The Impact of the American Game: "The Last of Us 2" on the Shaping of Asian Gamers' Cultural Identity

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ABSTRACT

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, race has become an increasingly important issue, with more people playing video games to pass the time during home quarantine. "The Last of Us 2" is a game that is popular but also very controversial in 2020. In different countries and communities worldwide, "The Last of Us 2" has a wide range of players, especially those who have played the first version. Since its distribution, the game has been plagued with controversy over its portrayal of Asian characters and plot. Accordingly, we decided to use this game as an example to analyse the impact of Asian plot arrangements in American games on Asian players' cultural identity. We conducted interviews with 10 Asian gamers (3 in the US, 6 in China, and 1 in France) who have played "The Last of Us 2" through focus group plus analysis. This article analyses the American game "The Last of Us 2" from its story arrangement, plot setting, and character design. Our research will involve new insights into American games on the cultural identity of Asian gamers, which include the impact of stereotypes, racial discrimination plots on Asian gamers' cultural identity, self-worth, political correctness, aesthetics. The study contributes to the dissertation research on aesthetical interaction in cultural content-based games, and will also provide valuable insights for cultural researchers, game developers, scholars, practitioners, and researchers in social studies, and points out future research directions.

Keywords: Video Game; "The Last of Us 2"; Asian; Cultural Identity

1. INTRODUCTION

"The Last of Us 2" is a video game that was released in 2020 and received mixed reviews. "The Last of Us 2" is produced by Naughty Dog, a game studio in California, and was released on June 19, 2020. As a PlayStation platform exclusive survival, adventure, and role-playing game, "The Last of Us 2" tells a story of revenge. The main plot of the game is that the protagonist Ellie William's adoptive father Joel was brutally murdered by his enemies, so Ellie embarked on the path of revenge. "The Last of Us 2" won the UK Golden Joystick Awards for Most Expected Game in 2017 and won Game of the Year at the seventh annual The Game Awards in 2020. In addition, one month after the release, the global sales of the game exceeded 4 million dollars. "The Last of Us 2" has a wide range of players in different countries and communities around the world

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Commonly known as tech-savvy with 'digital' ingrained in their genetic materials, this extremely tech 'savoir-faire' platoon, branded as 'Generation Z' is always surrounded by and immersed in digital technology and electronic information [1]. It is increasingly difficult to tell whether "Generation Z" is learning more from video games and whether gamers are unconsciously influenced by useful or harmful information from video games, which have become so ubiquitous that they are now considered part of mass

media, common methods of storytelling and presentation [2]. From a pedagogical aspect, video games, as one of the most typical forms of games, have the potential to improve the learning outcomes of children [3] and can influence the moral and psychological development of adolescents [4].

Besides those who regard video games as a tool for encouraging the transfer of learning, there are numerous critics who remain concerned about the interactivity of video games and their negative impact on players, such as video games make implicit cultural assumptions that players are unable to influence. Gee adds the figured worlds inherent in video games are important in reinforcing or challenging players existing perspectives on the world in his book What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Literacy and Learning [5]. As an example, from Bassiouni's qualitative data study, video games were not only a leisure activity but also a shared cultural resource, which mediated developing senses of gender and identity [6]. Later, in the American Journal of Play, Soraya Murray indicates that "video games, as complex systems of visual culture, create and uphold value systems and hierarchies of one constituency, often the dominant class, at the expense of another" [7]. As a result, video games are fraught with assumptions, biases, and subjective values from game developers, stereotypes, and messages that can influence players. Therefore, it is important to research and explore the extent, types, and good effects of video games on player characters, and how they influence players' cultural identities.

Melinda and others proved that stereotypes of different races do exist in video games. Her main research objects are blacks and whites in the United States [8]. After the participants experienced a video game in which blacks constitute the main criminal group, they would have negative emotions toward the black group [8]. This proves that the negative information about the race in the game will make the player have a negative impression of the race. Not only that, when players of a race find negative information related to their race in the game, it may affect their identity. In Vincent's research, he allowed African Americans and white Americans to experience the same video game. He found that African Americans are more sensitive to the content that contains stereotypes about their race [9]. African Americans are more able to feel the negative information about their race and the positive information about White Americans in the game. "Processes exist whereby social views of out-groups are legitimized at the expense of group interest. African Americans will hold an in-group bias explicitly, while favoring the out-group implicitly" [10]. People who have always accepted negative information about their race will have a prejudice against their own race and therefore tend to be more inclined to other races.

We found that there is a research gap between video game players and identity. In recent years, with the development of science and technology, video games have penetrated more and more into people's lives, influencing people's opinions in daily life just like books, television, and films. The research on video games mainly focuses on the study of specific game content and the physical and psychological effects on game players, or Computer-Mediated Interpersonal Communication. Researches on players' identity are mainly focused on their collective identity in the game team. There are little researches on players' identity, such as Asian and African Americans. Due to different situations national, the study of race is also different. At present, studies on racial identity are also mainstream among African-Americans in the United States. There are few studies on Asians and Chinese Americans, and we have not observed relevant studies on Chinese Americans and games.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, the race has become an increasingly important issue, with more people playing video games to pass the time during home quarantine. In the United States, shootings targeting Asians and comments on the Wuhan virus have made Asian and Chinese identities hotly discussed on the Internet. In this social background, our research can fill the gap in the study of video games players and Chinese identity, and provide some references for the study of game players and ethnic minorities.

3. METHOD

The research used a focus group method. Through social media and player discussion groups on the web, the research convened 22 participants willing to take part in the focus group. Considering experience as a player and whether they had played "The Last of Us" series, 10 of the 22 participants were selected for the focus group. These participants are all of the Chinese descent and come from different regions of China. There are 10 people in total, including 6 Asians living in China, 3 Asians living in the United States, and 1 Asians living in France, 5 boys and 5 girls. Their age range was 19 to 23 years old, and they were all current undergraduate or graduate students. All of them have played "The Last of Us 2" themselves, while 3 of them have played the two games of "The Last of Us" series.

The focus group was held using an online virtual meeting. Two researchers moderated the group and asked several questions. These questions included whether some episodes or characterizations in "The Last of Us 2" made participants feel offended, how participants preferred the Asian character design and the impact of "The Last of Us 2" game on participants' thoughts or lives. After this, participants were asked by the researcher to discuss in focus groups what is relevant about Asians across the European and

American gaming culture community. With the permission of the participants, the entire focus group discussion was recorded for analysis.

Two researchers compiled the content of the recorded focus groups into a transcript and analysed it. The study took a qualitative approach to the analysis, categorizing the participants' perspectives and choices to draw commonalities.

4. RESULT

4.1 Overall results

A total of 10 people were adopted, including 3 Asians living in the United States, 1 Asian living in France, and 6 Asians living in China, 5 boys and 5 girls, the age range was 19 to 23 years old, who have all played the game "The Last of Us 2" before. Participants agreed that the game had led to some debate about discrimination against Asians, but the majority of players did not focus on this issue, nor did it affect their progress or experience. After playing, they have paid much attention to the social comments or talked about it. Whether they are beginners or advanced "The Last of Us 2" players, Asian gamers in the US are more likely to feel offended than Asian gamers in China. In terms of gender, we think female gamers are more likely to feel offended than male gamers.

Players are interested in race problems in the game and had reflected on them before the focus group. while 4 of them have left comments about this game on the Internet, 3 players have read related reports, and 3 have talked about this game face to face.

From the contemporary social situation perspective, 60% of Asian gamers (6/10) are not offended by the plot of "The Last of Us 2". More than half of Asian gamers living in China were not offended while playing "The Last of Us 2", while the opposite was true for Asian gamers in the US or in France. Asian players' feelings of discrimination or offense in the episode of "The Last of Us 2" cannot be separated from the current epidemic environment, the tension in international relations and various ethnic groups, including some racial discrimination and demonstrations experienced by Asians who live in the United States and France. It makes the player more sensitive and offended by a particular character or plot in the game.

However, these Asian gamers living in non-Asian areas also showed another bias, namely, they were more sensitive to the existence of Asian discrimination than they were to experience it personally. Although there are frequent incidents of Asian discrimination in the area where they live, which they have heard from newspapers and other people, they still believe that the attitudes and actions of the non-Asians they encounter in daily life are friendly to Asians.

4.2 Whether players feel offended while playing "The Last of Us 2"

On the whole, in terms of the plot setting in "The Last of Us 2", 40% of participants (4/10) feel offended, and 60% of participants (6/10) don't feel that. Most of the participants can feel Asian stereotypes through the Asian character in "The Last of Us 2", but they didn't feel very uncomfortable. 60% (6/10) of participants chose to ignore such plots since they have seen too many similar plots. They could feel the racial discrimination in the plot, but they didn't bring it into their lives, nor feel offended. Another reason why people won't feel offended by the plot (Asian character is rejected by a white girl) is because people are more inclined to choose to fall in love with people of the same race, and the appearance and culture of other races do not conform to that person's aesthetic system. Therefore, the majority of participants can understand the plot and do not feel offended.

In terms of whether they are offended by the death of the Asian character in "The Last of Us 2". Not quite the same as what we expected, only one participant felt obvious offended. He said the game is a highly interactive medium, and the sudden death of characters will destroy the player's gaming experience. This plot destroyed his immersion in the game and ruined his gaming experience. However, 90% (9/10) said they were not offended by it. The reason is that in recent years, many American games with plot-oriented will deliberately create "surprise" plots, such as the sudden death of a character, so players can understand such plot setting. And when players play the game, the storyline -- the moral aspect of the game -- has a more puissant impact, detracting them from the Asian discrimination issue.

In terms of gender, women were more likely than men to be offended while playing "The Last of Us 2". 80% (4/5) of the women surveyed experienced greater emotional fluctuation because of racist scenarios. However, 20% of men (1/5) were offended by racism, far less so than women. Most women believe "The Last of Us 2" was a good game in terms of gameplay because the picture quality and configuration of the game are excellent, but the plot makes the players feel very uncomfortable, especially the heroine cannot accept the plot of forgiving her father and enemy. Only one male participant attacked the plot of "The Last of Us 2" with emotional words.

In terms of whether their life will be affected after playing "The Last of Us 2", we found that Asian gamers outside Asia and Asian gamers in China responded significantly differently to the data. We found that Asian gamers in the US showed a significant rejection of "The Last of Us 2"'s racial discrimination. 50% (2/4) of Asian gamers living outside Asia, who are in the US, will feel

their lives will be affected, while 16.67% (1/6) of Asian gamers living in China feel their lives will be affected. This kind of influence needs to be combined with the player's living environment. Gamers living in China think there is very little racial discrimination in their lives, and they are not particularly sensitive to racial discrimination in the game.

What's different is that one male speaker thinks the game is a good attempt by the game company to portray Asian characters in American video games, because compared with The Last of Us 1, the introduction of Asian characters in the second has enriched the world view of the series.

4.3 When asking about whether "The Last of Us 2" contains strong political correctness

60% (6/10) participants believed that the game contained political correctness, but the 40% (4/10) participants did not feel it. 0 participants thought that the game was completely politically correct. Most participants believe that there are discussions on sensitive topics such as homosexuality, feminism, race, etc. in "The Last of Us 2". One participant mentioned that the design of these politically correct plots was related to the departure of important employees of the game production company. Participants commented that the staff left behind was a typical white leftist, inclined to homosexuality, different races, and violence. But everyone agrees that game produce should draw a line from politics.

4.4 The evaluation of Asian stereotypes in other Western games.

Only 10% (1/10) of the participants was deeply impressed by the negative images of Asians in other games, and it is the Japanese image in Battle Field 5. 50% (5/10) of participants thought they would slightly feel offended because of the stereotyped influence of Asian roles. They believed that Asians are actually a group that is not valued. One participant thinks if there are many Asians as enemies in the game, (in some games, the proportion of enemies of Asian images in European and American games is higher than the proportion of Asians in European and American countries in reality), this may be the screenwriter's purpose to spread the theory of "Asian peril". 50% (5/10) of participants think not. They think it should be about the context of the game, not racism.

5. DISCUSSION

The research mainly explored whether the construction of Asian characters in "The Last of Us 2" will affect the identity of Asian players. The final research results show that only a small number of Asian players are affected by the Asian characters in "The Last of Us 2". Asians living in non-Asian regions are more sensitive to racial issues in games, and Asian female players are more sensitive than male players. Although only a few players were offended by the plots about Asian characters in "The Last of Us 2", the reason for not being offended is that these players have experienced too many similar controversial plots in the past and chose to ignore these plots.

The research studied the previously neglected impact of European and American games on Asian players, especially Chinese players. Asia is one of the important game markets, but the opinions of Asian players are easily ignored by European and American game developers. At the same time, the study also compared the thinking of Asian players living in Asia and non-Asian regions. The results show that the player's sensitivity to ethnic topics is related to the social environment. In conclusion, this research shows that the plots about Asian characters in "The Last of Us 2" are not liked by Asian players. Its one-sided portrayal of Asians will arouse the disgust of some Asian players, especially those who live in non-Asian regions. If European and American game manufacturers want to develop the Asian game market by adding Asian characters, they need to have a deeper understanding of the Asian social background and the gaming experience of Asian players.

In our focus group, all of the players are undergraduate students, or those with a bachelor's degree or higher, and are between the ages of 19 and 23. Therefore, players' educational background also makes a difference in their identity in a game. Most of the participants have been concerned about race issues, so players with higher education may be more sensitive to racism in the game. However, at the same time, these participants also showed a deeper understanding of the racism in the game. They have the ability to accept different cognitions and tolerance of cultural diversity. Therefore, the study believes that players with higher education are more determined about their identity, so the race issue in "The Last of Us 2" has less impact on the identity of participants.

Regarding the racism-related plot in "The Last of Us 2", Asian players living in non-Asian regions (the United States and France) are more likely to be offended and affected than Asian players living in China. There are many people of different races with very different appearances living in the United States. Therefore, the unique social environment may make Asian players living in non-Asian regions more sensitive to racism. In addition, because of the epidemic, the lives of Asian players in non-Asian regions may also be more vulnerable to racism in recent years. On the contrary, only a small number of Asian gamers in China feel that their lives are affected. According to the description of

the participants, the people around them all have the same skin and black hair, so they will not bring the racism in the game into life. Therefore, when considering the impact of racism in the game on the player, the social environment in which the player lives must also be considered.

Some participants showed a positive attitude towards the emergence of Asian players in American games. Although some participants said that they often feel the discrimination and stereotypes against Asians in American games, they still look forward to meeting Asian characters in American games. Therefore, adding Asian characters to the game may attract more Asian players, and these characters make Asian players feel valued.

6. CONCLUSION

The research used focus group to show how Asian players feel after playing "The Last of Us 2", especially their attitudes towards racial issues in the game. The results showed that "The Last of Us 2" only had an impact on the identity of a small number of Asian players. The research aims to explore the identity of Asian gamers when they play American games, which can help American game developers better understand the psychology of Asian gamers, shape the image of Asian characters, and develop the Asian market. However, the research sample of this study is still limited. Due to time and funding issues, this study did not expand the sample, and the results could not be more diverse and representative. In addition, this study did not delve into the reasons for the influence of "The Last of Us 2" on the identity of Asian players.

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