

The dilemma of online games in guiding adolescent values

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Abstract: Online games, characterized by their realistic virtual reality, strong entertainment value, and ease of operation, have attracted numerous adolescents. They possess unique value in guiding teenagers to experience teamwork, social interaction, and life experiences. However, the commercial promotion model and novelty-seeking competitive mechanism of online games can easily lead to negative impacts on adolescents, including gaming addiction, moral anomie, desensitization to violent behavior, and weakened time consciousness. To develop the online gaming industry and guide its value orientation, it is necessary to strengthen value guidance in game design and development, operation management, and self-discipline education, thereby conveying positive social energy.

Keywords: online games, values, guidance, dilemma, adolescents

1. Introduction

The National Outline for Cultural Reform and Development during the 12th Five-Year Plan Period designated the cultural and creative industry—including online games—as a priority sector, making it a new engine for economic transformation. China's online gaming industry has expanded rapidly: players grew from 187 million (2008) to 345 million (2013), with market revenue surging from 18.38 billion yuan (2008 annual) to 33.89 billion yuan (first half of 2013 alone). By mid-2013, China had 591 million netizens (44.1% penetration rate), including 345 million online game users. Students comprised 30.6% of gamers, with university undergraduates and vocational students accounting for 27.6% and 27% respectively. Adolescents, particularly high school and college students, have become the dominant force in online gaming.

This presents a dilemma: online games are now unavoidable in adolescents' lives and offer unique advantages for value cultivation, yet their addictive nature often leads to unconscious immersion and serious negative consequences. Effectively harnessing online games for positive value development requires addressing two core questions: What are their beneficial roles, and how can these be maximized? Simultaneously, how can their adverse impacts on values, academic performance, and daily life be mitigated? These issues demand careful examination to guide the future regulation of online gaming.

2. Value-Guidance tensions in online games

2.1. Commercial attributes and addiction mechanisms

Profitability is the market attribute of online games. Driven by commercial interests, developers continually design games with exquisite graphics, vibrant colors, beautiful backgrounds, and convenient interaction—where "attraction" and "addiction promotion" become guarantees for profit. Adolescents are often the largest consumer group and the key target customers for developers. To attract users and satisfy players' curiosity, developers painstakingly increase interactivity, improve visual quality, and incorporate violent, bloody, and even pornographic elements to draw adolescent players—objectively intensifying their obsession and accelerating their immersion into uncontrollable addiction.

From the perspective of virtual reality, adolescents experience emotional feedback similar to the real world through online games, achieving self-realization and psychological satisfaction unattainable in reality.

Through game rules, they recognize the importance and value of regulations, serving positive socialization functions. However, adolescent players have immature minds and poor discernment, easily blurring the boundary between virtual and real worlds, even becoming addicted to virtual reality while developing aversion to the real world. Various people encountered through gaming may also exert negative influences—ranging from distorted values and deepened obsession to fraud and extortion.

2.2. Violent content and value confusion

In guiding adolescent value orientation, a dilemma exists between violent bullying and chivalrous rescue. Many current large-scale online games are filled with combat and violent acts, though not necessarily unethical. Yet in-game, the line between violence motivated by chivalrous spirit (helping the weak against the strong) and bullying (oppressing the weak) is often razor-thin. High-level, well-equipped players bullying lower-level, poorly-equipped players is commonplace. The open, free-choice character of online games allows players to freely choose between chivalrous paths or ruthless, means-justify-ends routes for rapid leveling. Moreover, many shooter games lack clear moral distinctions, where common PK (player killing) behaviors only deepen hatred among players, misleading adolescent value development.

2.3. Cultural penetration and value conflict

Although most domestic online games carry values of patriotism and national spirit, foreign games contain exotic cultural elements and ideologies. Currently, games developed by Western and Japanese/Korean countries hold significant market shares, with their value elements permeating game themes and gameplay. Given substantial differences or even sharp conflicts between these countries' cultural backgrounds and value judgments and China's mainstream values, this inevitably dilutes and impacts socialist core values [1]. Adolescents easily receive Western ideologies and values during gameplay, game-related BBS discussions, and offline exchanges. The U.S. military has fully utilized online games' broad participation, concealed plots, and exaggerated rendering as important means for military cultural expansion [2], as seen in popular titles such as America's Army and Future War. Unconsciously, values adolescents originally acquired through school education gradually transform, even fostering blind worship of foreign things.

The playability, accessibility, ease of operation, player freedom, violent combat, and even pornographic elements become attraction factors, potentially influencing players' values. The value guidance principles initially upheld in game design often conflict with games' free and open nature—with the latter usually prevailing. Value dimensions include compassion and respect, theft and harm, conscience and humanity. Players immersed in gameplay struggle to make rational, moral choices. Original design intentions such as game spirit and rule consciousness fade and distance themselves from adolescent players. Solving this through developers' goodwill alone—reducing necessary game elements—seems unlikely; relying solely on adolescents' self-restraint to prevent addiction also appears difficult. Truly achieving online games' value-carrying function requires multi-stakeholder collaboration.

3. Online game culture: Dual effects on adolescent development

Online game culture is both part of internet culture and a component of mass culture. As a cultural form of the new era, mass culture is essentially consumer-oriented and commercialized, with entertainment as its function. Mass culture has a dual practical function: first, it plays a role in dissolving the sacred, promoting individuality, liberating thought, and strengthening democratization tendencies, which is crucial for human nature reconstruction and beneficial for people's pursuit of individual liberation; second, as a product of commodity economy, market mechanisms control the development of mass culture, which is produced for profit, and mass cultural consumption exhibits characteristics of vulgarity and entertainment. As a special form of mass culture, online game culture has a dual, symbiotic impact on adolescent values [3].

3.1. Positive values and aesthetic penetration of online game culture

The background culture and stories embedded in online games can indeed play some positive roles. They not only allow adolescent students to learn new knowledge through games, but the positive and strong learning interest triggered by games can also prompt students to actively search and study deeply through

other media such as television, newspapers, and books. Some value orientation guidance embedded in games, such as chivalrous rescue spirit, love for nature and life, and other value concepts, are contained throughout the cultural background and game rules of online games, from which adolescents can also gain enlightenment during gameplay. Additionally, some beautiful and elegant background music referenced in games can, to a certain extent, cultivate adolescent students' minds and improve their aesthetic taste. As part of internet culture, online game culture serves as a pioneer in enriching internet culture; music and game terminology driven by online games subtly enter adolescents' study and life, gradually guiding them away from the influence of mainstream values and even becoming non-mainstream. People directly gamify aesthetic attitudes in life, blurring the boundaries between art and daily life, thereby subverting tradition. Increasingly marginalized literature also conforms to contemporary aesthetic trends in narrative grammar, shifting from pure aesthetic grand narratives to pan-aesthetic desire narratives.

3.2. Negative erosion of online game culture and intervention dilemma

Due to the easy accessibility of online games and their strong appeal to all age groups, the characters gathered in the online game world are a mixed bag. Coupled with some incorrect value orientations inherent in online games themselves, this results in some game cultures having more dross than essence. Cultural factors such as online pornography and violence bring serious negative impacts to adolescent players, very likely making them not only addicted to games but also develop yearnings for vulgar lifestyles of sensual pleasure. Meanwhile, the entertainment, consumerism, and vulgarity characteristics of online games have a negative counteracting effect on establishing adolescents' serious yet lively mainstream values; long-term immersion in games will inevitably lead adolescents' existing values toward vulgarization.

The formation of culture is natural and unstoppable. Such folk culture not controlled by official authorities is difficult to intervene in. As long as people play online games, online game culture with its own characteristics will emerge and indirectly influence adolescents' values. Adding to this culture's duality—although it has some positive guiding value for adolescent value cultivation—it more largely encroaches upon the mainstream values adolescents should embrace, gradually steering them toward non-mainstream directions. Therefore, how to intervene and guide to reduce the negative impacts of online game culture on adolescents has become a difficult problem.

4. Cheating in online games: The contemporary assault on traditional game spirit

The game spirit inherent in online games—such as fairness and reasonableness, willingness to help others, emphasis on team interests, upholding justice or morality, helping the weak against the strong, defending justice, and chivalrous spirit—or at a higher level, releasing physical and mental pressure during gameplay while comprehending certain philosophies and realms, such as the unity of heaven and humanity—these should be the spirits or pleasures that online gamers seek during play, and also the positive energy that adolescents should grasp through online games. However, in order to attract more players, or due to insufficient attention to technical loopholes in the games themselves, or failure to discover them promptly, coupled with certain players' purposes of seeking quick victory, wildly dominating others, or even taking revenge on "enemies" by using cheats and other cheating behaviors, the game spirit or healthy pleasures originally inherent in online games are thereby destroyed.

To deal with cheating, game developers have traditionally relied on continuously discovering and patching loopholes through technical means to eliminate cheating software, which seems to be a very effective and the only feasible method. But the crux of the problem lies in that no matter how continuously technical loopholes are patched, cheating behaviors such as using cheats still cannot be stopped; once one loophole is patched, new loopholes are soon discovered, followed by new cheats. Developers and cheating players are like playing an endless game of hide-and-seek. Moreover, in some team cooperation games, several players do not need special cheating software—merely gathering a few acquainted players together enables cheating. Typical examples include the card game "Shengji" in QQ Games, and currently popular board games such as "Three Kingdoms Kill"; the cheating methods in these games are extremely simple yet impossible to completely eliminate.

Adolescents engage with online games primarily for leisure and entertainment; relatively few play with direct learning purposes. If they could appreciate the inherent game spirit during online gameplay, cultivate

team collaboration spirit and collective honor, and nurture a sense of justice and responsibility, then this could truly be considered as online games promoting their value development. However, adolescent players achieving quick victory through cheating, realizing "ambitions" or "revenge," or choosing to cheat together out of buddy loyalty—although achieving the purpose of fun—deviate from the game spirit and healthy pleasures that playing games should seek, and this is precisely what is most likely to happen. The elimination of cheating behaviors in online games will be another difficult problem for the value orientation of online games.

5. Multi-Party strategies for youth value guidance in online games

Regarding the popularity of online games, guidance is preferable to blocking. This requires starting from the design and development of online games, administrative supervision and management, as well as cultivating adolescents' rational self-awareness. Only through the joint efforts of multiple stakeholders in strengthening the promotion of traditional online game spirit can we maximize benefits and minimize harms, achieving positive value guidance.

5.1. Value guidance in online game design

Online game developers should pay attention to strengthening value guidance for adolescents in game design and incorporate anti-addiction settings. Game design should be classified and graded, developing games specifically targeted at adolescent age groups, prioritizing the embedding of value elements such as patriotism, historical culture, aesthetic consciousness, national spirit, innovative consciousness, and human ethics into game segments and backgrounds. For large-scale ethnic and historical theme games, instructive explanations should be provided.

5.2. Value guidance in online game supervision

On one hand, market entry review for games should be strengthened, improving the online game classification and admission system and real-name participation system, strengthening review of online games especially regarding foreign games entering the market; establishing violence assessment and classification systems for online games. South Korea explicitly stipulates that online games suitable for people under 16 cannot contain PK and violent bloody content. The United States and Japan have similar age admission and sales regulations. Real-name admission should be implemented for online game login authentication, with appropriate game levels or types selected according to age. On the other hand, process supervision should be implemented for the subjects and environments of online game participation [4]. As online games rely on networks and computers, both internet café and home gaming environments should be optimized, strictly prohibiting minors from entering internet cafés. Cultural management departments can instructively establish internet café management methods, setting up electronic reading rooms for minors in suitable cultural environments such as libraries and schools, or opening specialized internet cafés for minors, or dedicated minor seats, to facilitate classified management of game populations.

5.3. Value guidance in online game participation

Schools should integrate online games with certain courses, developing green game software and multimedia courseware, utilizing green online games to conduct courses in historical culture, music aesthetics, and moral sentiment, guiding students to shift their attention to game types carrying positive values. Teachers should comprehensively understand students' favorite game types, strengthen ideological exchanges with students, use games as a platform to close the distance between them, lead students to experience the game spirit and healthy pleasures of games, giving full play to the special role of online games in guiding adolescent values, harmonizing teacher-student relationships, and avoiding students using internet addiction to relieve stress [5]. In terms of family education, parents should pay attention to their children's participation status in online games as much as possible, strengthen home-school cooperation, try to avoid children contacting unhealthy online games, cultivate children's time management awareness and self-discipline awareness, formulate contracts with children regarding online game participation time and types, and encourage children to actively participate in physical exercise and cultural and entertainment activities in real life.

6. Conclusion

As one of the most influential cultural forms in the digital age, online games' role in shaping adolescent values has become an unavoidable social issue. This analysis demonstrates that this medium inherently carries multiple tensions: value guidance versus commercial logic, freedom and openness versus rule constraints, and cultural inheritance versus ideological penetration. Faced with this structural dilemma, neither pure technical blocking nor moral preaching can be effective. Only by constructing a "design-supervision-education" trinity collaborative governance system can dynamic balance be sought between respecting industrial development laws and protecting healthy adolescent growth. Future online games should not merely be vehicles for entertainment consumption, but rather become new educational spaces for conveying positive social energy and cultivating digital citizenship—requiring developers to assume more social responsibility, regulators to establish more scientific mechanisms, educators to adopt more open mindsets, and adolescents themselves to build rational value judgment capabilities through dialectical interaction between virtual and real worlds. Only thus can online games truly move from a "dilemma" to a "win-win pattern," enriching adolescents' spiritual and cultural lives while injecting lasting momentum into the healthy development of their values.

7. References

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