

The Impact of Social Game Gameplay Design on Players' Emotional Connection: A Case Study of "Sky: Children of the Light"

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Abstract:

With the rapid development of technology, the world is becoming increasingly digital. As new social media asks players to interact to do the quests, social games offer people more possibilities to have an emotional connection with other players in the virtual world. "Sky: Children of the Light" is a popular social game growing up during the pandemic era, with the core of "love and giving", it provides players positive emotional lead in the game world and encourages players to spread hope and love to other people. The article focuses on the gameplay design of "Sky: Children of the Light", the study of the impact of gameplay design on players' emotional connection by using the way of participatory observation and in-depth interviews, to provide some practical reference for healthy social game gameplay designing. The study found that by designing the interaction method and adding emotional purpose to the story narrative, the players' satisfaction and empathy about the world will increase, and care more about the environment and people around them.

Keywords: Social game; game design; emotional connection.

1. Introduction

Social games are more and more popular today. Playing online games with multiple people on social networks increases player enjoyment and persistence compared to online games played alone [1]. People who live in society need a lot of correlation with other people and the world to make sure that they are not isolated. Meeting friends on a virtual platform, with the property of editability and anonymity, social games can be a good choice. With the gameplay design in social games, players may find more easier to have a relationship with other people and establish an emotional connection.

The research focuses on the flourishing virtual social era, conducting the study on the impact of gameplay design in social games and the players' emotional connection, taking the game "Sky: Children of the Light" as an example. This study has researched how social game production teams can better set up social gameplay design in games in the future. From the current situation of "Sky", the design of the game, and interviews analysis of "Sky" players, the article conducts the research practically. The literature analysis method is used to search and read relevant materials to get information. The ultimate research goal of the article is to explore the main script and social element gameplay design in "Sky" and their relation to players' emotional empathy. Using the combination of participa-

tory observation and in-depth interviews, the researcher deeply feels the environment of the game, analyses and summarizes the conclusion.

2. Social Game

2.1 Background

Social game is a form of entertainment. It encourages players to interact with other players while enjoying the gameplay to achieve goals. Most of today's popular social games can be applied to electronic devices such as computers and mobile phones [2]. As an effective way to relax, its essential form is "virtual reality", which aims to help players temporarily escape from the pressure of reality [2]. Because of globalization and the fast-changing, globalized world has resulted in an empathy deficit, making young people face increasing challenges and pressures [3]. The emergence of online games greatly alleviates the depression that people find difficult to resolve in their daily lives. From the arcades in the 1980s to the computer multiplayer games, games have developed at a high rate. After the advent of the mobile internet era, electric mobile devices became the most popular carriers of games [4]. Especially in the 2020s, due to the COVID-19 epidemic, users' mobile game participation time has increased significantly, and social mobile games have stood out. Its users have strong stickiness and a high frequency of in-

terpersonal interactions, so they are more popular among players [5].

2.2 Current Situation of “Sky: Children of the Light”

2.2.1 Features of “Sky”

“Sky: Children of the Light” is an adventure social game developed by Jenova Chen and his team That Game Company (TGC) and released on the App Store on June 21, 2019. Based on its emotional core of “love and giving”, fantastic scenery, and exquisite production technology, “Sky” has won multiple awards. In the gameplay, the players are no longer asked to defeat the villain but to adopt a mode that can enhance group cohesion and jointly change the game world [2]. Some researchers show that playing a video game or watching a movie triggers emotions and these media can be used as a powerful tool to trigger empathy [3]. The production team tries to turn players’ attention to people’s hearts and inspire players’ yearning for love and peace via stories and festivals. They call on people to value natural life, protect the environment, pursue peace, and against discrimination. In the Days of Nature, players can be rewarded by cleaning up garbage and pollutants in the ocean; In the Aurora Concert, players can feel the praise of nature through animated videos; In the Season of Remembrance, players can experience the cruel war from a third person perspective; In the Eye of Eden and the Orbit, players can aware the greatness of life and the preciousness of friendship. Just as the thought of Jie Gong, games can make up for the shortage points of the real world [5]. Although the purpose of game playing is entertainment, they still promote people’s emotional connection with the world through personal experiences in the game.

2.2.2 Current situation of players

At the fifth anniversary celebration of Sky: Children of the Light, producer Jenova Chen announced that there are more than 200 million gamers up to now worldwide. As the descendants of the Sky Kingdom, players have some great missions in the game. Thus, the player is an extremely important group to study. Players use games as a medium to communicate and interact, which has created a new type of online social relationship. The game unites players and creates a stronger community from scratch [6]. The sky has a wide age distribution of players, which means that the experience in society and the development of the mental level of these players vary greatly. Such huge differences lead to more diversity of players compared to other games. This feature asks the players of Sky to enhance tolerance and empathy during the gameplay. At the same time, Sky is considered a warmhearted game

in China that many people with mental illness and serious physical illnesses enjoy. Many people think Sky is like a comfort of life, bringing love and hope. The emotions and desires of these players cannot be satisfied in the real world, and the real-time interaction, role-playing, and social interaction of mobile games meet the needs of players for simulated intimacy [6]. When two kinds of people interact with each other, they release the hope in the game.

However, there are still some bad phenomena in the interaction of communication, which is against the original intention of TGC, though the production team tried their best to avoid conflict elements. Gamers are not always nice to each other [7]. As a social game, conflicts between people are normal. However, some players do not care so deeply about leisure activities that they feel uneasy emotionally [7]. They bring other gamers bad emotional experiences via verbal bullying and image discrimination. In addition, some unreasonable policies and bugs in the game may lead to unpleasant experiences for gamers and result in players’ upset emotions such as no longer deeply protecting this group and the game.

3. Gameplay Design of “Sky”

3.1 Fixed Plot Gameplay Design & Its Impact on Players’ Emotional Connection

Unlike traditional competition online games with clear goals and development characteristics, the first main quest of Sky is simply to walk from the Isle of Dawn to Eden to complete the first rebirth. The slow rate of the game without a strong goal and clear clues allows the player to explore in their following trips. In the repeating trips, players may find different beautiful scenes and places they haven’t been to before. The views smooth the souls of players.

The emotional narrative in Sky to the start of the story. Instead of interacting with speaking language, TGC seeks to express emotions through universal languages like using action scenes to tell the players about the memory and the identity of the ancestor, making gamers imagine the part of the story [2]. The emotional narrative brings players thought and touch, increasing their love for the world. They can get the greatness of the people not only in the game but also in the real world. In addition, social interaction between people involves the encoding and decoding of social signals such as facial expressions, body gestures, and voice [8]. TGC designed the action expressions for players, allowing them to communicate with strangers friendly. This mechanism effectively avoids cyberbullying in some ways, players can subjectively to choose whether stay or leave. It is a good way to protect players.

Moreover, both increasing positive and reducing negative

emotions are important for improving a person's overall happiness and well-being [9]. Different from competitive games, players in Sky are not allowed to attack, but they are supported to save. The designing team deletes the action expression with aggressive meanings, reduces conflicts among players, and cultivates friendly relationships. Players are also influenced by the game gradually and help other players actively.

Among the entire exploration, the most shocking scene for players is the design of sacrificing and rebirth. After experiencing some obstacles from Eden, players are asked to give out their precious things to save the citizens of Sky Kingdom. Then, kids rebirth in the rebirth road. Games with characters can influence the emotions of players using affective simulation and the affective expressions of characters [3]. It is a fantastic scene with thousands of shining spirits, some are players' friends, and some are strangers. Players who complete the sacrificing will fly through the crowd and get to the door to rebirth. Holy music and the holy view make players understand the value of the relationship among people.

3.2 The Impact of Social Gameplay on Players' Emotional Connection

"The warm soul will meet eventually." Most players of Sky are familiar with this sentence. In the game, social is valuable. Players sometimes will be asked to finish one daily quest with other players' help. The core of a group is the interdependence among its members. Interdependency builds trust and intimacy among players and also motivates them to maintain good relationships with each other [10]. The "joint spontaneous involvement" is a central source of social cohesion and mobilization [9]. The design of interaction improves the quality of help in people's hearts. Furthermore, the ritual of being friends is solemn. Jenova Chen shows that players can feel the other person's character and sincerity through their interaction and observe whether he will betray them when doing the task, and then proceed to the next step of social interaction [2]. Players will give the candle which is valuable for players to another player to grow the friend trees. However, it is not the end to being friends. Players can grow the friend tree by sending candles if they want to cultivate a good relationship. The better of friends, the more candles are needed. Thus, players can greatly value the not ease of one relationship.

There are some social traditions developed by the players such as chatting at the start of maps and recording some charge-helping videos to help other players. When task interdependency is high, players exchange more information [10]. Sometimes old players also help new players to complete the first rebirth. These behaviors create a friendly

and warm-hearted community which is not obvious in the real world, making people touched by the warmth. Interpersonal skills may also transfer out of the game and into real life [11]. These players will then try to bring warmth to the real world and improve the development of society. However, Humans are social beings: their physical and emotional survival depends on others [9]. Social elements like possessiveness, make some people upset too.

4. Interview

4.1 Research Questions and Samples

To explore "whether players will have an emotional connection because of the gameplay design of Sky" and analyze the common points that cause players to have emotional fluctuation through the interview results, the author interviewed five players at the home of Sky. And then, it is efficient for obtaining effective information. The first interviewee B is an 18-year-old female who was handicapped from school because of mental problems. She contacted Sky after gapping from school and found her love for the game; The second player L is a 22-year-old female who works as a gameplay agent for Sky. Because of her working tasks, she is familiar with the various gameplay and activity tasks of Sky; The third player F is a university student, and he knew Sky in November 2023 through a game linkage activity and stayed in Sky from then on. And now, he is still exploring the game; The fourth interviewee W is also a university student who is 16 years old. She came to Sky at the instruction of her friend last year. W is very interested in the clues of history in the Sky Kingdom and relationships between players; The last interviewee D is a working female who is 18 years old. She has played the game for three years now. Though she is not often online, D occasionally goes online to chat with her friends.

4.2 Research Results Analysis

According to the interviews, the author finds that most of the players gradually understand the emotional core of Sky by feeling the precious relationships through their own experiences in the game. The detailed design of interacting in Sky allows players to feel a kind of respect from other people. Just encountering is beautiful. Because of the repeating daily tasks and single-playing design, the Sky's players have to focus on the aspect with no repeat in the sky, the social behavior. Each interviewee shows their deep emotions about interacting with other players. They show lots of tiny details in the game such as eye-following mechanism, holding hands heart beating, and social manners which are developed by players themselves. These expressions make players feel a kind of love and

friendly from other people in the world. Therefore, whether it is upgrading friendships or gaining love to improve appearance and props, needs to be “active” and kind. Under these interactions, the subtle emotions between friends will become more precious [2]. Players found that they can communicate with other people easily here which gives them a lot of confidence to interact and be empathic with people in real life.

5. Suggestion

After the epidemic era, the need for social games increased rapidly. A virtual community with good social distance gradually attracting the attention of contemporary people. Social games which are built to be enjoyed and shared with friends through existing social networks and platforms like smartphones satisfy people’s needs [12]. Making a social environment for entertainment is no longer an issue, but the new issue is to create good social games. To create a virtual community for spreading love and hope in society, it is necessary to induce conflict, discrimination, and bullying in communication. Here are some suggestions.

5.1 The Game Companies

As game companies, the producing team has great power to adjust the game design and follow-up revision. The feeling of belonging to a social community while playing increases continuance and game retention [1]. Game companies should pay more attention to how to create a community that makes players feel belonging and love. First, the game company is asked to notice the conflicts and bullying behaviors. Though in most of the games, gamers are supposed to be in conflict, the conflicts that are not related to the game design between gamers are seriously influencing the game community building because of the less regulation in the virtual world compared to the real society [7]. Second, it is a good point for the producing team to design some details that represent nice qualities in the world, such as interacting with peace and helping each other. Third, the producing team should constantly observe players playing feedback. Players are the main part of the game they feel the game closely. Some issues that are not noticed by the producing team can be found by players the producing team can improve them according to their feedback to make a better environment for players.

5.2 Players

It is concluded that the player motivations of massively multiplayer online role-playing games can be divided into five categories: achievement, escapism, immersion, manipulation, and relationship [4]. By playing games, play-

ers can understand their motivation and let the depressed feeling go smoothly. They need to exercise subjective initiative to choose the beneficial things for themselves and reject the bad things for their development. Players influence interpersonal relationships in real society by establishing social relationships in the game [6]. Thus, it is a chance for players to exercise their social skills in the virtual world and behave well in real society. Also, social games ask gamers to notice that the warm relationships between people still exist, they are supported to spread the lightness and love to others.

6. Conclusion

The encounter may not have an end, but it must be meaningful. Social games provide possibilities for people to experience new relationships with little limit in distance and identities in real life. The emotional connection with other players is precious while the social skill practice online can influence the interaction in real life. The paper found that game designing on social games is greatly related to people’s emotional connection. The article provides some practical references for future studies on how to make the social game more friendly and apply it to curing people with mental illness. Furthermore

However, the explanation of the impact of gameplay design on players’ emotional connection is not all. To offer a better game-playing environment in social games, more study on how to strengthen players’ emotional connection is a good topic to talk to. Moreover, there are lots of emotional connections, not only happiness but also some negative feelings. There should be more research on how to decrease the conflicts with anger and create proper world views for players while playing social games.

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