

Is American Horror Scarier?

-The Difference Between Chinese and American Horror Games

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Abstract: Fear is a result of human evolution to warn with the highest speed when faced with danger. With the continuous development of the entertainment industry, more and more horror games have entered the public's vision and been loved by everyone because they give people a sense of adventure and excitement. By comparing the horror games released by China and the United States in recent decades, this paper will study the differences and sources of Chinese horror and American horror as well as the development trend and suggestions of the two under the influence of cross-cultural communication in the future. The study concludes that in the current era of multicultural exchange, game producers and other creative professionals must strike a balance between maintaining the uniqueness of their work and embracing different cultural influences, in a way that not only promotes appreciation and understanding of various cultures but also creates innovative and engaging work.

Keywords: Chinese horror, American horror, Cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

1.1. The creation of fear

Everyone feels fear, which can also be recognized in many animal species. However, there is no consensus in the scientific study of fear. Some argue that "fear" is a mental construct rather than something that can be discovered through scientific investigation [1]. Others argue that the word 'fear' cannot properly be applied to animals because humans have no way of knowing whether they feel fear or not[2]. While this issue is still much debated in recent research, it is generally assumed that fear has adaptive functions in both cognitive and behavioral responses. Unlike reflexes and fixed action patterns, the relationship between stimulus and fear-mediated behavior is highly flexible to protect the individual from threats [3].

1.2. The commercialization of horror in games and its development trends

Virtual environments are often used to evoke positive emotions and reduce negative ones, especially in healing or therapeutic Settings. Similarly, players explore the world of commercial games to regulate emotions [4]. Virtual natural environments, provided in *Lost Ember* or *A Short Hike*, can induce positive emotions and promote escapism, that is, getting rid of daily worries [5][6][7]. In

contrast, Players of high-stimulation games in the survival horror genre -- by exposing players to countless threats and psychological horrors and making them feel "powerless and fearful" to disrupt the player -- precisely to enjoy the thrill of this starker response [8][9].

Since the appearance of the first horror video game Haunted House on the Atari2600 console, debates about the impact of digital gaming date back to the 1980s and 1990s, when the first affordable home computer systems were introduced [10]. Early research often focused on exploring the potential dark side of gaming, attempting to shed light on the social discourses that establish a relationship between gaming and negative effects on players and gaming communities [11]. But after four decades of video game development, horror games are taking an increasing share of the global video game market, and their representation is becoming more diverse, thanks to the colorful display of horror games developed by game creators based on their own cultural traditions. Domestic horror games have been booming since 2019, and the unique Chinese-themed horror narrative mode has provided the foundation for domestic horror games to play the role of cultural communication [12].

1.3. Loopholes in the development of horror games

However, up to now, no scholars have made a comparison between China and the United States in terms of games with horror elements, nor have they interpreted the impact of cross-cultural communication on game production and the future development trend. Therefore, this paper will first compare the horror games of the two in recent decades to find out the differences, then explore the reasons for the differences through cultural and historical backgrounds, and analyze the constructive effects of cross-cultural communication on future horror games compared with earlier works. To study the differences and integrate and learn from the strengths of the two in-game creativity, to provide better ideas and inspiration for the future artworks of horror and suspense.

2. Return of the old order and destruction of the new order

2.1. The common fear of Chinese style -- the return of the old order

There are many marriage themes in Chinese horror works, such as the game series Paper Bride released at the time of the rise of the Chinese horror genre in the game circle [13][14]. Although marriage is a happy event in common sense, the marriage in China's feudal era included a lot of oppression and mutilation of women and even men, including ghost marriage, son preference, and even infanticide (so that the ghost of the baby girl will not be reincarnated into the wife's belly). This kind of man-eating feudal old order is the common memory of all Chinese people, and they have only slightly gone away but not disappeared. Now they are still partially present in all aspects of China, so they can cause the greatest damage to the Chinese people -- and this kind of work is the real horror.

2.2. The common fear of American style -- the destruction of the new order

The development of American terror is often natural disasters and man-made disasters: a group of people come to an island or manor and meet a killer or monster, friends are killed one by one, and the audience is stimulated by the exciting pictures and bloody visual impact. This form of terror can be summarized as the destruction of the new order. For Americans, hundreds of years of industrial revolution success and social form are the most precious fruits. If one-day natural disasters lead to the collapse of daily life. For example, in Resident Evil: Biohazard, a series that began in 1979 with a virus that can modify the human body, the order is disrupted, Such an invasion of foreign enemies is terrifying to the Americans through the portrayal of the appearance of the villain protagonist and the victim to produce a sense of fear for the viewer [15]. Usually, the villain has nothing to do with the victim but catches up with the indiscriminate killing of innocent people. Moreover, these villain

protagonists usually seize some victims and do not directly kill them, but carry out various humiliations to experience the feeling of the ruler. In film, the *Buried*, *Cube* and *Saw* series are constructed through brutal and bloody acts and conspiracy theories about hidden villains; The images in games such as *The Evil Within* and *Silent Hill* echo this, with the protagonists in these games and films ending in American horror. In all cases, the last surviving survivor changes from fear to anger, and wins by achieving a short transformation -- a more ruthless way than the villain protagonist, striking the villain physically and killing him[16][17][18][19][20]. That is to say, American horror relies on hardware strength and direct attack to win as a creed. On February 19, 2024, actress Liu Yuxin said on social media that her Beverly Hills mansion, the most prestigious residence in Los Angeles, was robbed by a home invasion, losing tens of millions of dollars while the local police did not help her defend her rights, which shows that such man-made disasters are possible for Americans. This also forms their common imagination of fear [21].

So in American horror, the worst structure is almost always death, because death means the end, death means that there is no possibility of enjoying life anymore, while in Chinese horror, the worst outcome is often not to live forever because that's how the old society used to be.

3. Alienation of people -- in the shaping of "others"

In the non-absolute macro comparison, there is such a trend: Chinese terror is accustomed to excavating the sinister nature of human nature, and its source is often not a specific thing, but the human heart and the whole environment that shapes the human heart; While American horror is accustomed to creating a strange monster, and its source is often more concrete, such as a demon or a monster.

3.1. The heart of Chinese horror is sinister

For example, the Chinese game *San Fu* tells the story of Qigong fever in the 1980s, which was only 40 years ago. In this game, there are no demons and ghosts, only the unpredictable human heart under the oppressive environment, so the depiction of greed and distorted human nature is often the focus of Chinese horror [22]. In China, there are also many conventional folk precepts, which are summarized and formed under countless tragedies, such as "one person does not enter the temple", "two people do not look at the well", "three people do not hug the tree" -- "one person does not enter the temple" means that it is very dangerous for one person to enter the temple overnight, the ancient temple is often occupied by fugitives or robbers, the same way there is "rather sleep in a grave than sleep in a temple"; "Two people do not look at the well" means that another person pushes you into the well; "Three hands off the tree" means that when three people are standing around a big tree in a remote suburb, the other two are in your blind spot and their hands are being held by someone, so if the other two are trying to kill you, you don't have much of a chance to resist. These rules are like telling the Chinese that crises are everywhere, but they don't show in any concrete form, just like the human heart, you never know what the other person is thinking.

3.2. The theory of ghosts and Gods in American terror

Another feature of American horror is that few ghosts are coming out to scare people, and occasionally there will be evil spirits based on the theme of accidentally obtaining half of the video. There are two kinds of evil spirits here, one is the direct and specific ghosts, and the other is the possession of evil spirits.

Among them, the appearance of concrete monsters may stem from the habits of mind of dualism, which simplifies the model of understanding the world through a set of opposing concepts, such as heaven and hell, good people and bad people, us and them. There is a unique point of view in *Survival*

of the Friendliest: Humans outcompete nature not with strength and brains but with kindness. Humans have naturally evolved to be kind to fellow humans through self-domestication, but this kindness to fellow humans is achieved by cruelty to non-fellow humans, which is called dehumanization in the book [23]. Therefore, in order to shape "us", there must be a "them", and the more kind to "us", the crueler to "them", which is clearly reflected in the history of Western colonization. The embodied monster in American terror is the embodiment of "dehumanization" -- the source of fear must be a foreign, alienated, and completely different "monster" from us. This kind of terror is very close to life so that everyone can understand it, which is also the reason why this type of terror is popular.

The evil spirits in the subject matter of possession of evil spirits mainly come from hell, rather than some ghosts who died unfairly or formed by resentment. From this, it can be concluded that the evil spirits shaped by American terror are themselves unworthy of sympathy, and are born evil, which needs to be removed by righteous people, otherwise they will harm people all the time.

4. Suggestions on the development direction of Chinese and American games and films based on the theory of cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization

4.1. The creation of fear

There is a common Chinese saying, "Learn from each other's strong points", which can be applied to all aspects of cultural differences in a world where cross-cultural communication continues to influence the world -- Chinese-American horror games are certainly one of them.

China has accumulated a lot of experience in the cost control of horror game production. Since horror games account for a very small proportion of the game market in China, the scale and investment of production companies are very limited. However, under the rendering of the strange atmosphere, even if the production of pictures, music, and other aspects is not exquisite, game players can be immersed in it and feel the plot in depth. If we can go further in other areas, we will get more recognition from gamers who want quality games. The United States has always been leading the world in the production of pictures and special effects in movies and games, which not only requires more budget in terms of capital investment, but also has high requirements for game production technology. If the quality can be maintained while the cost can be controlled and the price of the game can be reduced, it will be more widely accepted by the audience.

Both China and the United States have their own "strengths" in horror game production, and if they can learn from each other, there may be different sparks.

4.2. Preserve cultural identity

As a cultural medium, the game itself is a part of the popular culture, the material development of the society, cultural ideas, etc., are included in the game medium, meeting the needs of people seeking to interact with information. Interaction is human instinct, people interact with information all the time, and the Internet is to solve the two-way interactive transmission of information. It is the demand for this interactive feature that makes online games have such a huge market. Online games are a good carrier of cultural communication, because the game language is easy to be accepted by a wider range of people, so we should pay attention to the carrier significance of online game cultural communication [24].

In the context of globalization, games may become more homogenized and lose their appeal to users. Therefore, Chinese and American game publishers can only stand out if they retain their own cultural characteristics, that is, carry forward their own fine culture while following the development trend of The Times. This makes horror games not only meet the entertainment needs of users, but also make the game more meaningful and in-depth, and become a classic in horror games. At the

same time, it can also satisfy the special preference of a considerable number of players for a certain style of play.

5. Conclusion

By comparing the popular horror games released in China and the United States in recent decades, this paper draws the characteristics and differences between Chinese horror and American horror respectively. As one of the carriers of culture, games are summarized as the sources of differences in games between China and the United States through the history and humanity of the two countries. Finally, this paper predicts and suggests the future development of horror games through the cross-cultural communication theory.

In the contemporary context of multicultural exchange, it is crucial for game producers and other creative professionals to strike a balance between preserving the unique qualities of their work and embracing diverse cultural influences. By actively engaging with a variety of cultural perspectives, these creators can both enrich the content of their artistic productions and increase their appeal to a broader, more diverse audience. This approach not only fosters cultural appreciation and understanding but also enables the development of innovative and engaging works that resonate with a global audience. Ultimately, maintaining an open-minded and inclusive stance in the creative process can lead to increased recognition and acceptance of one's artistic contributions.

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