

From Silent NPC to Active Consumer : Representing Female in Chinese Video Game Culture

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INTRODUCTION

The past decade has witnessed a dramatic increase on the population of Chinese female players whose role in video games has transformed from silent “NPC” to active consumers, contributing more to national video game market. According to *2017 China Gaming Industry Report*, the total income of Chinese game market has soared to more than 203 billion yuan (\$31.7 billion) with 583 million users, in which mobile games, as the genre of casual games, takes 57% of total revenue while the average ratio of female mobile gamers comprise more than 50%. Games customized for girls like *Love and Producer* (2016) and *Tabikaeru* (aka *Travelling Frog*, 2017) have exploded in China successively in January of 2018, attracting millions of female users and kickstarting a social and cultural phenomenon.

By far we could find lot of discussion about gender issues in Western video game culture which could be traced back to 1981 when Sidney Kaplan and Shirley Kaplan published their article about gender presentation in arcade games. Marsha Kinder (Kinder, 1991) argues that how gender stereotypes have constructed in video games. *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* focuses on relations between gender construction in computer game design, while *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* concentrates on gender narration in MMORPGs, followed by Sundén and Sveningsson’s analysis (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012) about female gaming experience in straight games and queer games respectively. However, gender representation in Chinese game culture has rarely been discussed by academia, especially in Chinese social and historical context.

This paper, focusing on games that have been popular among girls, present a panorama of gender stereotype representation in Chinese video game culture. According to British scholar Stuart Hall (Hall, 1997), representation, instead of judging the accuracy of the language (including written words, sounds, graphs, videos etc.), puts emphasis on how culture has been constructed by language. “Language is able to do this is because operates as a representational system. In language, we use signs and symbols - whether

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they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects - to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced.”¹ To put it simply, representation concentrates on the production and circulation of cultural meanings, in which signs should be regarded as social practice in a specific social and historical context. In that sense, the discussion of representing female in video game culture means to explore what female stereotypes there are, how those images have been constructed, and finally what types of player subjectivity have been formed by social practices.

Therefore, this paper chronicles three historical periods in Chinese video game culture since 1990s, during which three types of female stereotypes have been formed collaboratively by game industry, trends of popular culture and players themselves.

The first stereotype, the most common image in Chinese game culture before 2010s, should be termed as the object satisfying male players' desires, which could be found in early Chinese computer games ranging from Stand-alone games like *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* (1995), to MMORPG games like *Dragon Oath* series (2007-). In those games whose heroes are male, female, following Chinese traditional expectation on girls, have been depicted as either sexy girls that meet players' visual pleasure, loyal assistants having a rush on the hero and aiding them to combat, or a role that announces tasks to players, forming the sign of silent NPC in male-dominated video game culture.

The second stereotype, which could be seen in TANBI games from 2012 to 2016, should be labeled as the prosumer of BL culture (aka boy's love, a subculture genre in Asia), slightly transforming female to active participants by the HTML5 games. On the platform of Orange Light Games (OLG), a visual fiction game community attracting a huge population of girls, most games feature TANBI elements, narrating romances among several boys while the female become the subjects who gaze at the bodies of male characters. Rather than real queer culture, TANBI has just been the imagination of a romantic relationship by straight female players, significantly influenced by Japanese comics and Korean dramas. On the one hand, users play such kind of games as consumers; while on the other hand, they, as producers, also create their own TANBI games with the help of the software provided by the website, forming their identity as prosumers in game world. Girls, by prosuming tanbi games by themselves, get involved in game production within a limited space beyond hardcore male players.

The third stereotype in Chinese game culture has been interpreted as cash cows, that is, the technological consumers with unbelievable consuming ability, trapping themselves in male-dominated gender discourse. The very beginning of 2018 has witnessed the great success of games tailored for girls (otome games), including a dating sim called *Love and Producer* by Pappergames, and a pet cultivation game called *Tabikaeru* developed by Hit-Points, both of which use first-person perspective, encouraging girls to develop interactions with handsome boys or cute frog. In the gameplay, female players, by spending money or time to buy power-ups, successfully transform themselves to a group of consumers, while such genre of mobile games, because of their shorter and shorter lifespan, tend to become a kind of Fast Moving Consumer Goods, exploiting female players economically and emotionally.

To summarize, it seems that, with the dramatic increase of female players, different modes for girls to participate in game culture lead to three gender stereotypes, from silent NPCs to active consumers. However, the representation of female stereotypes in Chinese game culture has not been eliminated, but been constructed in a more subtle way.

OPTIONAL BIO

Jing SUN, a post-doctoral research fellow focusing on video game culture. Her PhD dissertation, the first analysis of game culture in Chinese academia, concentrates character politics in Chinese video games. Her major academic publications include “Deviant Allegory And Gender Heterotopia: The Politics of Characters in 66RPG Video Games” on *Cultural Studies* (Chinese, Vol30, 2017), “Eastward Spread of Western Culture: Has Year One of Chinese Video Game Studies come?” on *China Book Review* (Chinese, Vol 11, 2016), and she also contributes game criticism regularly to several national media, such as *Global Times*, *The Paper* and *Sixthtone*.

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1 Hall, S. (1997) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: Sage Publication and The Open University, p1.