Chronicles in Digital Fantasy : Reconstructing Ancient China in Video Games

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Abstract: This paper delves into the significant role of online gaming in the inheritance and transformation of traditional Chinese culture within modern society, posits that online gaming, as a contemporary media and art form, offers an innovative avenue for cultural dissemination, making traditional culture more accessible to younger generations and thereby supporting its ongoing evolution and preservation.

Keywords: Video Games; cultural inheritance; Game study; digital culture

An Analysis of Video Games and Chinese Cultural Integration:

In the past two decades, China's gaming industry has undergone significant development, not only expanding the market but also cultivating a unique cultural style within Chinese games. This development has increasingly positioned games as a new domain for the production and expression of traditional culture. Such growth is closely linked to the Chinese people's nostalgic sentiment towards their ancient history, particularly their yearning for the glorious periods of the past. Svetlana Boym, in her book "The Future of Nostalgia," explores this deep-seated attachment to nostalgia and introduces the concept of "restorative nostalgia," which often manifests as romanticizing and idealizing the past. Stemming from this profound nostalgia, there emerged a need for a platform capable of recreating the ancient society in multiple aspects such as storytelling, culture, and visuals. Consequently, the "Gu Feng" (ancient style) games within the Chinese gaming industry were born.

This type of game has a long history, initially emerging from works by the Taiwanese game developer Softstar Entertainment, traceable back to the 1995 RPG "Chinese Paladin." The game incorporates numerous elements from Chinese legends, most of which are derived from ancient Chinese mythological texts and literary works. "Chinese Paladin" became the most popular game in the Greater China region at that time, marking the first encounter for Chinese-speaking players with a gaming medium that centered on their cultural background and nostalgic imagination.

At the beginning of the millennium, when the mainland Chinese game industry was in its infancy, many game makers notably showed a tendency to imitate "Chinese Paladin" in the early stages. Among these endeavors, the most successful was the "Swordsman" series developed by Xishanju. This series, spanning a mere decade, released a total of eight works, with "Swordsman Online III" emerging as one of the most successful online games in China to date. The worldview of "Swordsman Online III" is rooted in the golden era of the ancient Tang Dynasty.

Recognizing the inclination of Chinese players towards stories deeply embedded in Chinese cultural contexts, especially those imbued with nostalgic elements providing cultural anchorage and a rich imaginative space, more local game developers started to explore similar themes. Around 2015, influenced by "Swordsman Online III", major Chinese game developers like NetEase and Tencent launched games such as "NiShuiHan", adapted from the history of the Northern Song Dynasty, and "Tianya Mingyue Dao".

In the late 2010s, the proliferation of smartphones significantly advanced the development of mobile gaming. This phenomenon facilitated the widespread global dissemination of this unique cultural phenomenon. For instance, Shanghai-based MiHoYo developed "Genshin," created a scene of ancient China named "LiYue." The success of "Genshin" signifies that the cyber representation of ancient China has transcended national boundaries, becoming a global cultural communication phenomenon and an important channel for the dissemination of Chinese culture.

Digital Reshaping of Ancient Chinese Civilization in Video Games:

Similar to literature and film, video games possess interactive elements for participants — plot, characters, conflicts, themes, and im-

agery (Koo and Seider, 2010). These fundamental components are all built upon the game's visual design. In this study, I deconstruct the game's portrayal of ancient China through five aspects: clothing, architecture, labor, scenery, music, to analyze how contemporary games reconstruct ancient China through visual creation. Herein, I use "Swordsman Online III" as a classic case study. Which I created a game account and based my observations on what the game character encounters in the beginner's village, focusing on the visual elements within the game and analyzing how they work together to recreate the culture and environment of ancient China.

Clothing

In the Tang era, civilian clothing prioritized practicality and simplicity to suit physical labor activities such as farming. Particularly for the lower-class laborers, as cotton had not yet been introduced to China, their garments were predominantly made of coarse hemp fabric. From the murals in Mogao Caves No. 23 and No. 323, we can observe the common attire of Tang Dynasty peasants: short-sleeved, short garments, half-sleeves, belted waists, long trousers, and feet clad in straw or hemp shoes were typical for this social class. In "Swordsman Online III", the clothing of rural women, young farmers, and roadside peddlers prominently features hemp fabric, characterized by its short, practical, and worn-out appearance, significantly restores the image of the peasants from the period. Elements conducive to physical labor, such as leg bindings, bamboo water containers, and aprons, are added, and details like patches on the garments authentically reflect the living conditions and economic status of the peasants at that time.

Architecture

Due to the significant temporal distance from the Tang Dynasty, extant Tang-era wooden structures are exceedingly rare, the Foguang Temple is one of them. In his the work "The History of Chinese Architecture," Mr. Liang Sicheng conducted a meticulous analysis of the structures of Foguang Temple's main hall:

The doors of Foguang Temple's main hall were panel doors, each fixed with five rows of nails; the windows between the two eaves of the main hall are straight lattice windows.

The development team of "Swordsman Online III" built upon academic research and archaeological findings to incorporate their subjective imagination of Tang Dynasty civilian architecture into the game. They meticulously replicated the door and window structures and facade layouts of extant Tang-era buildings. However, to more accurately portray the life of commoners, they opted to use straw in place of the elaborate, ornate flying eaves typically found in religious buildings, thus depicting the rural dwellings of ordinary villagers.

Labors

In terms of agricultural labor, the game places a special emphasis on the process of silk production in ancient times. In Tang Dynasty, silk was not only a crucial commodity for tribute to the central government but also a central aspect of the working people's productive activities. The game visually represents the entire process of sericulture, silk reeling, and weaving, undertaken by peasants. The game's detailed portrayal of villagers' approaches to food and labor enriches the historical authenticity of this cyber society, offering players an opportunity to dialogue with the past.

Scenery

In the overall scene creation, "Swordsman Online III" adopts the traditional Chinese landscape painting approach to crafting ambience, utilizing light and shadow to convey texture and spatial perception of objects. Like landscape paintings, the game scenes are characterized by distinct layers and the interplay of solidity and void. According to the renowned Chinese art historian Qian Mu, traditional Chinese landscape paintings emphasize expressing the painter's spiritual pursuits and philosophical thoughts through natural landscapes. The game's recreation of this landscape painting ethos signifies the continuation of ancient intellectual thought in a modern digital art form. Particularly, the use of negative space in the game's visual representation, akin to traditional landscape paintings, is meant to provide a transcendent spiritual experience, offering players a deep immersion into the spirit of Chinese literati.

Music

Furthermore, matching music can also enhance the visual art style of a game and maintain the overall consistency of its style and theme. In the environment of "Swordsman Online III" world, when players enter the game, the soundtrack "Dao Xiang Cun" immediately melds with the visuals, accompanied by traditional Chinese instruments like the guzheng, erhu, and yangqin, producing a melodious and lingering musical experience. Moreover, each scene in the game is accompanied by specific background music, not only completing the scene construction but also demonstrating the multifaceted application of classical music in a modern setting. This approach offers contemporary audiences a novel way to engage with and experience traditional music.

Leveraging Video Games for Cultural Advancement: Recreations in Real-World Contexts:

As a contemporary art form, online gaming wields significant influence over societal, as well as transformative impact on player consciousness. It can maintain the status quo online while also evoking various emotions and responses, thereby affecting multiple industries in contemporary society (McAllister, 2006). In 2019, "Swordsman Online III" collaborated with the high-fashion brand "Gaia Legend," launching a series of garments based on the game's visual designs, which debuted at the Paris Spring/Summer Fashion Week; The Shanghai Oriental Art Center held "Zi Yun Hua Qu" concert by young composer Luo Ge. Luo, a dedicated composer for "Gufeng" games, pointed out that "If classical music does not want to become museum music, it must evolve with the era." These cross-industry collaborations have significantly heightened the visibility of traditional cultural elements in modern society, especially making them more accessible and appreciated by the tech-savvy younger generation in a worldwide context.

However, market-driven adjustments, aiming to cater to a broad audience and their tastes, often lead to the simplification or alteration of cultural elements. Such adjustments may render the presentation of cultural elements in games superficial and potentially misleading. Therefore, the gaming industry, while integrating cultural elements into games, needs to find a balance between commercial interests and cultural heritage. Also, even the young generation's emphasis on traditional culture can cause a new round of cultural inheritance, the way games are used as a cultural medium is relatively unfamiliar to other generations who are not exposed to video games. Therefore, how to emphasise the culture itself while spreading it through the game medium is a top priority in the process of adaptation.

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