

Ashes of the Kingdom: A Study of the Impact of Game Design Innovation on Player Loyalty

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Abstract: In the context of fierce competition in the current mobile game market, player loyalty has become a key factor to determine the success or failure of games. "Ashes of the Kingdom" has a high level of player loyalty with its unique theme of The Three Kingdoms and diversified gameplay. This study takes "Ashes of the Kingdom" as the research object to explore the influence of its game design innovation on player loyalty. This research takes "Art World Theory" and "Field Theory" as the theoretical framework, and conducts semi-structured interviews with various players. The study found that "Ashes of the Kingdom" featured game design innovations in gameplay mechanics, story and character development, paid design, and content updates and operations. The results of the study show that the design elements of "Ashes of the Kingdom" have a certain impact on player loyalty, and provide a multi-dimensional reference for the game industry at the theoretical, practical and cultural levels.

1 INTRODUCTION

The game industry is iterating rapidly and the needs of players are changing. Since 2023, in the process of market development, Chinese otome romance games have gradually shown a conservative trend, and the homogenization phenomenon has become increasingly prominent. A series of problems such as rigid game mode, monotonous game experience and the difficulty of effectively satisfying the rich emotional needs of players have emerged one after another (Dai, 2023). These problems have undoubtedly sounded the alarm for the development of the entire game industry. After the "Ashes of the Kingdom" was officially launched on March 30, 2023, it attracted a lot of players' attention with its unique theme setting and innovative gameplay. In particular, it triggered a warm response among female players, and related topics were repeatedly posted on hot search on social platforms such as Weibo. At the end of 2023, "Ashes of the Kingdom" won Google's award for the best story game of the year, which fully affirmed its excellent performance and unique charm in the story, further enhancing the game's popularity and market recognition. This research has important implications for the development of the "Ashes of the Kingdom" and the entire dating mobile game

industry. This study mainly focuses on the influence of the game design of "Ashes of the Kingdom" on player loyalty. The in-depth interview method was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with different players to deeply understand the reasons why the game design of "Ashes of the Kingdom" attracts players. The advantage of this method is that it can well reveal the internal relationship between game design and player loyalty, which is conducive to the research. The ultimate goal of this study is to deeply understand and carefully analyze how the game design of "Ashes of the Kingdom" influences player loyalty. In order to achieve this goal, a lot of data collection and collation work have been carried out.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This study focuses on "Ashes of the Kingdom" to analyze how its game design innovations affect player loyalty, using Howard S. Becker's "Art World Theory" and Pierre Bourdieu's "Field Theory" to build a theoretical framework. The research reviews the previous relevant research results and explores the context and shortcomings of existing research to lay a solid foundation for subsequent research.

2.1 Howard S. Becker's Art World Theory

Becker believes that the creation of works of art is not an isolated phenomenon, but the result of the collaboration of many participants in the art world. The art world encompasses creators, performers, distributors, critics, and others who work together to create, disseminate, and evaluate art based on a shared set of conventions, techniques, and understandings (Becker, 1982). This study applies this theory to the field of games. A game is like a work of art. Art, copywriting, planning and operation constitute a huge world of game art. The success of "Ashes of the Kingdom" is no accident. The artists carefully craft the characters, the copywriters write fresh and in-depth copy, the planners are responsible for planning new events and game mechanics, and the operations are responsible for regular updates, promotion and maintenance. Players play a key role as audiences and communicators, and each role interacts to shape the overall ecology of the game, which in turn affects the loyalty of players to the game.

2.2 Pierre Bourdieu's Field Theory

The field proposed by Bourdieu is a social space full of competition and power struggle, in which different individuals or groups compete for favorable positions in the field according to the capital they own (Bourdieu, 1986). Each game company has a common set of rules to follow, but also have a niche based on the uniqueness of each game. "Ashes of the Kingdom" need to skillfully deploy all kinds of capital, find a unique position in Chinese otome romance game field, give the players a sense of value, help them accumulate capital advantages, so as to consolidate the player's loyalty in the game.

2.3 Existing Research Deficiencies and Prospects

There is still a lack of in-depth analysis of such ancient female mobile games as "Ashes of the Kingdom". Most studies have focused on mainstream game genres and have not fully explored the connection between unique design innovations in niche genres and player loyalty. Most studies on Chinese otome romance games adopt the in-depth interview method, which is a beneficial method to analyze the psychology behind players and explore the reasons (Wang & Yang, 2023, He, 2023). But little research has been done on "Ashes of the Kingdom". Moreover, there are few systematic

analyses combining Art World Theory and Field Theory, which fail to fully reveal the interaction mode of all players in the game, as well as the capital accumulation and loyalty transformation mechanism of players in the complex game field.

In summary, based on the two theories, it is beneficial to accurately enter into the research topic of the influence of the game design innovation on the player loyalty, and explore the effective path of game operation and player maintenance.

3 METHOD

This research adopts the semi-structured interview method, through the official community of the game, social media groups, player forums and other channels. The study adopts the combination of stratified sampling and purpose sampling to select different types of players as interview objects, including active players, loyal players who have not played for a long time, players who have recently left, and lightly experienced players. The research ensures that players of different genders, age levels, and geographical distribution are involved to strive for sample diversity.

The interview outline is designed around the core innovation of game design, such as the gameplay mechanics, players were asked about their opinion on the unique setting of the spy cultivation system, such as "How does the trust setting affect your strategic planning when you are training spies?"; in the story and Characters section, players were asked "What episode stood out to you the most, and how did it deepen your emotional engagement with the characters?"; for paid design, players were asked "What do you think is the price/performance ratio of paid items in the game, and does it affect your willingness to pay?".

In this study, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with the help of online conference software, and the duration of each interview was controlled within 30-60 minutes. The whole interview process was recorded, the recording of the in-depth interview was translated into a manuscript, and the text was classified and sorted by using coding technology. For example, the views on gameplay innovation are grouped into one category, and those related to story experience are grouped into another category. Through continuous comparison and induction, key themes and views are extracted, and the advantages and key points of game design mentioned by players more frequently are identified, and the underlying reasons are explored.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Gameplay Mechanism

The innovative gameplay of "Ashes of the Kingdom", which uses fragmented information to piece together a story and combines love and combat, is loved by players. In this game, players gain fragmented information through exploration, simulating the player's entry into the unknown, increasing the sense of engagement and authenticity.

"Ashes of the Kingdom" defies conventional notion and proves that female players like to think and fight, appealing to a wider audience. Its unique spy cultivation and combat matching system is well received by players. Players no longer rely solely on card values as in other otome games, but are keen to study spy skill combinations, positions, and the timing for skill release, and different battle scenarios prompt players to adjust their strategies frequently. This depth of strategy allows players to invest a lot of time in experimenting and optimizing the lineup, and cultivates the player's strategic dependence, which is a key factor in maintaining long-term loyalty. Players spend weeks figuring out their own lineup for difficult levels, which gives them a sense of accomplishment and increases their engagement with the game. Compared with love games of the same type, the gameplay of "Ashes of the Kingdom" is rich and can provide enough game space for players. Players said that most of the traditional otome games focus on the story, and the unlocking of the story only relies on the upgrade and combination of cards to complete the game, lacking interesting gameplay. Compared with the general card strategy games, the unique love experience and spy plot of "Ashes of the Kingdom" provide it with a unique competitiveness. Players said that they can not only unlock the story after completing the level, but also get a lot of resources to draw cards, so as to draw new agents into the team. These agents also have separate or intersecting story lines that keep them exploring.

4.2 Plot and Characters

"Ashes of the Kingdom" incorporates historical characters into the story of the game for modern interpretation, enhancing the game's appeal and depth. It is set in the history of The Three Kingdoms Period, and players can learn about real historical figures through the characters in the game. Through the processing of art and copywriting, the game not only gives the character a new setting and story, but also lets the player fall in love with the historical

figure in the game experience, and transfers this emotion to the character in the game. Players said that the painting style of the spy and the male lead was very attractive to them and was the key to retaining them. This makes the game an immersive experience that allows the player to travel through time and experience history firsthand. As a games with a focus on female preferences, "Ashes of the Kingdom" complements the female perspective of historical figures, giving players a different perspective from the traditional narrative and making them feel fresh. Players say that many women whose subjectivity has been erased in history can show their side as human beings in this game. It's a valuable perspective. Wang Yi, for example, was famous in history for being loyal to her husband. But in this game, she is a brave and resourceful general. She doesn't have to be a perfect wife, nor does she have to be a perfect mother. In addition, players can also learn historical knowledge in the process of playing the game, making the game experience both interesting and educational, thus deepening the love of the game.

Prince Guangling, as the female protagonist and the player herself, possesses unique character charm, which is also the key to retaining players. Unlike the average love game, the image of Prince Guangling is bright and deep. Her experience and personality traits have generated strong interest in many players. Otome romance game players usually don't want the heroine to have too much personality, so as not to affect their sense of immersion in the character. However, Prince Guangling is loved by players because of its complex and three-dimensional backstory. She has the decisiveness and determination to be the top and to threaten others; She also harbors "benevolence" and can "hear the cries of all people in the world". This depth of character makes players feel hooked. Even if they want to give up on the game, the new CG of Prince Guangling can reawaken their interest.

4.3 Payment and Operation

The reasonable payment design of "Ashes of the Kingdom" stimulates players' willingness to consume. Limited-time recharge packages with exclusive rewards, as well as special plots and clothing props meet the psychological pursuit of unique experiences by some players. Reasonable pricing and moderate concessions allow paying players to gain a sense of value, willing to continue to consume to support the game operation and maintain the game economic ecology. However, sometimes, the card probability is unknown, the guarantee

mechanism is harsh, and the gap between paid and free player experience is too large, which has become the focus of player criticism. Many players who have spent a lot of money still cannot draw the desired role, resulting in the loss of some players. Some players even publish bad reviews on the network, damaging the reputation of the game.

The game operator regularly launches new plots, levels, and activities to meet the players' psychology of aspiring novelty and maintain the popularity of the game. For example, the limited contents of festivals such as the Double Ninth Festival and Qixi Festival are integrated with traditional cultural elements, providing novel playing methods and exquisite rewards, so that players are enthusiastic about participating in the game and continue to pay attention to the game.

5 DISCUSSION

5.1 Gameplay Mechanism

Previous studies have shown that innovative gameplay mechanisms, as game rules, constitute the creativity required for a work (Zhang, 2024). According to the China Game Industry Report in 2021, Chinese gamers prefer mobile games represented by role-playing, card and strategy games (Fang et al., 2023). Modern players, especially the younger generation, have grown up in the Internet era with a lot of information and are used to actively mining information. "Ashes of the Kingdom" provides fragmented information to match the player's exploration instincts. Players are curious and eager to piece together the complete story like a jigsaw puzzle, and this self-driven exploration makes them the master of the game process, creating a sense of immersion (Hamari & Lehdonvirta, 2010). From the perspective of psychology, Daniel Kahneman's "Peak-end rule" indicates that the unexpected clues players gain in exploration and the surprise moments when they unlock the hidden plot constitute the "peak" of game experience, which makes them remember deeply, and further increases the sense of engagement and stickiness (Kahneman, 2011).

Chinese otome games show a high degree of consistency in gameplay design. They generally adopt the mechanism of drawing and upgrading cards. The game's core combat system relies on the player's timely manipulation of cards, while providing the option of automatic combat. From another perspective, this design reflects an inherent prejudice against female gamers, who prefer simpler

modes of play (Li, 2022). "Ashes of the Kingdom" breaks the inherent mode of otome games and strategy card games to meet the complex needs of female players. Under the gradual change in social attitudes, female players are not only interested in delicate emotional lines, but also eager to demonstrate intelligence and strategic abilities. One study showed that highly engaged players can derive six achievement values from playing games, including fantasy satisfaction, adventure, victory, social competence, self-actualization, and increased wealth and status (Lin et al., 2015). The unique secret agent cultivation gameplay of "Ashes of the Kingdom" breaks through the limitations of traditional otome game, and the strategic depth of the game caters to players' psychology of challenging difficult levels and pursuing a sense of accomplishment (Ryan et al., 2006). Players need to choose and match agents according to the battle situation and formulate tactics. During the strategic planning process, players will invest mental resources to build a deep connection with the game and increase loyalty. After completing the level, resources are obtained for drawing cards and expanding the lineup, forming a virtuous incentive cycle, allowing players to invest a lot of time and energy, and maintain long-term loyalty.

5.2 Plot and Characters

Story and characters have always been powerful tools to keep players engaged in a game. A Study in the field of narratology have pointed out that suspenseful and emotionally tense stories can prolong players' game duration (Ryan, 2001). The history and heroic figures of the Three Kingdoms inherently carry the love and cultural heritage of the masses. Game artists and copywriters dig deep into a character's underlying personality and give it a new look, in line with today's young people's preference for contrast and personalization. "Ashes of the Kingdom" with the fanciful history of the end of the Han Dynasty, weaving the story of power and emotion interwoven, in line with the player's pursuit of cultural and emotional depth.

At the level of role characterization, players tend to identify with characters with distinct characters and full backgrounds, and project emotions (Cohen, 2001). The addition of a female perspective is to fill the gap in the market, allowing players to see a diverse side of historical figures and stimulate their empathy. The game uses POV narration and live2D to present characters vividly and arouse players' empathy.

Most dating games shape the female lead image very flat, sacrificing their personalities to ensure a sense of immersion for players. In many stories, male characters are often given prominent social status and good looks. In contrast, heroines are often portrayed as one-dimensional and lack distinct personality traits. Other female characters are also often weak, acting as villains to set off the heroine or supporting characters to promote the romance between the male and female protagonists. This fixed character setting and implicit male dominance seem to limit female players to being "loved" and "taken care of", but fail to solve their inner confusion. This oversimplified characterization, which ignores personality, is in sharp contrast to the complex setting of the male protagonist, resulting in an increasing number of players having difficulty in empathizing with the heroine's role (Dai, 2023). In contrast to them, the complex and three-dimensional character of King Guangling in "Ashes of the Kingdom" stands out. The contrast between her courage and kindness as a top person is in line with people's expectations of good leaders in reality, and is also close to the complex nature of human nature.

5.3 Payment and Operation

Research shows that the in-app purchase system can not only accommodate the play rights of non-money users to ensure the popularity of the game, but also allow players to pay for individual pursuit of expansion space, thus becoming the most mainstream game payment design at present (Qi & Chen, 2023). The "card drawing" mode itself caters to various game psychology of game players to a great extent, including curiosity psychology, perfectionism psychology and gambler psychology, constantly stimulating players to engage in "card drawing" behavior, making players unable to stop (Qi & Chen, 2023).

Properly paid packages successfully leverage the player's pursuit of unique psychology. Limited time, exclusive elements are used to create a sense of scarcity, so that paying players feel that they are worth it. The card chaos violates the principle of fair trade for consumers. Players invest a lot of money but do not get the expected return, resulting in serious frustration. Players are far more sensitive to losses than they are to the joy of gaining gains. The failure to pay has caused their trust in the game to collapse, leading to negative word-of-mouth spread (Kahneman, 1979).

The constant updating of the game is a source of motivation to keep players enthusiastic. "Ashes of the

Kingdom" regularly updates the level, plot, and holds limited time activities to meet the needs of players. In terms of operational strategy, game promotion and community management also influence the initial impression and long-term evaluation of players.

6 CONCLUSION

The research result of this study is that through the in-depth analysis of "Ashes of the Kingdom", it is found that its gameplay mechanism, story and character development has significant innovation, while paid design has both advantages and disadvantages, and planning and operation have a certain degree of influence on player loyalty. The research concluded that the success of the game lies in its unique gameplay mechanics and story design, but the payment mechanics and operation strategy still need to be improved. This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, which mainly affects the field of game design and player behavior research, and reveals the interaction mode of each participant in the game and the transformation mechanism of player loyalty. Future studies should focus more on the introduction of quantitative analysis methods. They should collect opinions of players from different regions, ages and cultural backgrounds through large-scale online questionnaires, conduct quantitative assessment of player loyalty, and explore the correlation between game design innovation elements and player loyalty, so as to more scientifically reveal the inherent law between game design innovation and player loyalty, making the research results more convincing and practical guidance.

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