Global Distribution of Chinese Interactive Indie Movies: A Case Study of Zhongce Studio

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Abstract: China's audio-visual creation industry has made considerable progress in the 21st century. With the application of new technologies, this industry is constantly developing new forms of media, including interactive movie games. The development of interactive movie games in China is currently increasing. However, indie games are still far from the best interactive movies internationally. This research examined Zhongce Studio, an indie game company that focuses on the production and distribution of interactive movie games in China. It finds that, despite the adverse influence of the game market environment, Zhongce Studio has been in line with international standards and tried innovations in character construction and plot setting, but there are still many shortcomings.

Keywords: interactive movie; communication; gamification; video creation

In the field of film development, interactive movie games are an emerging field, in which players' selections determine the characters, plots, and ending of a story123. They represent an important achievement in the gamification of film. Due to the relatively low difficulty and cost of gameplay design and video production, the core gameplay is mainly presented as a movie-style performance. Moreover, other risk factors such as the development cycle can be well controlled, and this type of game has thus become one of choice for small studios. However, the trend toward interactive movie games has not been fully explored. This article analyzes the interactive movies published by the Chinese game company Zhongce Studio.

To date, this company has produced three games, all of which were released on the Steam platform. The first two games are detective games, while the third one is a love-puzzle game; all three are interactive movies. The global communication of the company's work is mainly reflected in four aspects. First, the company's works are published on Steam, a famous international gaming platform where games can be released in a timely manner when it is difficult to obtain official game imprimatur. Second, the detectives' images in these works have some international elements, comparable, for example, to the Sherlock Holmes series. The narrative presents characters similar to those from existing detective literature, but it also has the characteristics of Chinese discourse. Third, in the spirit of modernization and internationalization, these three games respect sexual orientations and gender expressions in ways that exceed local restrictions. For a long time, the mainstream Chinese culture has been very conservative in terms of gender attitudes. It is difficult for LGBT people to be treated with the respect they deserve. And the more gently mannered male market is seen as having a feminine temperament and is stigmatised. But in these three games, it is opposite.

Zhongce Studio is an independent game company. All the titles it produces meet Garda's 4threefold definition of an independent game: financial independence, creative independence, and publishing independence. The games are not funded by investors and are therefore not subject to the interference of their opinions. Moreover, the games have not been commissioned by any publisher and are distributed by themselves.

1. Interactive movie games

Broadly speaking, all works in which viewers can do something to promote or influence the video's progress can be called interactive movies or interactive movie games. It is a comprehensive medium that encompasses some features from videogames and some from movies. The game audience can only do limited, predictable behaviors, and most time they are watching movies when playing. Multiple videos are used, and the order in which these videos appear determines the plot. Such interactive movies are also referred to as interactive films, interactive storytelling, or narrative games 56. In the gaming field, this technology is called full motion video7. Interactive movies are an example of the way in which media fields gradually merge with the development of new technologies.

It is difficult for filmmakers or game designers to pull interactive movie games into their camp completely. Interactive movie games are becoming an independent medium, inheriting the narrative ability of movies and the sense of participation in games. They constitute a fascinating and unique medium, the inevitable synthesis of the entertainment industry 4.0.

The origin of interactive movies is mostly considered to be the development of laserdisc technology 8. Laserdisc allows fragmented video content to be played out of order by a specific selection method, and this is a very effective way to make the audience feel involved. This form of interaction is more like some early playable children's books. The difference is that the paper-based book changes the plot by jumping pages. It takes honesty and self-consciousness to cut off the connection with other plots. When the laserdisc plays and makes a choice, the screen will show only the plot without exception.

Cybertext is a concept developed by Aarseth from Norbert Wiener's theory of cybernetics, which means to treat the complex components of the medium as part of a literary whole to form the mechanical organization of the text. It is "a perspective on all forms of textuality"9.

According to Aarseth, interactive movie games should be counted as a form of cybertext: they aim to present different storylines

through user selection and repeated attempts in a manner similar to hypertext. The texts which are performed through this act of traversal of different paths are called Ergodic Literature 10 Aarseth emphasizes the interactive behavior required by such new media artworks and user participation — playing makes traditional film art acceptable as a dual process 11. Text becomes explorative, configurative for users , rather than having a one-dimensional interpretative element. This also produces an aesthetic expression of contrast between different story layers.

2. Methodology

The main method of this study is a case study on three games specifically chosen because they were created by a Chinese indie video game company and comprise all of the video games published by this company.

This study is not intended to be thorough, and conclusions should not be extrapolated to a larger population or a new collection of games, as is usual with case study research 1213. We admit bias in our selection and curation. The games investigated were created in China by Chinese-speaking design teams. However, this does not mean that all Chinese interactive cinematic games have similar characteristics.

Table 1:Games created by Zhongce Studio

Game Title	Visitor	Visitor 2	One Day
Date Published	July 7, 2018	July 31, 2019	November 2, 2019
Style	Full motion video	Full motion video	Full motion video
Story Type	Detective	Detective	Science fiction
Platform	Steam	Steam	Steam
Reviews	691	158	63
Good review rate	79%	75%	77%

The data of number of reviews and good review rate was accessed on June 6, 2022.

The goal of research using the case study technique is to help produce a list of features and common themes that can then be experimentally explored. In this study, three researchers independently analysed each game as a separate case study. Each game took between two and four hours to finish. The researchers made distinct notes on each game, which evolved into themes.

3. Findings

This section presents descriptive results for each game. The case studies are descriptive. Thematic analysis is presented in the Discussion section after examining each game as a separate case study.

Visitor

Visitor is a detective mystery game about a murder in a residential building on a winter night in 2017, where an escort died in her own home. Three police officers must analyze a large body of evidence and testimonies to recover the details of the murder and find the real killer.

Visitor 2

Visitor 2 is a detective mystery game that takes place after Visitor and follows a murder in a rural guest house on a winter night in 2018, in which a woman dies in a room, and players must take on detective roles and navigate through several suspects. players must take on detective roles and find contradictions in testimony or connections among several suspects and dozens of clues such as evidence and surveillance footage to find out the truth. The main characters from Visitor, Qiang Sheng, Ouyang Lan, and Xiao Li, continue to fight with the suspects and uncover the truth behind the crime.

The main interface of Visitor and Visitor 2 is that of a detective's tablet, with folders of information about the case (more and more as the case progresses) that the player must analyse to identify elements that are related or contradictory, combining them to reach new conclusions.

One Day

One Day is a video game in which the player takes on the role of the main character, Hu Huan, who, after a car accident, crosses over into the body of a university student. After crossing over, Hu Huan keeps repeating the same day over and over, with everything around him acting like a prison to trap him. Starting at 8 am, each hour is a point in the day when the player has to plan where to go, whom to meet, how to treat them, and what items to collect to learn about his new life and mission from their feedback.

4. Discussion

There are many commonalities among the three games from Zongze Studio. For example, the filming of each game is relatively rudimentary, lacking in clever shooting and complex scenes, while the acting of the characters in the games is very mediocre, making it difficult to achieve an immersive experience.

In this section, we explore four key points from our analysis of these three games, including (1) the plight of small-budget indie games, and (2) international and local perspectives on characters in Chinese indie games. We also consider how these two points reveal the dilemmas faced by interactive video-based indie games in China, and how they should be confronted and addressed.

4.1 Shortcomings of Zhongce Studio

All three works of Zhongce Studio have been criticized on Steam. The criticisms mainly focus on three points. First, the visual quality

of the games needs to be improved: the mise en scène, the costumes, and the props are relatively mediocre. Second, the actors' performances do not communicate character traits very well. It is clear that the performers are all amateur actors, not professional ones. Third, players have limited freedom in these games. Sometimes, it is clear that loopholes in a witness's testimony can be found by players, but due to the linear structure of the games, they cannot immediately expose these loopholes. According to the game system, players must wait until the following chapters.

These three categories of negative comment all point to the same underlying problem, which is that Zhongce Studio is an independent game studio with a small scale and relative lack of funds. Therefore, deficiencies in performances and cinematography are inevitable. Several people on the main creative team played many important acting roles, and the camerawork was also carried out by the game producers, because they do not have enough funds to hire a professional cast and crew. In addition, if the game is to offer players a large degree of freedom, it is necessary to shoot a commensurately large number of scenes, forcing a substantial growth in the requirements for personnel and set construction, far exceeding the budget limits of this studio.

It is precisely because of these factors that the international influence of Zhongce Studio's works is low. Visitor and Visitor 2 each have only a few dozen non-simplified Chinese reviews on Steam, while One Day has only five. This has resulted in a vicious circle: at the beginning of the project, the lack of funds resulted in the limitations. They were not able to put their ideas into practice when they were exploring new game production models. Due to the shortcomings, these works have a difficult time competing with their foreign counterparts. As a consequence, Zhongce's works have not been widely recognized, and their circulation has been relatively limited, restricting its further expansion. After Zhonce Studio's experience has accumulated to a certain extent, the market for interactive movie games has gradually matured worldwide. They have the first-mover advantage, but they can't keep up with the iteration and innovation of the global tide.

4.2 A story about a group: The characters' internationalization and localization perspective

For interactive movies with the theme of criminal deduction like Visitor, the analysis of the characters, plots, and stories can be carried out through a structural analysis of traditional detective novels.

Greimas' structural matrix distinguishes 3 sets of oppositions and 6 action elements, which is named the Actantial Model . This article focuses on the "Helper-Opponent" set of opposition types and analyzes how the role model in related works breaks through. In the original structural unit consists by the helper and opponent, the former plays an auxiliary role in the goal that the subject wants to achieve, and the latter acts as an obstacle. But in Visitor and Visitor 2, the opponent will be transferred to the helper and construct a large subject's imagination through the expanded protagonist group.

In traditional detective novels, the main role represented by the detective is assumed to promote the development of the plot. The detective's goal is to maintain the social order. Starting from Edgar Allan Poe's The Murders in the Rue Morgue, the Detective-Assistant model has become a common way of setting roles in subsequent works, such as Sherlock Holmes and Watson 15. The detective takes the lead in solving the criminal's puzzle, while the assistant helps the detective collect material evidence and proposes details. From the perspective of narration in the text, the assistant often asks questions for the detective to answer or describes the environment in terms of space and time, as a basis for subsequent logical reasoning. The assistant also allows readers to enter the narrative context and perform deductions of their own, instead of just watching the reasoning enclosed in the detective's consciousness as a one-man show.

In Visitor and Visitor 2, detective Qiang Sheng and his female assistant Xiao Li fit this model. Qiang Sheng is leading the reasoning, while Xiao Li presents the evidence and asks questions of her master Qiang Sheng. Unlike the classic model, the addition of Ouyang Lan's role gives new vitality to the Detective-Assistant model.

Like Xiao Li, Ouyang Lan was an apprentice of Qiang Sheng. But after becoming independent, he has become a star detective who has received more social attention than his master, and he even has his own assistant. In both games, Ouyang Lan plays the role of a detective like Qiang Sheng rather than a helper or a mere assistant. At the beginning of Visitor, he and Qiang Sheng despised each other, as they were in a competitive relationship. Ouyang Lan deliberately conceals clues: when he discovers a belt as a murder weapon, he does not share that information immediately. The existence of another detective with an opposite style undoubtedly enriches the external environment that the detective protagonist needs to face.

However, this antagonistic relationship quickly disintegrates: Ouyang Lan gradually recognizes Qiang Sheng's master status in the early stages of Visitor. He also styles himself as Xiao Li's senior sister, eliminating the internal contradictions among the three protagonists such that they can act as a unified subject. After that point, in addition to his stereotyped femininity 14, he does not assume the responsibility of creating contradictions in the main storyline. Furthermore, the conflict between the two detectives is almost invisible in Visitor 2. The model of two detectives and one assistant has evolved into one detective and two assistants, or into a model in which there arguably is no absolute protagonist.

Due to the game interaction mechanism, in interactive behaviors of searching for evidence and establishing logic, the identity of the executor of the text in the game is often concealed: that is, Qiang Sheng, Xiao Li, and Ouyang Lan are all capable of reasoning. Who, then, solves the crime? It is not so much Qiang Sheng, Xiao Li, or Ouyang Lan, so much as it is the player, and the entire three-person detective group serves as the player's avatar. Throughout the full text, Qiang Sheng's leading role is not very prominent, while Xiao Li and Ouyang Lan play important roles. In the game, the setting of the detective team is a breakthrough - the driving force for solving puzzles, from the individualism of primary and secondary to the subject of the other and me relationship to shape the image of a larger subject.

The narrative of personal heroism means that the individual solves all problems, while discourse with a strong ideology will say that

the state machinery and security organizations will sweep away all difficulties. In general, detectives are often the incarnation of bravery, wisdom, and justice. They are heroes who fight anti-human elements in an ultra-modern civilization15.

The protagonist setting of the three-person team does not serve to enhance personal heroism, nor does it show us how the machinery of the state allocates individuals as resources and exerts their different abilities to achieve the state's goals. The team members with their distinct characteristics illustrate the process of deciphering suspense stories under the latent discourse of collective narrative; it not only carries the subjective emphasis on "We" in Chinese cultural products, but also implies a group of prophet images' elite characteristics. In the interactive completion of the game text, the player becomes the solver of the problem without having a strong sense of substitution with any specific character. The work focuses the player's attention on the plot, so that the final emotional sustenance is shifted from a Sherlock Holmes-style identification to the settling of external events. This is a narrative discourse with Chinese characteristics in general: solving problems is in and of itself more important than creating a character. In general, videogames focus on the process of event resolution, enhancing the experience of reasoning itself through ongoing (rather than narrated) player behavior to constitute a co-interpretation of the player and the character and not a legend that can only be heard but cannot participate.

Research on the global communication of Chinese interactive film helps to bring interactive film into the field of film research. In this way we can not only explore new paradigms for film development, but also broaden the distribution channels of Chinese audiovisual products overseas, so that global audiences can better enjoy Chinese cultural productions.

5. Conclusion

In the five years of the harsh winter environment that prevailed when China limited the release of official game imprimatur, independent game studios like Zhongce Studio chose to rely on overseas platforms to flexibly release their works. In terms of the contents of the games, by blurring the subject of the action and portraying multiple protagonists, the Chinese-style group narrative has surpassed the existing image of the heroic detective to a certain extent, creating a pragmatic narrative focusing on the plot and the player's own behavior. Players do not identify with a Sherlock Holmes-like hero icon, but instead decipher the truth of an event through a multi-character avatar.

In summary, the difficult environment for the release of video games makes investors, publishers, and producers cautious about investing in independent games. Meanwhile, the games' difficult distribution channels and the relatively simple content have resulted in a large number of Chinese independent games not yet entering the market. But even so, we can still see the characteristics of the times and society in which small-scale game developers like Zhongce Studio operate.

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