

The Shift in Game Aesthetics Driven by Female Consumption: A Dual Reflection of Catering and Anxiety

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Abstract. This study focuses on "Honor of Kings", analyzing the dual aspects of the game's aesthetic ecology driven by female consumption. As the consumption power of female players has risen, the game precisely caters to women's aesthetic preferences for dreamy and girlish feelings through elements such as character creation and skin narratives, constructing an exclusive visual utopia. However, behind this aesthetic adaptation lies hidden consumer anxiety: the internal competition of skin iterations creates a sense of scarcity, giving rise to psychological pressure of not buying means falling behind, and standardized aesthetic templates such as "fair, young, and thin" implicitly discipline the aesthetic choices of female players, even extending to real appearance anxiety. In social spaces, skins have become social capital, triggering collective consumption competitions. The study reveals that the game industry needs to break away from the logic of commercial profit-seeking and build a diverse aesthetic ecology and optimize the consumption mechanism; female players should also be vigilant against single aesthetic discipline, reshape rational consumption awareness, so that the game aesthetics can return to its happy essence and eliminate the undercurrent of consumer anxiety.

Keywords: illustration design, game character design, female players, "Kingdom Rush", female economy

1. Introduction

With the development of society, the she economy has risen, and women have become the core force in the consumer market. As games are an important part of the digital economy, the proportion of female users has been continuously increasing. According to a survey as of July 2025, the proportion of female players in "King of Glory" is approximately 54%, with a number of 108 million, which has exceeded the proportion of male players [1]. Role design, as an important component of games, is the core carrier of players' emotional connection. Its portrayal of female images not only affects users' consumption but also reflects society's perception of women's status and value. The research on the correlation between these two aspects is of great significance. In today's steadily developing economy, women's consumption demands have significantly increased in various industries. The proportion of female players in the game industry has expanded, and the demand for character emotional value has increased. Studying the correlation between the character design of "King of Glory" and women's economic development can help understand market trends and changes in

women's needs. According to the research institution Niko Partners in the Asian and Middle Eastern game market, the number of female players in Asia is growing at a rate of 11% per year, and the female player group is constantly expanding, with huge market potential [2]. I will explore the correlation between character design and women's consumption demands through the design elements such as the appearance and brand collaborations of female characters in "King of Glory", combined with the consumption and feedback of female players. The research finds that the symbolic design of female characters in "King of Glory" has become more feminine with the development of society, precisely meeting the emotional needs and consumption psychology of women. The character skin design, by collaborating with brands that women love, is more refined in the modeling of male characters, to stimulate the consumption of female players. The game caters more to female aesthetics, but it creates aesthetic consumption anxiety through selling skins and other means.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundation of character and illustration design

In terms of character design, different forms can create distinct character traits, making the characters' personalities more prominent and giving them a high degree of recognizability that can be quickly grasped by players. In the field of character design, effectively shaping a character's image usually hinges on three core criteria: being contemporary, resonating with the audience, and having visual impact. Firstly, being contemporary implies that a character's aesthetic style, clothing design, and even behavioral characteristics should be rooted in the current social culture and life context, ensuring that they not only fit the work's era atmosphere but also possess cultural relevance and real-world connection. Secondly, resonating with the audience emphasizes that characters should reflect the psychological, behavioral, and emotional expectations of the target audience. This concept is widely applied in character model design theory, where typical character models are constructed through research and analysis to guide the design direction and enhance audience resonance. Lastly, having visual impact means that characters should present strong memory points in their image creation, which can immediately capture the audience's attention and enhance recognition through the strong expressiveness of visual symbols. Integrating these dimensions into a three-dimensional evaluation framework of "contemporaneity - audience resonance - visual impact" can significantly enhance the dissemination power and artistic appeal of character design.

Qiu Sishu et al. systematically expounded the process, techniques and key points of comic character design in "Comic Character Design". This mainly includes character script design, character clothing and prop design, character styling design, style expression, as well as feedback and adjustment. Although these methods and theories focus on the comic field, many of them are also applicable to character design in MOBA games. The core value of game characters lies in serving the gameplay. Good character design encompasses a wide range of content, not only including the large-scale game world background, but also the interpersonal relationships, personality traits, and preferences of the target audience among various game characters, making the characters more diverse. In terms of illustration design, through the combination of colors, lines, composition, etc., the characteristics and emotions of the characters can be accurately conveyed. Excellent illustrations can give characters greater visual impact and artistic appeal, leaving a deep impression on players' minds. In summary, unique character design is an important part of the game development process, which can bring players a new gaming experience and visual impact.

2.2. The rise of women in the economy and female players

The Ways of Seeing (1972) is a television documentary series jointly produced by British art critic John Berger and the BBC. It premiered in 1972 and triggered a revolutionary change in the way art is interpreted. The series explores the power relations inherent in visual media such as painting, photography, and advertising through four episodes, focusing on criticizing the elitist tendencies and gender gaze phenomenon in traditional art appreciation [3]. Viewing refers to the everyday, unconscious visual behavior, which is the basic physiological and psychological activity through which humans receive information from the outside world. It usually does not have a strong subjective intention or power orientation. Gazing is a visually focused state with initiative, power relations, and cultural significance, emphasizing the examination, control, or interpretation of the observed object by the viewer, and implies an unequal power structure or deep social and cultural connotations. In short, viewing is the basic visual behavior, while gazing is a deep viewing shaped by power, culture, and subjective intentions. The latter is more often used to analyze the social relations and meanings behind visual phenomena.

The rise of the female economy has led to changes in the demands of female consumers, and this is influenced by female psychological factors. Women tend to place greater emphasis on emotional experiences and self-expression, which often leads to internal conflicts and emotional fluctuations. They are also more inclined to use consumption as a way to relieve stress and seek psychological comfort. At the same time, as women's consciousness awakens, they yearn to break away from traditional stereotypes and pursue the realization of their own values. They hope to showcase their individuality and attitudes through consumption. All these provide an economic foundation for female consumption, enabling them to have the ability to pursue high-quality and personalized consumption experiences. Women are no longer confined to traditional consumption areas. They reject gender stereotypes. In early 2018, the Ministry of Culture released a list of prohibited games, and dozens of highly popular and widely played games were on the list. Among them, the games that were pointed out for rectification due to their character costumes being revealing and involving pornography accounted for a large proportion (Figure 1).

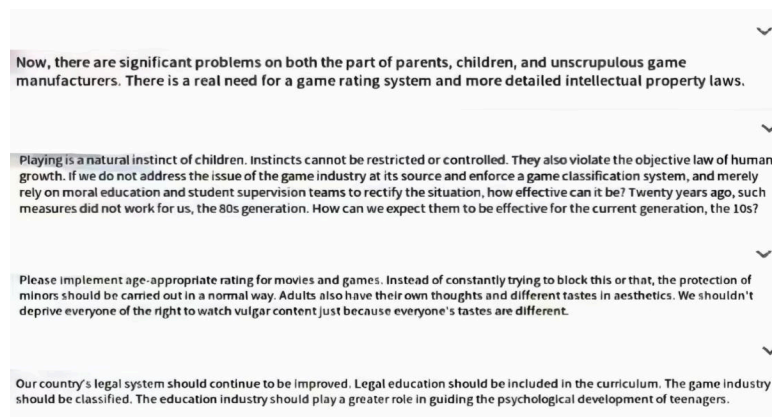


Figure 1. Opinions of Weibo users on the game [4]

After the mobile game "Love and Production Person" sparked a craze in 2017, in recent years, works such as "Journey of the Artist in Time" and "Love and Night" have emerged one after another, jointly forming this social phenomenon of spending sweet moments with digital characters [5]. Doujinshi games are love-themed games specifically designed for female players, with the core revolving around emotional interactions between female protagonists and multiple male characters.

The core gameplay is love interaction and plot-driven, the art style is delicate and beautiful, which conforms to the visual preferences of female players. These characteristics jointly establish the core positioning of the doujinshi games centered on female emotional needs, making it an important entertainment form for female players to relieve emotional stress and experience romantic fantasies. The creative team of doujinshi games is female, and players have strong cohesion. There are community activities and offline activities to cosplay the male leads, all of which are by women. All of these indicate that women hope to be respected and have a safe space.

2.3. Color design rectification for “kingdom of honor”

In today's society, the game industry is booming. MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) is an electronic sports game based on teamwork. In the era of the internet, many excellent game products will emerge at any time. Among them, the games that can long occupy the market share are those that can create character images that are not only vivid and realistic but also can be quickly familiarized with by players.

From the perspective of the platform, mobile games have remained at the top, holding approximately 70% of the market share. The popularity of smartphones, the development of 5G, and convenient payment methods have all contributed to its expansion. Leading products such as "Genshin Impact" and "Honor of Kings" attract players with their exquisite graphics, innovative gameplay, and strong social interaction, driving growth [5]. Since the launch of "Honor of Kings" in 2015, the design of female characters has undergone significant development. The overall design was rather round and emphasized the female figure's curves. The first version of Da Ji's original artwork was released in 2015 as one of the early heroes in "Honor of Kings", featuring a design style that was seductive and alluring, with minimal upper body clothing and a rather revealing outfit [6]. The original artwork of Da Ji has undergone multiple revisions, mainly focusing on image optimization and adding more fabric, to better align with the character's setting and aesthetic requirements. Also, considering factors such as minor players, the version after 2019 was modified to the one we see now. From the perspective of the so-called "male gaze Angle", Daji's clothing design is rather revealing, highlighting her body curves. When showcasing the character's "seductive" traits, it leans more towards catering to some men's aesthetic preferences for sexy images, creating visual appeal through relatively less fabric and cuts that accentuate the figure. After the revision, Daji wears a costume with golden decorations and a black inner layer on the upper body. The overall outfit retains a certain degree of luxury while being presented in a more appropriate way compared to before. It not only highlights the character's charming traits but also avoids excessive exposure, paying more attention to the balance between the overall integrity and aesthetic appeal of the clothing. The first version of Da Ji's original artwork had an exposed figure with minimal fabric, almost bare upper body. The latest version has added a lot of fabric, completely covering the chest with two separate pieces of fabric, and the skirt has become longer, with safety pants added, making the overall design more conservative.

Gazing is a way of observing that involves the operation of power and psychological desires. In games in the past that mainly targeted male players, female characters were often regarded as objects of gaze, fulfilling the desires of male players [7]. In "Honor of Kings", some female hero characters were portrayed in a way that was somewhat unrealistic, such as overly exaggerated body proportions, revealing clothing, wearing high heels during battles. And some female heroes were designed as cute girl-like images, with big eyes and round faces. The shaping of these female hero characters all belong to the products of male aesthetics, carrying the meaning of male gaze [8]. Yao's original drawing highlights Yao's slender waist and elongated leg lines. The clothing emphasizes the

body curves to some extent, to meet the attention of some male aesthetics on female bodies. The body posture has a certain display nature, such as bending over, with relatively soft curves of the limbs, rather than a more powerful combat posture, making the picture become an object of appreciation rather than focusing on combat ability. However, Yao's design also has a side that aligns with the flexible and innocent setting of the character "Little Deer Girl". This male gaze perspective is a complex presentation of game art design in the balance between commerciality and character portrayal, and also reflects some aesthetic tendencies in the industry. As players' awareness improves, subsequent optimizations and adjustments will also be made.

As the game developed and market feedback came in, character designs became increasingly diverse. The design process of Xi Shi was also full of twists and turns. Initially, due to the complex gameplay and excessive expectations it carried, the design was repeatedly overturned. Eventually, a graceful skirt, surrounding petals, and an ethereal and charming image of a young girl emerged, which better matched her humble background. Xi Shi has a delicate and lively face, with expressive eyebrows and eyes, bright and clear eyes, which is in line with her set image of a curious and straightforward young girl. From the overall evolution trend, female characters have gradually shifted from merely emphasizing physical appearance to also including personality shaping and cultural connotation expression, striving to meet the aesthetic and emotional needs of different players.

The sales of skins that Honor of Kings has collaborated with multiple is have been considerable. Recently, Honor of Kings collaborated with Sanrio to introduce Arthur's Pudding Dog skin. Thanks to the high popularity of the Sanrio IP and the limited label, the sales were considerable, reaching over a million within just one day of its launch. In terms of the overall evolution trend, female characters are gradually evolving from merely emphasizing physical attractiveness to combining personality shaping and cultural connotation expression, striving to meet the aesthetic and emotional needs of different players.

3. Analysis

3.1. The creation of female appeal

In "Establishing an Ambiguous Ethics", Beauvoir writes that the oppression of women is not only the contradiction between old and new ideologies, but also the lack of women's status and voice in various unfair treatments in society [9]. But as society progresses, the economic status of women keeps rising, and the economy becomes an important force in the consumption field, a trend that profoundly affects the mobile game industry. According to market data, the number of female players and their spending power continue to grow, and they have unique aesthetic and emotional demands for the design of game characters. Honor of Kings, a phenomenon-level mobile game, keenly captures this trend and actively caters to female aesthetics in aspects such as character design and skin production. Female players are no longer satisfied with character Settings from the traditional male perspective and prefer characters with independent personalities and self-development space. In terms of character design, Honor of Kings has made many changes to fit the aesthetic of female players. Take female heroes as an example. Early heroes like Daji and Akatsuki were often depicted as sexy and seductive, with revealing costumes and an excessive emphasis on body curves, leaning towards a male aesthetic perspective. But as female players have more say, hero designs are gradually diversifying. Like Xi Shi, who is depicted as a delicate girl from Jiangnan, this gentle and charming image design is deeply loved by female players. The game provides a platform for women to showcase their creativity and individuality. In Honor of Kings,

players can purchase various styles of skins for their characters and gain a sense of achievement by collecting skins and enhancing character attributes, but in the process, aesthetic consumption anxiety has quietly emerged.

In the mobile gaming sector, "Honor of Kings" has emerged as a phenomenon, with its female player base quietly rising to become the main consumer force. According to the 2017 Mobile Internet Report released by QuestMobile, female players accounted for 41.9% of the "Honor of Kings" app user base; in 2020, official data indicated that the proportion of female players had reached 54.1% [10]. In the 2024 Flowlight Points ranking, the top positions were almost exclusively occupied by female players, whose cash power was astonishing. From a game design perspective, "Honor of Kings" has precisely captured the preferences of female players in terms of character and art style. The heroes' appearances are exquisitely designed, and the skins are diverse, ranging from cute to ancient, from modern fashion to dreamy fairy tales, satisfying women's diverse pursuit of beauty. In terms of skin design, "Honor of Kings" has launched numerous female-oriented styles.

3.2. The creation of female anxiety

Although "Honor of Kings" has achieved success in catering to female aesthetics, it has also to some extent triggered aesthetic consumption anxiety. On one hand, the frequent release of new skins has put female players in a dilemma of choice. The game keeps updating its skins, and their quality becomes increasingly exquisite, each with unique designs and special effects. Female players, out of their love for beauty and their emotional connection to the characters, often want to collect the skin they like. However, the prices of the skins are not low, and the ways to obtain them are diverse, such as purchasing or participating in lotteries. Players have to consider the economic cost and worry about missing out on the limited skins, thus experiencing psychological pressure of not owning will be regretful when choosing which skin to purchase. On the other hand, the aesthetic atmosphere created within the game also exacerbates consumption anxiety. Some female players will develop a competitive mentality because of others' rare skins, feeling that their characters are not beautiful, believing that only by constantly purchasing new skins can they gain confidence and recognition in game social interactions. This phenomenon of linking aesthetics with social value has caused female players to bear additional psychological pressure in aesthetic consumption.

As a leading mobile game, "Honor of Kings" needs to strike a balance between catering to female aesthetics and avoiding the creation of consumption anxiety. I believe the game developer could appropriately control the frequency of skin releases to reduce players' decision-making pressure, while optimizing the skin acquisition mechanisms to lower both the economic and psychological costs for players. Additionally, other in-game methods could be employed to enhance players' sense of achievement in areas such as operational skills and teamwork, thereby reducing their over reliance on skins as social capital. For female players themselves, it is also important to foster a rational consumption mindset and aesthetic perspective, avoiding impulsive purchases driven by trends, and instead appreciating the game's aesthetic pursuits in a balanced manner while enjoying the fun the game brings. Female consumption has played a significant role in pushing "Honor of Kings" to cater to female aesthetics, but the issue of aesthetic consumption anxiety cannot be overlooked. It requires joint efforts from both the game developer and players to create a healthy in-game aesthetic and consumption environment.

3.3. The awareness of aesthetic discipline

For female players, they need to be vigilant against the monotonous regulation of aesthetics. The "beauty" in the game is a commercial product, while the aesthetic standards in reality should be more inclusive. When we let go of the obsession with "having perfect skin" and focus on the fun of game strategies and teamwork, the consumption anxiety will naturally subside. After all, the essence of games is happiness, not an anxious battlefield dominated by aesthetics. The female aesthetic consumption ecology of "King of Glory" reflects the common problems of the current game industry: balancing commercial profit with player experience is always a challenge. Only by allowing aesthetics to return to diversity and getting rid of consumption anxiety can games truly become the happiness field for female players, rather than the anxiety generator - this requires the awakening of game manufacturers, and more importantly, the growth of players' rational consumption awareness. In the traversal of aesthetics between virtual and reality, find their own non-anxious gameplay. The fact that female players have become the main consumers of "King of Glory" is the result of the combined effect of various factors. As the female player group continues to grow, their consumption potential will be further released, and in the future, it will continue to influence the development direction and operation strategies of the game.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, at a time when the game industry is deeply understanding and catering to user needs, the aesthetic adaptation practices carried out by "Kingdom of Heroes" due to the growth in female consumption power have not only established a virtual aesthetic space exclusive to female players but have also exposed the deep contradiction between commercial logic and player experience balance. From the softening template of character design to the escalating update of skins, from the binding of cultural emotional value to the consumption competition triggered by social comparison, female aesthetic consumption in the game domain undergoes a dual process of being catered to and being disciplined. This phenomenon reveals that the essence of the game's catering to female aesthetics is a precise strategy driven by business, but in practice, it has been distorted into an anxiety generator - when beauty is simplified to standardized modeling and bound to frequent consumption, the aesthetic freedom of female players falls into the shackles of commercial discipline. To solve this predicament, game manufacturers need to abandon single aesthetic output, build a diverse and inclusive role ecosystem, and let beauty return to richness and possibility; at the same time, they need to reconstruct the consumption mechanism, weaken the scarcity anxiety, and truly maintain users with content value rather than anxiety marketing. For female players, they need to clearly distinguish the boundary between virtual aesthetics and real aesthetics, refuse to be disciplined by the perfect template shaped by the game, and shift the focus of consumption from "catching up anxiety" to experiencing pleasure. Only in this way can games break free from the narrow path of commercial profit-seeking, and female players can regain the initiative in aesthetic consumption, making "Kingdom of Heroes" and other phenomenon-level products become positive samples connecting aesthetic experience and healthy consumption, promoting the game industry to achieve true empathy rather than control in the female aesthetic field, and ultimately achieving a symbiotic and mutually beneficial coexistence of commercial value and user well-being.

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