

The Influence of Modernism on Independent Games

- From an Analysis of <The Binding of Isaac> -

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Abstract With improvements in science and technology, independent game which through individuals or small groups development mode has become one of new art creation. In these constantly emerging works, there are contents include trend of modernism thought. In this article, independent game <The Binding of Isaac> is used as an example, by analyzing that game's script, art style and animation sequence, and comparing with westward modernism literature, modernism art and modernism movie's characteristics and manifestation, we try to find how modernism thought influences the independent game design, and conclude modernism game's characteristics. Through those deep influences, we prove that the progress of productivity can also stimulate mass culture to develop in a certain extent.

Key Words : Modernism, Independent game, Game scenario, Game's art style, Game's animation sequence, Mass culture

요 약 과학과 기술의 발전에 따라서 개인이나 소수의 팀 작업 제작방식으로 인디게임은 새로운 예술 창작수단으로 발전하게 되었다. 현재 출시되어진 인디게임 작품들에서 모더니즘을 포함하는 작품들이 계속해서 나오고 있다. 본문은 인디게임 <The Binding of Isaac>을 예로, 게임 시나리오, 디자인 스타일, 스테이지 분석을 통하여 서양 모더니즘문학, 미술, 영화의 특징과 표현 형태를 비교하고 모더니즘이 인디게임에 미치는 영향력을 연구한다. 또한 모더니즘 사조가 인디게임에 미치는 영향력에 대한 탐구를 심도 있게 분석하고, 이를 통해서 생산력의 진보가 대중문화 발전에 기여한다는 점을 증명하고자 한다.

주제어 : 모더니즘, 인디게임, 게임 시나리오, 디자인 스타일, 게임 스테이지, 대중문화

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1. Introduction

Modernism seems not relate with independent games, but the two together has epoch-making significance which means game design has stepped into the modernism era or even postmodernism era.

Modernism is a trend of bourgeoisie thought about literature and art after industrial revolution. It is the reflected thought of civilization crisis when freedom, love, humanitarianism are destroyed by cruel reality[1]; and modernism art and literature's features are negative, absurd, abstract and pessimistic. The representative works of modernism are wide spread include literature, drawings and movies[4]. Following with the development of science and technology, electronic game was born. As electronic game's story is based on literature, character design and background design are based on drawing, and animation design is based on movie, electronic games will also win a place in modernism and mass culture[5].

<The Binding of Isaac> is an independent video game designed by Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl and Edmund McMillen released it to Steam as early as September 29, 2011. The 2D role-playing, action adventure game has a unique design, which makes it unforgettable. The absurd game background and style lead game players think about Picasso's work "Guernica", and all kinds of elements in game also contains symbol of reality similar to "Guernica" and implicit implications. With those obvious modernism characteristics, we consider it as a good example to analyze the influence of modernism thought on independent games. Therefore, though <The Binding of Isaac> may not be the first independent game which reflected modernism thought, but it is a proper case recently. In the paper, we analyze the <The Binding of Isaac>'s script, painting style, animation and compare it with literature, art and movie to study the influence of modernism in mass culture on independent games.

2. Artistic Analysis

2.1 Analysis Of The Game's Scenario

Characters in the game come from the Bible, but not the bible's real Isaac story. The game's narrative adopted the technique of montage that hide 18 important stories in 18 endings. And the story does not have the open ending, but has a linear structure; every ending is the element which uncovered the next story. In the game's beginning, Isaac's mother religious superstition, she got the oracle which told her to kill Isaac. Isaac hid into an underground maze to escape from his mother. In the underground maze, when he beat the monster whom named "mom's leg", he thought that the crisis is over, but in the next scene his mother broke down the door with a knife, so that everything before is the imagination of Isaac's painting. In the next game, after defeating "mom's leg", there had two new maze level, and the finally boss became to "mother's heart". Once beating the "mother's heart", there will appear a new big treasure box, there are some toys and strange things in it. The Game's end does not tell us whether Isaac is really out of the woods yet, it let players open their free imagination to the true ending.

After the player completing the entire game, finding all endings and collecting many strange items, they can guess the game's true story: Isaac was a little boy, after his father's death, he was bullied by his religious mother and his classmates, and he is powerless to resist. So he hates himself, hopes he had never been born. Finally he locked herself in the toy box, and died of stifle. The whole game is the fantasy before Isaac dead, in that fantasy world he revenged to the real world. So in the game, Isaac beat the monster 'mother' over again and again, and thought his classmates are all monsters. Players need to restore the reality by reading the little boy's fantasy. These contrast between fantasy and reality is one of the highlights from the game script. And in the game script, the alienation of affection with indifference between family members,

the loneliness of human nature and the sense of urgency for civilization all can reveal the modernism ideology.

2.2 Analysis Of The Game's Art Style



[Fig. 1] Game UI

The game screen's art style is graffiti, the designer uses simple brush to paint a bizarre game world, and through the bizarre game world a bizarre real world is insinuated. In the game's screen, the background is dark and claustrophobic, characters and monsters always reveal a kind of sadness, and the final bosses "mom's leg", "mother's heart", "Satan" all showed much more rage. The designer let players feel angry, negative, pessimistic, disappointed through game's art style. And these deformations of the abstract painting style are easy to reminiscent of Picasso's "Guernica". But comparing with "Guernica", <The Binding of Isaac> is more nebulous, simpler, more anti-aesthetic and more of post-modernism.



[Fig. 2] Character Design

The Game's bizarre style can also allow players to follow a kind of spiritual confusion which the designer want to express. Perhaps for the designer, modern society has all sorts of strange things just as strange things in the game, even more stranger than in the game. <The Binding of Isaac>'s art style is not the only one, this kind of art style also exists in the animation <The Cyanide and Happiness> which is a satire reality American animation[8].

2.3 Analysis Of The Game's Animation



[Fig. 3] Animation Sequence

Once player finishes each level, there will have a random short animation between the upper and lower levels, such as being bullied, falling into the abyss, and so on. Although animation sequences has nothing to do with the main story, they tell other tragedy stories, reflect Isaac's unfortunately real life. At the end of the short animation, players can always watch Isaac huddling in tears.

2.4 Analysis Of The Game's Item



[Fig. 4] Game Items: Hangers

Not only short animation sequence, many game items also implied that tragic moment in Isaac's life. Props as "Mom's knife", "nine tail whip" and "tough love" told Isaac is trapped in domestic violence which is given by his mother. Items as "Father's love", "torn picture", "cancer" can let players suppose that Isaac's father may die from disease. Each item has a certain significance for Isaac, which let the players know what the real life of Isaac has, and not only has in the imaginary game world.

So, in the game, the short animation sequences and items' design also creates a pessimistic and negative atmosphere. Thus it causes players to rethink the weakening of affection in the modern society, the negative effect of religion and the minors' psychological damage from domestic violence.

3. Analysis Result

<The Binding of Isaac> which is against the traditional video game story tells brave man to defeat the dragon and rescue princess's plot pattern. <The Binding of Isaac> uses a special angle of view and tells a story without time and location, and at the end of the game, when player win, the player's effort does not change Isaac's ultimate fate. It has a great similarity with the aesthetic idea of modernism literature[9].

The modernism literature's aesthetic idea has a tendency of complexity. And modernism trend is deeply influenced by Nietzsche and Freud's theory. They reject authority, use personal will to be the basis, respect in unconscious instinct to be creativity, contempt for the middle class's civilization and hypocritical morality, and think pessimistic about the future. Many modernist writers who are influenced by these ideas, believed that individuals can't change the world, so they showed many decadent or cynical trend in their works. Under the control of this kind of idea, those writers tends to express consciousness such as

absurd, chaos, rudeness, evil, ugly in their works, and this makes their works more like nightmare. <The Binding of Isaac> is as well, through revealed religion's evil and ugliness of human nature, let players think much about them, and cause players resonate with designer. In the game, player can see absurdity, evil and ugliness everywhere. And through this nightmare it represents the cruel real world. To show "honest real mind" is the basic spirit of the modernist literature. In the <The Binding of Isaac>, designer recognized good human nature which represented by Isaac, but doesn't want to only use pure and goodness to cognitive the world at the same time, so his mother and classmates were designed imperfect and represented evil forces. If the game only create Isaac's naive perspective to watch the society which let the game world seems like real good and beautiful world, that will be so weak to have any true facts to compare with real world.

Postmodernism art is an extension of the modernist art, but postmodernism art can not separate with modernist art, and even the boundaries between them is also fuzzy. Comparing with traditional art, modernism art does not need to paint realistically, but has more symbolic, expressive and abstractness. With these characteristics extremely developed is <The Binding of Isaac>'s post-modernist art style[13]. In the game, character design style is casual and simple, like children's graffiti. The game with this casual art style to represent that art's self can above anything, it is not liable for any obligation, and it is solipsism.

Modernism film is a kind of art film, which are often from the performance of storyline to character's inner heart, then to reproduce social life and character's mood[15]. <The Binding of Isaac>'s short animation sequences also looks alike modernism film clips. The game animation has nothing to do with the main story, even each animation sequences is random from many animations. But every animation scenes are closely linked with the game's world view, it is showed Isaac's "emotion", and it explores the most primitive things

from human nature[16].

Comparing with modernist literature, modernist arts, modernist film, we find that independent game <The Binding of Isaac> is deeply influenced by modernism ideology, and that game is a masterwork in independent game industry and even in the entire game industry. It is an anti-tradition game and designed with a variety of modernist style.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Modernism Game’s Characteristics

According to the results of the <The Binding of Isaac>’s analysis, we can predict the characteristics of modernism game design:

<Table 1> Predict Modernism Game Characteristics

Contents	Predict Characteristics	General Common Ground
Story	ridiculous and decadent	tragic world view
	against traditional	
	emphasizes character’s inner	
Art Style	randomize	reflects certain solipsism
	casual	
	personalized	
Animation	absurd	blur the boundaries between art and life.
	magic	
Connotation	express designer’s inner feelings.	show emotion

4.2 The Meaning Of Modernist Ideological Trend Which Influenced Independent Games

Through the analysis of independent game <The Binding of Isaac>, we can find that modernism ideological trend has deeply affected the high-valued independent games. And we can see that the development of science and technology is changing the mass culture. The development of productivity and improvement of living standards can not satisfy

people’s growing spiritual and cultural needs. But modernism art broke the boundary of art and life because it is advocated by subjective feeling. So the emergence of modernism art reduced the gap between the modern material civilization and spiritual civilization, which has a certain historical inevitability. Nowadays, electronic game can be seen as a product represented advanced productive forces and the concrete embodiment of mass culture. The spirit of the culture connotation will also be improved. We can assert that game creation also entered modernism era, even entered post-modernism era. With the growth of independent game industry and the emergence of modernism game works, it is proved that the technology progress can promote the mass culture’s development.

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