Chinese Society and Culture," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 5.1 (2016): 1–27.

foregrounding their exact number, and no other novel/game foregrounds its "database" the way *Outlaws/Suikoden* does—by including its heroes' names on a list carved in stone that is part of the diegesis itself.

The aim of my study, however, has not been so much to make an argument about a particular case as it was to state the case for a particular method. By comparing the early modern novel *Outlaws* with the postmodern game series *Suikoden*, a deliberately anachronistic comparison between two seemingly incompatible media forms, I seek to suggest that a more playful attitude towards premodern canonical literary works can produce new, productive insights. Some of these insights and the playful way of arriving at them are arguably applicable to many of the other great Chinese novels. *Outlaws* may suggest the iconic ways in which characters can escape their "original" narrative context, but undoubtedly no character is more iconic in this fashion than Guan Yu 關羽, the hero of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義) and the God of Wealth (*Caishen* 財神) found in most Chinese establishments of business. The interface of the Stone Tablet in *Outlaws* may allow for crossing the bridge between diegetic and extradiegetic play in unique fashion, but arguably no novel does so as brilliantly as *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, with its central lithic protagonist-cum-object-cum-text. The database of characters that are played with in the many different incarnations and adaptations of *Outlaws* may be strictly circumscribed, but a large, infinitely variable, and enticingly collectible cast of characters is at the heart of many of the most famous late-imperial novels, their myriad sequels, and cultural adaptations.

If the aim of this essay has been to argue for an approach, then central to this approach is the concept of play. Such play can be understood in a Derridean sense, as the freedom to recognize, disrupt, play with, and hence liberate ourselves from dominant structures—in this case, the structures long associated with what we only too easily define as a "novel."[68] To some, such play may seem irreverent or even anarchistic, but play should also be understood in the sense Huizinga uses it—as a perhaps free but ultimately also still rule-bound engagement

[68] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 279–94.

with a community—in this case, the community made up of academia and the discipline of East Asian Studies.[69] And finally, play should be understood as a concept that we may think characteristic of the wasteful, distracted, and consumerist early twenty-first century, but which arguably was equally central to the wasteful, distracted, and consumerist late Ming dynasty.[70] Indeed, when we look carefully, we cannot help but notice how often the new literary form of "the novel" was entangled with the popular games of its day. Early twentieth-century scholars characterize the novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西游記) as a game (*youxi* 遊戲), but in the mid-sixteenth century, Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602) famously compared the great *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* in similar fashion (albeit for different reasons) to a giant go board.[71] *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinpingmei* 金瓶梅) is, as I have argued elsewhere, a veritable encyclopedia of different games—chess, kickball, pitch-pot, and swings, to name a few—but marshals such seemingly idle pursuits to form a trenchant critique of its own times.[72] In this light, the playful nature of *Outlaws* brought out here through a seemingly incompatible comparison seems not so much anachronistic in historical terms, but rather a paradigmatic symptom of a literary genre and a historical moment characterized by forms of play, both modern and premodern. As such, we would do well to take a game such as *Suikoden* as seriously as we do the classic *Outlaws*.

[69] To quote Huizinga's famous definition of play, "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and so stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means." Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing, 2014), p. 13.

[70] For the way late Ming textual culture was accused of such traits by later, more "serious-minded" Qing-dynasty *kaozheng* 考証 (evidentiary) scholars, see Yuming He, *Home and the World: Editing the "Glorious Ming" in Woodblock-Printed Books of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2013).

[71] For a discussion of *Journey to the West* as a game, see Liu Qiongyun 劉瓊云, "Shengjiao yu xiyan: Lun shiben *Xiyou ji* zhong yiyi de youxi" 聖教與戲言——論世本《西遊記》中意義的遊戲, *Zhongguo wenzhe yanjiu jikan* 中國文哲研究集刊 36 (2010): 1–43.

[72] Paize Keulemans, "Games in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*," in *Approaches to Teaching "The Plum in the Golden Vase"* (*The Golden Lotus*), ed. Andrew Schonebaum (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2022), pp. 218–29.