Demystify the Concept of Beginner Village in Chinese Role-playing Games: A Discourse Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Immersion, defined as the sense of being in an alternate space distinct from reality, constitutes an important part of the gameplay experience in role-playing games (RPGs) (Hutchings and Giardino 2016). To engender such immersion, RPGs need to invite players to enter into a virtual world in the first place (Bollmer and Suddarth 2022), and this process is often completed in the starting areas of the games. In the Chinese game industry, the starting area of a role-playing game is typically termed a "beginner village" or "newbie village" (Li et al. 2008), even if the area is depicted as a post-modern metropolis. Under this circumstance, the usage of this term in gaming forums and journalism often disconnects with the actual scenario of the game, which prompts several inquiries: when and how did the concept of beginner village start to gain popularity within the Chinese gaming community? What connotations does this concept contain? More importantly, what design patterns are revealed through this concept?

METHODS

To answer these questions, I conducted a discourse analysis of Chinese game journalism relevant to beginner villages because this method provides a cross-time context that reflects "the production, distribution, and consumption of texts" within the game culture (Fairclough 1992, 226). Specifically, I searched for articles with the term "beginner village" in the title across three popular Chinese game journalism outlets, Gamersky, Sina, and Youxia, as well as in an academic database Cnki. The inclusion criterion stipulated that eligible articles must allocate a majority of their discussion to subjects related to beginner villages. As a result, 39 articles were collected, with publication dates ranging from 2002 to 2021.

As for the analysis process, my approach stems from a previous game journalism research paradigm (Anderson and Schrier 2022), and starts by sorting the articles into categories according to their themes. Correspondingly, five categories were identified: game preview (n=17), game walkthrough (n=12), game reviews (n=5), players (n=2), and discussion beyond games (n=3). This categorization process then

allows me to synthesize the discourse on beginner villages and make clear the recurrent and emergent topics therein.

DISCUSSION

This section includes two observations:

(1) Although early Chinese RPGs before 2000 are often considered to be extensively influenced by Japanese games (Pepe 2021), the concept of beginner village did not emerge until the rise of massive online multiplayer role-playing games (MMORPGs) in China at the beginning of the 21st century. Articles about beginner villages from this time mostly fall into the category of game walkthrough, providing information about quests, choices, and characters in the starting areas of MMORPGs. These articles convey a dual message for understanding beginner villages. On the one hand, since early Chinese MMORPGs are commonly rooted in historical backgrounds, the discourse surrounding beginner villages in these games also frequently used the term to indicate historical and low-tech settings. On the other hand, the discourse also often described beginner villages as bustling hubs full of online players, implying that beginner villages only exist when shared by a large player community. In this sense, the concept of beginner village, at its inception, can be understood as a virtual space that is historical, undeveloped, and social. These features of beginner villages then serve to detach players from reality and immerse them in the game world.

(2) With the development of the Chinese game industry, the concept of beginner village has also continuously evolved. Since the 2010s, game journalism has also started referring to the starting areas in single-player RPGs as beginner villages. Correspondingly, the focus of the concept of beginner village has also shifted from the village to the beginner, emphasizing a player image that contrasts with a skilled one. This shift demonstrates that Chinese players' imagination of RPGs was no longer confined to history and sociality as the game market continued to expand and became more diverse. Moreover, according to the articles obtained from Cnki, the term "beginner village" has been used in multiple contexts and fields unrelated to games since 2015, which also sheds light on the increasing influence of the Chinese RPG culture.

CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined the concept of beginner village in Chinese RPGs through a discourse analysis of 39 articles from game journalism between 2002 and 2021. The concept is recognized as embodying the Chinese gaming community's subconscious imagination of RPGs and paralleling the growth of Chinese RPGs from historical and social contexts to more diverse settings. Therefore, demystifying this concept can facilitate a more nuanced comprehension of the development of Chinese RPGs and the evolving perceptions within the Chinese gaming community.

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