The Application of Non-language Symbols in Japanese Games from the Perspective of Cross Cultural Communication--Take"Animal Crossing" as an Example

Shuhan Wang

School of Languages and Communication, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing, 102401, China

2114010124@st.btbu.edu.cn

Abstract:

In cross-cultural communication in electronic games, non-language symbols' application scope and methods are very diverse. Studying the design and application of non-language symbols in Japanese games in cross-cultural communication can assist Chinese games in going global and contribute to the dissemination of excellent traditional Chinese culture. This article takes "Animal Crossing" as an example to analyze how nonverbal symbols are used in cross-cultural communication from scene, character, and plot setting. Finding that non-language symbols in the game assist language symbols, integrate players' feelings, shape a complete scene, and promote cultural exchanges. It is concluded that Chinese games can build a perfect non-language symbol system from three aspects: digging deeply into the culture with national characteristics, looking for universal non-language symbols, and using non-language symbols from multiple perspectives so as to achieve the goal of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Non-language symbols; Cross-cultural communication; Game

1. Introduction

In today's globalized society, cross-cultural communication has become increasingly widespread and inevitable. In this diverse communication environment, with the continuous development of communication media, not only are language symbols important ways to convey information, but the importance of non-language symbols in the communication process is also increasing. Especially in the special medium of electronic games, the important role of non-language symbols cannot be ignored. Players can not only deeply experience and understand the meaning of the game through non-language elements such as scenes, actions, music effects, and environmental design but also successfully convey cultural characteristics and values without the need for words, greatly promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding among players.

The electronic game industry in Japan has always had a wide influence globally, and many overseas users have learned and developed a love for Japanese culture through Japanese electronic games. The "Animal Crossing", released in 2020, has received much attention worldwide. According to Nintendo's financial report, by December 31, 2023, its sales in the world had reached 44.79 million copies, becoming one of the best-selling games on the Nintendo Switch platform. In the game, non-language symbols such as character images, side events, and scene props help players from different cultural backgrounds understand and master the gameplay and concepts while cleverly integrating Japanese cultural characteristics, creating favorable conditions for cross-cultural communication. This clever integration not only spreads Japanese culture globally but also builds a bridge for cultural exchange for global users by incorporating cultural elements from other regions, promoting the integration and development of global culture.

This paper explores the use of non-language symbols in the game environment of "Animal Crossing," seeks its role in the cross-cultural communication of electronic games, analyzes and understands how non-language symbols transcend language barriers, and seeks the success of Japan's transmission of its own culture through electronic games. Encourage more creators to value the role of non-language symbols as an efficient medium for cultural communication, enabling them to play more roles in cross-cultural communication and facilitating better communication, innovation, and development of world cultures.

2. The System of Non-language Symbols in the Game "Animal Crossing"

2.1 Definition of Non-language Symbols

Symbols are divided into language symbols and non-language symbols. Nonlanguage symbols refer to symbols that can directly move people's sensory organs without using spoken and written language as carriers for information dissemination [1]. With the popularization and development of media such as television, computers, and mobile phones, humanity has entered a visual society, and the position of non-language symbols is becoming increasingly important. The diversity and intuitiveness of non-language symbols have become essential tools in cross-cultural communication.

2.2 Non-language symbols in "Animal Crossing"

McLuhan describes games as an extension of human beings [2]. Games extend the human ear, eyes, and neural center. Through rich sound, light, and electrical technologies, game visuals are applied to the human auditory, visual, and sensory senses, allowing players to immerse themselves in the experience. Behind the stimulation of multi-sensory integration, in addition to technical support, a complete non-language symbol system needs to be established. "Animal Crossing" has built a complete non-language symbol system to help global players integrate into the game.

2.2.1 Character symbols

"Animal Crossing" is a simulation business game in which NPC (non-player character) is the key for players to understand the game operation and promote the plot. For example, the core character of the plot in the game, "Tom Nook," is a drooping and silent civet cat. It is responsible for managing the main affairs of players on the game island and distributing tasks to players, and its mysterious image allows players to quickly understand that this is the core NPC in the game. When encountering difficulties during gameplay, it seeks ways to operate. Both "Timmy" and "Tommy," also civet cats, are fixed NPCs in the game. They operate shops on the island and promote the props and transactions required for players to build the island. This character image setting helps players quickly understand the operating mechanism and enter the game environment.

In addition, over 400 small animal characters in the game will randomly come to live on the island built by the player as islanders. Their images and personalities are diverse. To help players quickly understand the islanders they have, the image settings for each animal are very de-tailed. For example, character clothing design can convey the physical characteristics of the character, which can be used to decorate, recognize, and reflect emotions, helping players quickly understand the personalities and preferences of different game characters, establish interactions with them, and improve their liking, to make the island they manage to have higher scores [3].

The game also incorporates some Japanese cultural characteristics into the character design. For example, the small animal named "Kabuki" is a cat that combines the facial makeup of Japanese Kabuki. Its often-used posture is derived from the Kabuki "Mie," which is a slow motion of Kabuki actors during the climax of a performance, posing in certain specific positions without stopping the performance from expressing the character's high emotions. This direct visual symbol image also allows players to have a better understanding of Japanese Kabuki culture unconsciously.

2.2.2 Space symbols

The buildings and scenes in the game space are the most effective carriers of visual communication. The basic building design in "Animal Crossing" is typical Western-style buildings or Western-style houses. At the same time, the use attributes of different buildings are distinguished in detail. For example, as the most core service center, there will be an imposing doorpost in front of the house, a clock tower and a broadcasting horn on the roof, and public facilities such as bulletin boards and street lights outside the house. The shops will have transparent display windows, which will also display products. Choosing globally recognized building forms can help players quickly understand the game's spatial settings.

Although the design of the basic buildings in the game is simple and understandable, the design of the game scenes adopts more detailed and diverse forms. When players enter the service area scene, they will find that although the internal settings do not have any obvious features and only have a relatively Western decoration style, Japanese-style notebooks, and ice wheat tea, which are popular in Japanese cuisine, will be placed on the NPC's desktop. In the shopping scene in the store, in addition to the common radio, the cash register also displays plates for changing change found only in Japanese stores. In addition to these already set scenes, players can choose additional Japanese-themed hot spring pools, tatami mats, and other items in the prop store to decorate their islands or rooms on their own. Enable players to set up their scenes according to their preferences in the gaming experience while also being able to invisibly experience Japan's local architecture and lifestyle culture.

2.2.3 Auditory symbols

Music and sound effects are also important non-language symbols in electronic games, which can suggest the game's theme, pave the way for players to enter the cultural atmosphere of the game, and resonate with their inner emotions. In "Animal Crossing," players will play white noise simulating the natural environment once they enter the game. When players operate their characters, they will hear footsteps and wind. They will hear the sound of water flowing when they are close to rivers. When they are close to trees, they can also hear leaves shaking. With the sound effects, players can enter the game environment more immersively.

Meanwhile, in the absence of textual explanations of rules, players can use sound effects to assist in mastering the rules of game operations. For example, when a player is fishing, the sound of the fish when it is hooked is different from the sound effect when it is not hooked. Even without the explanation of language symbols, players can still distinguish the difference in sound effects and master the method of fishing after several experiences.

2.2.4 Cultural symbols

To successfully carry out cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to provide corresponding cultural narratives. Electronic games have the natural advantage of storytelling and can carry special cultural significance and connotations in some game plots and props. For example, the plot of catching insects in "Animal Crossing" is an activity that Japanese children would participate in when they were young. However, players in other regions may not have had this experience when they were children. Experiencing the operation of the insect-catching network in the game can help more people understand the fun and the "insect culture" of Japan.

As well as in "Animal Crossing," if there are specific festivals, the stores in the game will launch specific seasonal goods. For example, during the Japanese Yulan Bon Festival, eggplant horses and cucumber horse racks are available for players to purchase. Players may become curious about them and learn that this is a symbol of Japanese people's desire to transport the souls of their deceased loved ones. It can not only help players understand the festival customs in different cultures and create a sense of freshness for other cultures but also enable players to find a sense of belonging in familiar festivals.

3. The Connotation and Use of Non-Language Symbols in Cross-Cultural Communication

3.1 The Connotation of Non-Language Symbols in Cross Cultural Communication

"cross-cultural communication" was first proposed by Edward T. Hall, who proposed in "The Silent Language" that communication is culture, indicating that human communication activities must have cultural attributes and that human culture is constantly created and shared in communication. Due to the differences between different cultural backgrounds, there will inevitably be communication barriers in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, cross-cultural communication is to study the differences between different cultures and how to reduce the communication barriers caused by differences. Cross-cultural communication has three key nodes: information access, information decoding, and information identification [4]. In today's Internet era, the rapid development of media has greatly reduced the difficulty of accessing information. To carry out successful cross-cultural communication, people must solve the core problem of whether information can be understood and how to make emotional identity between different cultural audiences. As a carrier of information dissemination, symbols are closely related to the receiver's understanding of information content and the setting of symbols by the disseminator.

3.2 The Role of Non-Language Symbols in Cross-Cultural Communication

3.2.1 Auxiliary language symbols

Language symbols are the most important communication tool for humans, but they are not omnipotent, especially in the context of globalization for cross-cultural communication. Nonlanguage symbols can enhance the effectiveness of language communication. In the environment of building an uninhabited island provided by Animal Crossing for players, in addition to the text explanation of the main task, most of the other content needs to be received and understood by players from the props, sound effects, character expressions, and actions in the game scene, which reduces the misunderstanding caused by language differences in the cross-cultural context, and makes the player's experience more vivid and immersive.

3.2.2 Integrating multiple feelings of players

Cross-cultural communication in games can achieve better communication effects by fully utilizing the integration function of non-language symbols and organically combining various non-language symbols according to specific rules [5]. As a special communication medium, games can simultaneously stimulate players' visual, auditory, and tactile systems. Various sensory stimuli cannot be acted on independently when setting up non-language symbols. The spatial construction and storytelling of games require

various non-language symbols to connect, and the organic combination of image symbols, sound effects symbols, game console vibration symbols, etc., makes information more vivid. Players can also have more direct access to information, deepen their understanding of the game theme, generate emotions with the game, and better understand the cultural connotations they want to spread in the game.

3.2.3 Creating a complete scene and promoting cultural exchange

"Animal Crossing" combines the cultures of many countries and different non-language signs produced by different cultural backgrounds. The proper and slow presentation of these non-language signs in the game will help the audience no longer exclude other cultures and even take the initiative to understand other cultures. For example, during the fireworks festival in Japan, the game provided players with small props to set off fireworks, and fireworks performances were performed at specific times. Players could also customize fireworks patterns in advance according to their preferences. Various non-language symbols built a complete cultural scene, enhancing their sense of participation and deepening their understanding of the Japanese fireworks festival, thereby reducing the barriers caused by cultural differences. Furthermore, it promotes communication between different cultures.

3.3 The Use of Non-Language Symbols in Cross-Cultural Communication

3.3.1 Choose cultural symbols

When choosing specific cultural symbols, Animal Crossing uses food, clothing, decorations, and other items closely related to daily life as the carrier of characteristic culture. Players can experience different cultural foods in the game, purchase special festive products to decorate their houses during festivals, and choose clothing from different countries to decorate their image.

The selection of symbols close to the player's life provides a common space of meaning, which is conducive to breaking down cultural barriers between different regions, narrowing the distance between each other's cultures, and overcoming cultural barriers.

3.3.2 Integrating global culture during use

To reduce barriers to information dissemination in cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to consider the cultural backgrounds of audiences from different countries and the difficulties they face in understanding the cultures of other countries. The use of cultures that have strong commonalities on a global scale can help overcome cross-cultural barriers. "Animal Crossing" focuses on selecting cultural symbols common to global users to fill the gap of cultural differences. In the basic environment of the game, the architectural symbols are selected from the common Western-style houses around the world, and the props and furnishings inside the buildings also use modern and common scenes. People can choose globally influential festival events and incorporate global cultural elements into non-language symbolic props to enhance the participation of players world wide.

Incorporating some Japanese cultural symbols appropriately can make it easier for players from different regions to accept information in the context of a globally shared culture. This can also help reduce the negative impact of cultural unfamiliarity on cultural dissemination.

3.3.3 Generating emotional resonance in different cultures

In addition to the game itself, its content and values are key to promoting cross-cultural communication. The game's virtual space design can meet players' needs and expectations, making communication and interaction more effective [6]. When building and combining various non-language symbols, efforts should be made to evoke emotional resonance to better capture the player's inner world. "Animal Crossing," as a business game without the concept of customs clearance, uses soothing pure music and white noise to simulate the natural environment in the background music settings. Various visual elements shape a coastal island with mountains and water as the game background. Players can also customize many props to decorate their islands, creating scenes similar to those in life through the combination of various non-language symbols. However, it provides players a more peaceful and free creative space than real life.

The game utilizes a stress-free natural background to create a spiritual utopia, which can satisfy the emptiness in most people's hearts in today's fast-paced society, alleviate the pressure brought by life, and resonate emotionally with players worldwide. Better shaping the values in the game can also help players better understand its cultural connotations.

4. Enlightenment from the Success of "Animal Crossing"

"Animal Crossing" has achieved great success in game production and player feedback and has brought many positive references and inspirations. China and Japan are both high-context countries, and the simple use of language symbols in cross-cultural communication can easily lead to cultural discounts. By analyzing and absorbing the success of this game, improving the use of non-language

symbols in Chinese games will be beneficial for the development of Chinese games worldwide and the dissemination of Chinese culture worldwide.

4.1 Deeply Digging into Ethnic Characteristic Culture

Preserving national cultural characteristics in cross-cultural communication is a beneficial way to enhance games' uniqueness and competitive advantage. When designing games in a specific cultural context, one should understand the history, uniqueness, and development trends of culture, improve their creative and communication abilities based on this cultural foundation, and gain an autonomous position in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, it is particularly important to use non-language symbols with ethnic characteristics in cross-cultural communication. Nonlanguage symbols have their advantages in cross-cultural communication, which can compensate for the lack of understanding and misunderstanding of local culture by audiences of other countries. These symbols containing local cultural connotations achieve a subtle and sophisticated cultural output.

4.2 Searching for Universal Non-Language Symbols

From the analysis of the use of non-language symbols in "Animal Crossing," it is obvious that most of the non-language symbols used in it are universal, such as music, scenes, clothing, action, etc. In this form, even with the addition of other cultures from multiple countries, players can still gain a sense of familiarity and comfort by presenting these universal non-language symbols, thus entering the game space faster and better. In addition to these essentially universal non-language signs, the creators should be more active in looking for universal non-language signs that exist in emotions [5]. "Animal Crossing" has found the emotional needs of people in today's society for a quiet, slow-paced life. Players can be more satisfied with their inner feelings by meeting this emotional demand for non-language signs, such as planting flowers, fishing, diving, etc.. Furthermore, it compensates for the differences between players and the cultural background of the game. Actively seeking empathy and connection points between different cultures and psychology, integrating different cultures to form universal themes, and promoting cultural "going global."

4.3 Using Non-Language Symbols from Multiple Perspectives

In cross-cultural communication, if the description of culture is too simple, it can easily lead to cultural stereotypes or discounts. By utilizing visual and auditory non-language symbols from multiple perspectives and constructing comprehensive scenes and plot settings through diverse non-language symbols, the game plot will be more three-dimensional, making the player's experience more immersive, providing a more complete space for cross-cultural communication and allowing the audience to have a more comprehensive understanding of the connotations and meanings in culture [7].

5. Conclusion

Nonlanguage symbols can compensate for the limitations of language in cross-cultural communication and effectively reduce the bias in understanding information content caused by different cultural backgrounds. "Animal Crossing" shows the game's advantages of using non-language symbols. Non-language symbols can shape multiple cultures and enrich the details of works. Active use and improvement of non-language symbols are conducive to the cross-cultural communication of Chinese games, such as in-depth exploration of Chinese culture, finding cultural universality, and using rich details from multiple perspectives. Through non-language symbols, cultural differences can be reduced, and the influence of Chinese games in the world can be improved. Furthermore, it helps Chinese culture to go global.

References

[1] Bai X. Narratology analysis of TV news special program. Qingdao: Ocean University of China, 2015.

[2] Marshall M. Understanding media-on the extension of man. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 2000.

[3] Stratton C. Nonverbal communication and the influence of film success: A literature review. Concordia Journal of Communication Research, 2017, 4: 1.

[4] Yu G M. Three key communication nodes in cross-cultural communication: A communication perspective on reducing and eliminating cultural discounts. News and Writing, 2020, 3: 62-65.

[5] Xia T. The Application of language symbols in cultural communication in Film and Television: A Case Study of Kung Fu Panda 3. Western Broadcasting and Television, 2019, 4: 141-142.

[6] Antonijević S. The immersive hand: Non-verbal communication in virtual environments. The Immersive Internet: Reflections on the Entangling of the Virtual with Society, Politics and the Economy. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013, 92-105.

[7] Zhang F. Nonlanguage symbols in film and television from the perspective of cross-cultural communication: A case study of "Baobao". Overseas English, 2022, 11: 211-213.