The Politics of Gender in the Video Game Culture in China

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Abstract. The paper explores the influence of the feminist appeal of female gamers and the male gaze of male gamers in China on the market strategies in the game industry worldwide. The research is conducted through qualitative interviews and textual analysis. The research found that the female gamer group in China that could be constructed has its unique demands with gendered features, including being respected and recognised for their social identity and opposing the male gaze and gender stereotypes. To ensure profitability, the marketing strategies in the global game industry are influenced to some extent by their demands, as evidenced by the fact that games that respect the demands of female players and the group itself have received more development support; however, at the same time, marketing strategies are limited in their response to women's demands and are still bound by traditional gender perceptions.

Keywords: video gaming culture in China, marketing strategies of global gaming companies, male gaze, female gamers.

1   Introduction

The game industry is flourishing worldwide, and as the ninth art, video game presents feature of both artistry and commercialization. Unlike the one-way relationship that audiences have with traditional artworks, gamers interact with these cultural products in both directions as viewers, participants and consumers. As a result, gamers' demands can influence the content of games, as producers take consumer needs into account when designing their products, and capitalists tend to invest in products that are more in line with the market demand. Among gamers, there are different groups, and gender can still be used as a way of categorising and influencing their demands. The paper focuses on Chinese gamers, exploring whether there is an aesthetic conflict between male and female gamers in China, analysing the marketing strategies influenced by the demands of gamers of different gender, which is significant to improving the gaming experience for female gamers; and how the games made by worldwide gaming industry are influenced by the demand of the Chinese female gamers.

2 Background

In the past decade or so, many scholars have done a series of influential studies on the gender issue in the video game industry with the development of games. Alserri, Zin and Wook conclude the elements that impact gamers' engagement in serious games and the elements that are preferred by females, which proves the link between gender and the video games market and the differences between male and female gamer's preferences in video games [1]. And it has been proved that gender and preference in entertainment are strongly correlated [2]. Therefore, gender is used as a category method, as this division still widely exists in the gamer field and has a significant impact on gaming culture. The existing study also suggests that there are differences in how male and female players perceive virtual characters [3], giving a clue to relating the gaming experiences of gamers to the male gaze and sexualization elements of female characters. Moreover, there is a precedent presenting that problematic gendered stereotypes exist in video games [4].

The above-mentioned literature analyses the relationship between the content of games and the preferences of gamers. Nevertheless, limitations still exist. The serious games that one of the papers focused on is too narrow to represent all game industries. Also, the quantitative analysis used in the research above cannot directly reveal a person's gaming experiences and preferences profoundly. The limitation of the JK Gardiner's study is that although gender stereotypes are widely presented in games' characters, there are also games that helped mobilize feminism theories and might not be all presented as the author described and explained. Besides, there are no studies that address the connection between the demands of gamers and marketing strategies.

The paper fills the gap in previous research by focusing on the impact of gamers' demands on marketing strategies and the response of the market and provides a detailed analysis to find the correlation through the semi-structured interview which is an innovative approach.

In addition, the paper defines the revolved concept based on the existing research. To begin with, gender refers to social identity whose politics "emerged as a way to understand the group specificity and to mobilize and restore pride and group cohesion" [5], and the politics of gender is the common need of a social group (female gamers) with a shared experience and culture, the need of being respected and recognised, and the corresponding efforts to have their demand met. Similar to gender, female is a social identity in such politics.

The definitions of video game and gamers are as follows. The existing definition of video game is "a game that people play thanks to an audio-visual apparatus that can be based on a story" [6]. Gamers are people who play video games [7], which is more accurate than using gamers in the paper; female gamers refer to gamers who are, biologically, female and agree with their gender identity. In feminist theory, the male gaze is the act of depicting women as sexual objects from a masculine, heterosexual perspective for the pleasure of the male viewer [8].

Lastly, there are many reasons for the bias of the aesthetic review in the game market, among which market strategies plays a great role [9]. "The market strategies allow

an organization to concentrate its limited resources on the greatest opportunities to increase sales and achieve a sustainable competitive advantage" [10]; in the paper, it includes designing advertisements and determining which area to invest in.

3   Proposal

The paper explores the influence of the feminist appeal of female gamers and the male gaze of male gamers in China on the market strategies in the game industry worldwide. The hypothesis is that capital has a profit-seeking reason; thus, its marketing strategies tend to meet the needs of its primary target group first. And in the video game industry, marketing strategies are reflected in the design and content of games, so the male gaze is used in video games to attract male gamers as the main consumer. However, this male gaze content conflicts with the feminist aspirations of female gamers who feel offended and reduced to physical attributes, and bored. As the female gamers expand and gain a voice, the video game industry takes their needs into account to maximise profit and therefore adjusts the marketing strategies to meet their needs. The content of the game is thus characterised by two sides, there is content that meets the female aesthetic, while the male gaze is still present in abundance.

The research is conducted through qualitative interviews and textual analysis to find the demands of female gamer groups in China, and the marketing strategies in the global game industry which are influenced to some extent by those demands.

4   Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 interviewees in the 17-47 age range, all of whom were Chinese gamers, of whom 8 was female and 4 was male. The sample offers ground to fine-tune hypotheses for a more fully-fleshed study and argument. The content of the interviews focused on the gamers' gaming experiences, gaming feelings, aesthetic preferences, and attitudes towards elements in games (including images, texts, plots, etc.). The interview material was then used to analyse the demands of female gamers and their influence. The interviews with male gamers serve as a contrast to the gender differences in demand, thus highlighting the uniqueness of female gamers' needs.

5   Results and Discussions

5.1   The Demands of Female Gamers

Generally speaking, female gamers are just as focused on the quality of gameplay, which includes techniques, experiences and proper difficulties, as male gamers. However, there are still differences, female gamers may concern more about the storyline, character design, art and choice of characters. Correlated with this, female gamers mainly have three demands.

The most important one is opposing the male gaze contents. They need to feel respected as females instead of being objectified. Almost all interviewees mentioned that it is uncomfortable and offensive to see the male gaze in video games in the interview. And a significant proportion of interviewees said they would avoid games with such content. The content of the male gaze refers not only to the appearance of some female characters (such as revealing clothing, over-emphasis on secondary sexual characteristics, etc.) but also to their personality and related storylines. Some female characters are portrayed as silly, emotional and empty of appearance. Here the characters are often easily manipulated like dolls, which might satisfy the male desire for domination. For instance, the main character called Lyse from the 4.0 version of *Final Fantasy 14* is mentioned with disgust by one of the interviewees as a gamer. She said, "She's more of a male aesthetic kind of girl from her appearance to her personality, obviously a mele fighter but not wearing underwear and wearing super short bottom, and she's a bit of a straightforward, silly next-door girl, this kind of woman annoys me the most. I've almost given up on the game because of her".

Female gamers are also against gender stereotypes, which still widely exist in video games. For example, in combat games, male characters usually have higher attacks while female characters are designed to have supportive and healing functions; and in narrative games, male characters are usually in a dominant position and more rational, while female characters are more emotional and vulnerable. Many female gamers are dissatisfied with this. As an example, an interviewee said that female characters who act in an overly aggressive manner are offensive to her. She believes that in reality, women have a sensual side, but there is a more rational and intelligent side exists; whereas many games are made in a way that reinforces the former of female characters while weakening or even hiding the latter. In relation to this, female gamers would like to see equality of ability between the different genders of manipulable characters.

Besides, some female gamers are concerned about the gender of the game's producers and their words and behaviours. They want to make sure that the games they consume and play are produced by people who respect them instead of sexists, as a way not to pay sexist capitalists. Also, they tend to believe that it is quite possible for a sexist game producer to produce a sexist game. Even if the game content itself doesn't have obvious problems, if the producers make inappropriate comments or actions, most of which involve gender stereotypes and sexism, then female gamers may still choose to avoid games made by the relevant group.

5.2   The Response of Marketing Strategies

5.2.1 Gender respect issues.

It must be acknowledged that in the past, in the male-oriented gaming environment, many game makers have used female characters as 'tools', so there is no excuse for disputes over respect. 70% of girls said it didn't matter whether the main character in a game was a man or a woman, and 78% of boys agreed. The survey also found that the games girls play are actually often quite masculine, with 26% reportedly playing first-person shooters like Call of Duty and Halo, 36% playing role-playing games like The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim and Grand Theft Auto, and another 17% of girls playing games

like FIFA and Madden, for example. However, both men and women tend to support game makers in developing more glamorous and distinctive games for female gamers.

Thus, in this context, there are two sides to today's video game market. On the one hand, more and more female characters in video games are moving away from being 'other' and becoming narrative subjects, which helps to break the male monopoly on the gaze relationship and changes the power position of the viewer. On the other hand, however, a minority of video game producers still cling to old ideas and are unwilling to accept women's equality with men, clinging to a monopoly that is already destined to be wiped out by the tide of time. This phenomenon does not only occur within games, but also in the teams of creators behind the games where the suppression of female game makers often takes place. Only by providing substantial respect for women from both the player and creator perspectives can we ensure that gender is truly implemented and not something that is a formality(Trunk, 2021).

5.2.2 Operational issues.

In most people's minds, men will always be the ones to take the lead, while women will be more of a symbolic or supporting value. This leads to the design of game characters in which male characters are always more operational. Although many Otome games have relied on the success of 2017's In most people's minds, men will always be the ones to take the lead, while women will be more of a symbolic or supporting value. This leads to the design of game characters in which male characters are always more operational. Although many Otome games have relied on the success of 2017's Mr Love: Dream Date to innovate on many female characters, the internal logic of their operation remains an appendage to male characters. It is still the same stamina system in Mr Love: Dream Date, and even though it gives women enough freedom and initiative, the purpose of all actions is to gain psychological comfort by pleasing the male characters in the game, and the whole game is instead reduced to a tool for capitalists to make profits

It is the moba genre that has handled this issue better in China. The moba games, led by "Glory of Kings", have a balance of male and female characters, without any bias towards the ultimate goal of both sexes (to beat their opponents with their teammates), so that Glory of Kings rarely receives resistance from female players in terms of action, which reflects part of their needs. This part of the problem is more likely to be circumvented by the game model.

5.2.3 Plot reasons.

The storyline of a game is extremely important to enhance the senses of a game. Some female players have responded that the plot of many of the game's activities is illogical. In fact, there are limitations to this problem. The real problem lies in the fact that many games that are not gender specific have a preference for male plots. In Arknights, for example, the dialogue of the female characters seems to please the men, and there is very little complimentary interaction with the women. A competent game designer should already be aware of the spending power of female gamers, and even unisex games should be designed with female gamers in mind. For example, the game

Fate Grand Order was designed with male and female players in mind, and the characters were assigned according to player research in order to meet the needs of male and female players more precisely.

6   Conclusions

The primary reason this survey has limitations is that it is partly based on the respondents' self-perceptions of gaming. The types of games included are therefore rather homogeneous and do not give a comprehensive picture of the position of female gamers in various games. Furthermore, due to the geographical limitations of the sample, the survey covered the video game industry more in mainland China but less in foreign ones, which leads to limitations in drawing a more objective answer. In addition, in terms of sample selection, the survey sample mainly involved students in their twenties, which makes it difficult to reflect the preferences of the all-age female gamers.

Game making is a complex process and we need to consider not only marketing strategies but also the attitudes of gamers towards games. As women's economic and social status increases, women gamers are making more demands, and game makers should be aware of these demands and try to address them. Firstly, they should pay attention to the individuality of female players and put more effort into the design of female characters; secondly, they should make female actionable characters more actionable and three-dimensional; finally, game producers should balance the experience of players of different genders in the plot that they can participate in, and try to make the plot design as all-embracing as possible.

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