

Developing Standards and Strategies for Globalizing the Storytelling of Korean Online Games

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Abstract

Objectives: This study was aimed at extracting and proposing a narrative grammar that the South Korean online game industry would do well to take on strategically, in the context of a comparative analysis of storytelling in globally successful games. **Methods/Statistical Analysis:** The study set “globalization” as a key word for the industry’s current challenge, based on the view that this crisis in the game industry can be seized as an opportunity. As a method for comparative analysis, this study examined how the “hero narrative,” which is the most classical story archetype, is applied in game stories. **Findings:** The South Korean game industry has not fully understood the importance of storytelling, as it has focused on technology-centered production contexts, such as videos and graphics. Particularly, South Korean games focused on MMORPG share a trend in which there is a setting but not a drama. They only have settings in terms of basic elements, such as historical background, space, and characters, but no drama structure that develops conflict, confrontation, depth, and resolution. The study developed a globalization strategy for the global competitiveness of the South Korean online game market by approaching the optimization strategy of online game storytelling from four angles, namely “convergence,” “divergence,” “extension,” and “sharing”. To develop South Korean online games, professional writers specializing in game scenarios should be cultivated. Cultivation of competent writers who can develop scenarios that harmonize locality and universality via extension and sharing, beyond convergence and divergence, will be the only strategy to sustain export of the South Korean online game industry. **Application/Improvements:** Particularly in the current saturated market, stories with high completeness are in demand. This is the academic background to the problem of developing South Korea’s own creative narrative strategy in order to improve the completeness of stories, which will help to create new markets, and also to acquire global competitiveness.

Keywords: Developing standards, Globalizing, Narrative Strategies, Online Game, Storytelling

1. Introduction

Korea is one of the power players in the online game industry and has been leading the field with advanced technologies and brand power. A number of famous Korean online games have been successfully introduced to the world including ‘Lineage’, ‘Mu’, ‘Maple Story’, ‘Dungeon & Fighter’, ‘Blade & Soul’, and ‘Archeage’ since the first-ever MMORPG, ‘The Kingdom of the Winds’, was released in April, 1996. The remarkable success of Korean online games can be attributed to the strong government support and well-developed infrastructure such as high speed internet services and ubiquitous PC Baangs or cyber cafes where young adults get together to play games.

However, Korean online games have received relatively little attention in North America, the biggest online game market in the world. Only ‘Guild Wars’ by NCSOFT has managed to succeed, while ‘Lineage’ and ‘Maple Story’, two of the most famous Korean games, failed to gain popular success in the region. Considering that ‘World of Warcraft’ developed by ‘Blizzard’, an American company, has been hugely successful, it is hard to escape the blame that Korean games are only for Koreans.

I believe that the major difference between ‘Lineage’ and ‘World of Warcraft’ which best represent the two countries, Korea and the US respectively, lies in the expandability of their storytelling. The narratives of ‘World of Warcraft’ have been identified with and expanded by

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gamers around the world, whereas those of 'Lineage' were understood and shared only by Korean gamers. Thus, for a Korean online game to succeed in the global market, it is necessary to study and develop standards and strategies for globalizing its storytelling that can be shared not only by Koreans but also by people from other countries.

The purpose of my research is two-fold. The first is to examine the structures and characteristics of Korean online game storytelling in terms of convergence, divergence, expansion, and sharedness. The second is to develop global standards and strategies for Korean online game storytelling by analyzing the strategies of 'World of Warcraft' which has been loved not only by Americans but also people from around the world.

In order to achieve the research goals discussed above, I will conduct the following tasks.

- To look into the publishing and marketing strategies of Korean online games in North America and to analyze the reasons for their commercial failures in the region.
- To study the storytelling strategies of 'Guild Wars', the most successful Korean online game in North America.
- To compare and contrast the storytelling strategies of 'Lineage' and 'World of Warcraft' in the aspects of convergence, divergence, expansion, and sharedness.
- To develop standards and strategies for globalizing the storytelling of Korean online games based on the results of the aforementioned tasks.

2. Background

In the *Game White Paper 2015*, a survey shows that the most important factor users consider in deciding which game to play is the genre of the game. Furthermore, what they are most interested in is the story during gaming. Genre and story are important, because users are interested in the basic narrative structure of computer games¹.

Whether or not a game takes a worldview in which the user is interested is an important criterion in the selection of games. A user who generally enjoys fantasy novels or SF animation is unlikely to enjoy being a Kung fu master wandering the ancient Chinese martial arts world. At the very least, the world view of a game is important to users, if not the details of the storyline. Therefore, in the planning and development process of games, the role of storyteller is very important, as it sets the verisimilitude of the story

and plot. The robustness of the narrative structure, in addition to its technological standard, should be set as a criterion for the measurement of a game's completeness.

However, the weakest point of the South Korean game industry, which is regarded as an online game powerhouse, is the absence of storytelling. The lack of appropriate storylines, unlike the evolution of technology, is the greatest challenge for the South Korean game industry to overcome. One striking feature of the South Korean game industry, the online game infrastructure of which is the best in the world, is that it has no iconic character, in comparison with those of other countries, who tend to have representative characters, such as "Super Mario" of Japan and the "Angry Birds" of Sweden. The reason why characters are important in a game is that they allow scalability of the content and increase sales. Game industries abroad generate a variety of value-added markets by means of connections to other industries through game characters. In the case of the United States, the marketability of characters of various cultural contents, such as movies, animation, and games, are expanded multiple forms of One Source Multi Use. In contrast, in South Korea, where such characters are lacking, revenue can be generated only through game sales.

Firstly, the cause of the sluggishness in the South Korean game industry is the poor storytelling of the country's games. The lack of a story contributes to the lack of characters, due to which value-added markets cannot be created, thereby forming a vicious circle. This is linked to a range of other problems, such as a lack of content and the foreign domination of the South Korean game market.

Until now, the South Korean game industry has only been the customer for content such as *Lineage*, *Scions of Fate*, and *Ragnarok*, but has not supplied to other fields, such as movies and drama. Changing its role from customer to supplier may lead to limitless effects, including popular affinity and image improvement. Particularly in the current saturated market, stories with high completeness are in demand. This is the academic background to the problem of developing South Korea's own creative narrative strategy in order to improve the completeness of stories, which will help to create new markets, and also to acquire global competitiveness.

3. Research Objectives and Method

Since 2000, the South Korean game industry has developed remarkably, with national attention, plenty of

human resources, and the construction of a world class telecommunications infrastructure. The history of the South Korean game industry began with the world's first online game, *The Kingdom of the Winds*, and the enormous success of MMORPG games, such as *Lineage*, *MapleStory*, and *Mabinogi*, and thus the industry became the core of CT based cultural industry. In 2012, the game industry recorded -10 trillion won of market size, signifying remarkable growth.

As it rapidly expanded its platform from PC and video to online games, the South Korean game industry is regarded as having the highest global competitiveness among the country's cultural content industries.

However, "warnings of crisis in the South Korean game industry" have recently emerged around the online game market. Specifically, the industry is shrinking due to a lack of professional manpower for planning and marketing, which, in turn, is due to human resource development focusing on technology. Moreover, negative perceptions of games are shared across the society, with a range of restrictions being legalized, marking "the shutdown." Most importantly, many critics suggest that the South Korean game industry is not producing global killer content because it is complacent with its current success in the overseas market, most of which comprises the Chinese market.

At present, the most popular game in the world is *League of Legends* of Riot Games, based in the United States. The game was continually ranked 1st for 34 weeks. The market share of the game is at least three times more than the 2nd ranked game. The *League of Legends* is of the AOS genre, which combines match actions and sieges. It is setting a milestone in the online game market, which has thus far been dominated by MMORPG and FPS. The success of the *League of Legends* is attributed to a thoroughly prepared localization strategy.

Some of the dubbings of various heroes were based on humor that can be understood in South Korea. In addition, for the first anniversary of its service in South Korea, the skin of "Shaco" was introduced, which is described as the Korean secret weapon. Moreover, a Korean style hero, "Ahri," was also designed, based on the ideas of "Kumiho," a Korean legend, for the LOL launching in South Korea, albeit controversially. This represented a successful maximization of synergy, which was attributed to globalization and localization, combining a global element, the "AOS genre," familiar to gamers around the world, with the local element, "South Korea²."

The fact that South Korean game companies are failing in globalization can be seen in the case of the new games of ArenaNet, NCSOFT's local production studio in the United States. In March of 2013, the only South Korean game that entered the North American rankings was *Guild Wars 2* of NCSOFT. However, this game cannot appropriately be described as a South Korean game, because ArenaNet inherited the existing game plans and staff, although it was merged with NCSOFT in 2002, so it remains an American game company. The game's discrepant identity is shown in the fact that *Guild Wars 1*, 7 million copies of which were sold globally, was unsuccessful in the South Korean market. With regard to *Guild Wars 2*, it remains uncertain whether it will be launched in South Korea.

The South Korean game industry is standing at a crossroads. Its technological development is facing the fierce challenge of foreign game companies; its domestic market is saturated; the negative social perception of games and various restrictions are discouraging developers. Most importantly, the fact that its global market share, which once comprised the most successful exported content, is gradually decreasing suggests that new exploration and challenge are needed. This study was aimed at extracting and proposing a narrative grammar that the South Korean online game industry would do well to take on strategically, in the context of a comparative analysis of storytelling in globally successful games. The study set "globalization" as a key word for the industry's current challenge, based on the view that this crisis in the game industry can be seized as an opportunity³.

As a method for comparative analysis, this study examined how the "hero narrative," which is the most classical story archetype, is applied in game stories. The study developed a globalization strategy for the global competitiveness of the South Korean online game market by approaching the optimization strategy of online game storytelling from four angles, namely "convergence," "divergence," "extension," and "sharing"

4. The Application of the Hero Narrative in the Online Game Narrative

New text creates unique expressions, in which its own characteristics are applied, while depending on existing expressions and cultural mode. That is, regardless of its

type, the expression of new text is a sort of hybrid, which is a combination of existing custom and new style⁴.

While an online game is a new game due to the invention of computers, its narrative grammar is ironically the most classical story archetype, namely the “hero narrative.” The hero narrative is the oldest among the story structures humans have created, and is an influential element. It is not only widely and commonly found in narrative literatures like myths, legends, and folklore, but is also a ruling story convention chosen by every narrative art form, including movies, plays, and dramas. For instance, *Aion* and *ArcheAge*, which are leading the South Korean online games, are based on middle age fantasy heroism. This shows how the computer game narrative has been closely associated with the hero narrative. The structural trait of computer games, the “one person engagement experience game,” allows the user to escape reality and meet a very non-routine world, so it embodies and activates the user’s unconscious desire to be reborn as “I” who is completely different from the reality. Thus, the computer game narrative employs the hero narrative, the oldest story structure of humans, to fill the gap between reality and unreality, the “I” and the completely different “I,” with familiar custom.

In my opinion, the hero narrative of online games is a particularly meaningful story pattern, which covers both “universality” and “distinctiveness.” All the civilizations of the world share the general characteristics of hero stories, but they differ in terms of the details in the unraveling of the stories, in accordance with their own cultural traits. The narrative structure, comprising onset - development - culmination - ending, and the characters, namely hero versus antihero, antagonist versus assistant, develop in a unique pattern in accordance with the narrative form, through writing and rewriting. The dialectic narrative grammar of universality and distinctiveness may be identified by examining how online games apply the hero narrative⁵.

Firstly, in the hero narrative of online games, the hero becomes the subject, not the object. The heroic main character becomes “I,” not “he”; the user is proactively involved in the progress of the narrative as an actor rather than as an audience. In the traditional hero narrative piece, the hero-main character is alone, but in online game hero narrative pieces, the hero-main character is an unlimited number of unspecified people. Each of the countless users who meet in the online game field plays the role of the hero-main character, and they compete or cooperate with

each other toward the same tasks or goals. The roles of commander, assistant, and antagonist of the traditional hero narrative are substituted by NPCs in online game hero narratives. In the traditional hero narrative, those roles are fixed and definite. In contrast, in online game hero narratives, there are countless NPCs, allowing the narrative is run arbitrarily and randomly, depending on which NPC is met. The choice to be commander, assistant, or antagonist is completely up to the user, by which such heroes-main characters can possess and experience different narrative evolution in the same field.

Secondly, the characters in online game hero narratives are focused on “mission completion.” The “exploration of paradise” appears to overlap with the mission, but there is almost no “exploration motive,” such as “self-exploration.” This is the part of the traditional hero narrative that online game hero narratives employ. However, the background is somewhat different. The fact that there is no self-exploration in the traditional hero narrative is attributed to the mythical belief that the setting of the hero is itself utopian and omni-personal, but in the case of the online game hero narrative, this is related to the limitations of technology. The source of the online game is programmed in terms of “patterns,” “loops,” and “repetition.” Although there are countless scenarios, a reaction B is structured for a behavior A. Therefore, there is no room for conflict or anxiety between the mechanical sets. The hero-main character can think about whether to choose behavior A or B, but it is impossible to adjust or reject the reaction. Therefore, he must always have faith and belief in his behavior, so he can proactively lead the running of the game narrative.

Thirdly, for the completion of the mission, the online game hero narrative has various tasks. A new task is assigned when one has been finished, unlike the traditional hero narrative, which has one mission, on which the entire narrative focuses. Furthermore, the mission is carried out endlessly. When there is no carrying out of the mission, the online game has no meaning as a game. In fact, the narrative of the online game is a narrative of mission completion, which is eventually completed by the user, although it is difficult. Therefore, the online game hero narrative should always prepare new missions, unlike the traditional hero narrative which ends when the mission is completed.

The traditional hero narrative involves missions that are quest centered, such as rescuing a princess, recovering treasure, or winning a war. In contrast, in the online

game hero narrative, the mission is conventionalized into leveling-up or acquiring an item, in addition to the conventional quest commitment. Furthermore, the reward for mission completion of the hero-main character is “being strong.” In the traditional hero narrative, the meaning of “reward” is marriage to the princess or the acquisition of authority or wealth, in which good triumphs over evil, signifying the end of the narrative. In contrast, in the online game hero narrative, the reward is not a conclusion, just part of the process of being strong. The desire to be strong is endless (because the countless heroes-main characters in the field run the narrative due to the same desire), but can never be met (because new missions are continuously assigned). Hence, the online game hero narrative can be never-ending, unlike the traditional hero narrative.

Fourthly, while the traditional hero narrative has the structure of a return to a clear destination, the online game hero narrative has the structure of a maze with no destination. Whether or not there is a destination is very influential for the completeness of the narrative. A destination also implies a place of departure. The general convention in the traditional hero narrative is that a mission is assigned in the place of departure, followed by travel to the destination to complete the mission, and completion on arrival at the destination, followed by a return to the departure place to obtain the reward. In contrast, the development scheme of the online game hero narrative is not conventional. The hero-main character heads to the destination with an assigned mission. Having completed the mission, he returns and is rewarded. He is then assigned a new mission. Repeating this process, the hero-main character gradually becomes stronger, later finding a new mission commander, with whom he repeats the same process. As the hero-main character becomes ever stronger, he finds a series of new mission commanders, travelling to new destinations for the missions, and thus the narrative runs on endlessly.

Finally, in the traditional hero narrative, the gender of the main character greatly affects the development of the narrative. However, in the online game hero narrative, gender has no such influence. The main characters of the traditional hero narrative were mainly males. Females were the object of a mission or the reward for mission completion. Male heroes confidently accepted missions in the name of great causes or to obtain justice, but female heroes, the number of which is relatively small, traveled to cure a father’s illness or for a loving husband. Moreover, while male heroes completed their missions

with their own will and ability, female heroes completed their missions with help or advice from male assistants. In contrast, in the online game hero narrative, gender is just one of countless options the user can choose. There is no difference between male and female options for the development of the narrative; the goal of “becoming strong” is the same for either gender.

5. The Four Schemes of a Game Scenario

The definitive difference between *Linage* and *World of Warcraft*, which are the representative games of South Korea and the United States, respectively, lies in the extendibility of the storytelling, which gamers develop. The game narrative of *World of Warcraft* was successful in globalization, as gamers across the world could feel the same and expand in the same way. In contrast, *Linage* worked only with South Korean gamers. In order to achieve global success, South Korean games need to overcome their locality and acquire universality⁶.

By analyzing globally successful online games in terms of storytelling, the difference between success and failure may be understood in terms of a story’s convergence, divergence, extension, and share. The convergence is a scheme through which the online game adopts the traditional hero narrative. *Linage* and *World of Warcraft* adopted a western hero narrative based on a northern European myth⁷. Their time, space, and worldview all overlapped with the middle age western romantic hero narrative. Furthermore, they diverge in their game scenarios. The two games are similar up to this point. The point at which *Linage* and *World of Warcraft* differ from each other is in terms of extension and share. In terms of the quality and quantity of basic scenarios, *Linage* and *World of Warcraft* differ from each other. *Linage* has a simple and weak scenario that can be summarized on one A4 page. In contrast, *World of Warcraft* has been continually updating and extending its game scenario since 2004 when it was officially launched⁸. As its game scenario became known to be more interesting than normal fantasy novels, users appeared who played the game to observe the historical space and sites of the scenarios. The attractive hero narrative of *World of Warcraft* was recently extended to animation, manga, and a movie, with *Warcraft: the Beginning* to appear in theaters across the world in June 2016. Such extension of the story led to voluntary sharing by users, so the massive game narrative of *World of*

Warcraft is being rewritten in various ways such as by fan pick, fan art, and game novels. The creation of the game scenario includes spatial, interactive, and multimedia creativities beyond literary imagination. Writing a game scenario is similar to the way in which narrative poems were written during the period of oral culture. Stories, created by bards, could be inherited up till the present with artistic value, because through the process of extension and sharing, the audience enriched the story, adding their own imaginations. To figure out what *World of Warcraft* has and *Linage* does not have will be important for the development of a globalization strategy for South Korean online games.

6. Conclusion

The South Korean game industry has not fully understood the importance of storytelling, as it has focused on technology-centered production contexts, such as videos and graphics. Particularly, South Korean games focused on MMORPG share a trend in which there is a setting but not a drama. They only have settings in terms of basic elements, such as historical background, space, and characters, but no drama structure that develops conflict, confrontation, depth, and resolution. In the case of *Linage 1*, a representative MMORPG of South Korea, various quests of the game repeat mechanical moves without justification. As there are no plots throughout the game, the quests have no connections, and its users become familiar with the mechanical pattern, rapidly moving up levels, which results in the repetition of a vicious circle, and a reduction in the duration of the weak content. If there were a strong storyline and plot, the content could be extended via new characters and conflicts, like the episodes of soap operas. However, as the plots themselves are weak, the amount of content is small, and the overall scheme remains the same, despite updates. Susan O'Connor, a famous game scenario writer who was a speaker at the Game Developers Conference (GDC) of 2013, has suggested that the game industry should develop game stories. "Writers play an important role of creating emotional contents of games," O'Connor

said, "And writers are responsible for the emotion gamers feel while gaming," emphasizes the importance of writers in the game development process⁹. To develop South Korean online games, professional writers specializing in game scenarios should be cultivated. Cultivation of competent writers who can develop scenarios that harmonize locality and universality via extension and sharing, beyond convergence and divergence, will be the only strategy to sustain export of the South Korean online game industry.

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