

Gender Bias in Games: Different Reactions Between Chinese and Global Players

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Abstract

As a global cultural medium, the gender images games create profoundly influence players' perceptions. This article focuses on the presentation of gender bias in games, delving into the differences in responses between Chinese and global players to such content and the underlying reasons. The study found that when faced with gender stereotypes, excessive objectification of female characters, or gender stereotyping in games, global gamers demonstrate a more proactive and active response. They often organize protests and petitions on social media, demonstrating a strong sense of individual rights and a desire to change the status quo. In contrast, Chinese players, while equally concerned about gender issues in games, typically respond more subtly and practically. Their discussions often focus on the practical value of characters, the rationality of story settings, and whether character designs align with local cultural aesthetics and cognitive norms. Large-scale, organized, public protests are relatively rare. Behind this difference lies a profound cultural heritage. The response patterns of global players are steeped in the long-term development of the Western feminist movement and its individualistic values. Chinese players' attitudes are closely tied to China's deeply rooted collectivist traditions, its focus on practical utility, and the unique evolution of local gender discourse within its specific social context. Furthermore, China's unique game content censorship system and highly market-driven industry environment profoundly influence the boundaries of gender-related content expression in games and the effective channels for conveying player feedback. This study emphasizes that accurately understanding player feedback on gender bias in games requires a deep understanding of the cultural context within which they operate. The study calls on game developers to enhance cultural sensitivity in content design to promote a more diverse and inclusive gaming world.

Keywords

Gender Bias in Games, Chinese Players, Global Players, Cultural Differences, Player Reactions, Stereotypes.

1. Introduction

The digital gaming industry has become a mainstream form of global entertainment. The character images, narrative logic, and interaction rules constructed within its virtual worlds implicitly carry and convey specific social values, with gender issues being particularly prominent. Pervasive gender bias in games, such as the oversexualization of female characters, the emphasis on violence in male characters, and the rigid division of gender roles within narratives, not only reinforces stereotypes in real life but also potentially influences the formation of gender perceptions within gaming. With the increasing diversity of gaming communities and rising awareness of gender equality, gender representation in games has become a growing focus of academic and industry attention.

Existing research, primarily from a European and American perspective, explores the representation of gender bias in games and the critical discussions it has sparked, revealing how Western gaming communities leverage social media and consumer action to exert pressure for change. However, research on non-Western contexts, particularly the Chinese market, with its vast player base and unique cultural background, remains insufficient. The Chinese gaming market differs significantly from Western markets in terms of regulatory policies, cultural traditions, player demographics, and gender perspectives. How these differences influence Chinese players' perceptions, attitudes, and responses to gender bias in games is a question that urgently needs further exploration.

This study focuses on a relatively underexplored area: how do Chinese and global players react differently when faced with gender bias in games? Through case studies, observations of discussion dynamics within player communities, and in-depth cultural context analysis, we seek to uncover the root causes behind these differences. The significance of this research is multifaceted: it not only enriches our understanding of cross-cultural gaming phenomena, but also provides game developers with valuable insights from the perspective of real players when culturally adapting and designing more inclusive content. Simultaneously, the research will help enhance the industry's understanding of the unique values and core needs held by player groups in different regions. Ultimately, we hope these findings will contribute to building a more respectful and inclusive global gaming environment.

2. Gender Bias in Games: Universal Phenomena and Specific Manifestations

Gender bias in games manifests in a wide variety of forms. This phenomenon is common in games around the world, though games produced in different regions often exude distinct flavors. The core issues lie primarily in character design and storytelling.

In terms of character design, female characters are often overly sexualized. Specifically, combat uniforms expose waists and legs in ways that defy physics, body curves are exaggerated to the point of distortion, and poses are distorted like catwalks, all clearly designed to attract attention. Conversely, male characters fall into the same trap: uniformly sporting eight-pack abs and scarred faces, their expressions chillingly cold, as if every movement screams, "I'm the best fighter," as if men possess no other skills except their fists.

This approach, frankly, stems from a perspective that prioritizes the female characters' thighs. Female characters are treated as mere ornamental objects, while male characters are confined to the rigid shell of "no fear, no tears, only toughness."

Gender bias is even more glaring in storytelling. Female characters are often relegated to supporting roles: either the "nurse" who heals the male protagonist, the "princess" who waits to be rescued, or simply a "tool" to propel the male protagonist forward. Their own ideas and growth are rarely seen. And what about male characters? They're born to be heroes, bosses, and hands-on. They're forced to hold back their tears, perfectly embracing the stereotype that men shed blood, not tears. Even professions are gender-specific: Warriors and Engineers are all-male, while Nurses and Mages are shoved into the hands of women. Even more insidious are the biases embedded in the game's mechanics, such as the way certain collection quests are assumed to be popular with female players[1].

These issues are common in best-selling games worldwide. For example, the numerous female NPCs in *The Witcher 3* are scantily clad and often linked to prostitution; many early female heroes in *League of Legends* were highly sexualized; and the *Grand Theft Auto* series has been frequently criticized for its narrative tendency to objectify women. In popular Chinese games, such as *Honor of Kings*, some early female characters (such as Daji and Diao Chan) sparked controversy for their overemphasis on sex and allure. Appearance systems in MMORPGs like

Moonlight Blade often offer highly sexualized female clothing options. It's worth noting that with the growing global awareness of gender issues, some game developers have begun adjusting their design strategies, but the prevalence and complexity of gender bias in games remain.

3. Chinese Players' Response Characteristics: Introverted, Pragmatic, and Culturally Adaptable

Chinese players' reactions to gender bias in games exhibit significant differences from those of Western players. This is primarily due to their relatively restrained responses, the strong functionality of their evaluation criteria, and a strong focus on cultural adaptability. Compared to the frequent social movement-style protests launched by players worldwide, large-scale, organized online petitions or collective boycotts against gender bias are relatively rare among Chinese players. Their opinions are primarily expressed on official game forums (such as Genshin Impact's MiGames and Honor of Kings' Camp), general communities, and social media threads. Emotional and heated criticism is not prevalent in these discussions, but rather rational analysis based on character strength, art style coherence, narrative logic, and whether the character fits the aesthetic and cultural perceptions of local players.

A prominent characteristic of Chinese players' reactions is that character strength is often the primary criterion for evaluation. As long as a female character possesses strong skill mechanics and plays a crucial role in combat or within a team, even if her appearance evokes a certain degree of sexuality, she will generally be widely accepted and even sought after by the player community[2]. Community discussions often center on questions like "is it worth buying?", "how strong is it?", and "is it useful in a team?", rather than primarily focusing on criticism of the character's gender-specific design. Conversely, if a character's strength is insufficient, even if their gender expression is considered more "correct" or "correct", they may be ignored or criticized, often being mocked as a "vase" by players – meaning pretty but not functional.

At the same time, Chinese players are extremely sensitive to whether gender representation in games aligns with local culture. For games based on Chinese history or mythology (such as Honor of Kings and Black Myth: Wukong), players enthusiastically discuss whether the character designs and costumes adhere to historical research, as well as their traditional imagery and aesthetic expectations. Whether the portrayals of classic characters like Mulan and Yang Yuhuan align with popular cultural perceptions is a key factor in player evaluation. Even for imported foreign games, players often express dislike for overly revealing or sexualized designs deemed incompatible with mainstream Chinese aesthetics and values. However, this discomfort is often framed as "too tacky," "low-brow," "lacking Chinese style," or "not adapting to the local climate," rarely directly applying Western feminist theoretical terminology to criticize them.

4. Global Player Response Pattern: Explicit Activism and Rights Discourse

Compared to the reserved and pragmatic nature of Chinese players, global players' responses to gender bias in games are significantly more direct and organized, with stronger theoretical arsenal and a prominent activist style. This difference stems from the deep-rooted feminist movement in Western society, the emphasis on equal individual rights, and the tradition of people organizing to promote change.

When expressing discontent, global gamers tend to take public, organized action. Social media has become their primary platform, generating momentum through trending hashtags; organizing petitions on platforms like Change.org, directly demanding character or storyline changes from game developers; sometimes even submitting open letters or reports to game

company executives, or organizing symbolic protests inside and outside the game. If these methods are ineffective, a final resort is often to launch a boycott. Their goal is clear: to leverage social media and the collective power of gamers as consumers to force change from game developers. And there have indeed been results: persistent player criticism led Blizzard to adjust some overly sexualized female character models in *World of Warcraft*; *Mass Effect: Andromeda* was met with widespread online mockery and petitions for the stiff expressions of its female characters, directly influencing the developer's subsequent approach; and the constant outcry from players and critics has been instrumental in transforming Lara Croft from her early days as a sexy icon to her current image of strength and resilience.

These actions aren't random; they're backed by solid theory and a mature system of rights discourse. Players naturally invoke concepts like "gender equality," "opposing the objectification of women," "LGBTQ+ inclusion," and "diverse character representation" in their criticisms. They focused their criticism on design stereotypes, hidden patriarchal logic, perspectives that serve the "male gaze," and the neglect of non-binary communities. Gaming media and prominent commentators played a crucial role in bridging academic gender research with the personal experiences of everyday gamers, generating a force that effectively forced industry change. The distinct activism of European and American gamers is a direct product of their individualistic culture, which encourages individuals to speak out and fight for their rights[3]. It is also an extension of society's tradition of promoting change on public issues through institutionalized channels, extending this trend to the gaming sector. This force has significantly transformed mainstream European and American game companies, who are now more proactive in increasing character diversity, enhancing inclusive narratives, and incorporating a broader gender perspective into their creative processes.

5. Exploring the Roots of Differences: A Prism of Culture, Society, and Industry

The significant differences between Chinese and global players in their reactions to gender bias in games stem from three main factors: cultural background, speaking habits, and gaming environments.

The cultural background is different. Chinese people inherently value harmony, believe in harmony and adherence to rules. When it comes to expressing opinions, they tend to approach them slowly, working within established rules and regulations, rather than confronting or causing conflicts. This is closely related to the ancestral values of "propriety" and "moderation." Therefore, when Chinese players examine character designs in games, they are more concerned with questions like "Is it appropriate?", "Does it look pleasing?", and "Does it conform to local customs?" They are less likely to constantly express "It's my right!" Furthermore, they are generally more pragmatic—is the character powerful? Is it fun to play? These are the most important considerations. A character's appearance is more like a "packaging package," meant to serve the purpose of entertainment. In Europe and the United States, on the other hand, the cultural foundation is that "the individual is supreme," and people speak out freely, taking to the streets to protest any perceived injustice. This makes it easier for European and American players to band together and make trouble, treating the gender stereotypes and revealing designs in the game as real-life struggles for gender equality[4].

The language used in both regions differs considerably. When discussing gender issues in games, European and American gamers naturally resort to terms like "male gaze" and "objectification," and their reasoning is clear. After all, they have a long history of feminist movements, and these rhetoric has long been prevalent. What about China? While there has been significant progress toward gender equality at the legal level, societal discussions of gender equality are often tied to practical issues like economic development and family stability,

taking different paths. The public discussion space is also different. Therefore, when Chinese gamers criticize games, they rarely directly employ Western feminist terminology. When criticizing, they're more accustomed to saying the design is "too vulgar," "doesn't look like our traditional stuff," or "worries about corrupting children," arguments that are more easily accepted here.

The gaming environment is vastly different. China's strict game content regulations do prevent some particularly explicit designs from appearing in games, but they also reduce the space for open discussion of these issues. China's mobile game market is enormous, primarily driven by a "free-to-play, in-app purchase" model. Players can quickly tell developers what they like and dislike by simply paying real money, leading developers to pay close attention to character power and likability. In Europe and the US, console gaming has a long history and is more widely considered a form of culture, making it an easy target for social activism. Furthermore, there are more relaxed regulations and a greater number of independent games, giving critical voices a freer voice. These environmental differences significantly influence how players express their discontent and who manufacturers try to appease first.

6. Case Comparative Analysis: Specific Demonstrations of Differences in Response

Player feedback from both Genshin Impact and Overwatch in the Eastern and Western markets clearly demonstrates the differences in gender issues between the two.

Some female characters in Genshin Impact have sparked controversy. Western players often criticize the game's "male gaze" or "oversexualization," believing it's designed to attract attention rather than serve the characters themselves. They are more likely to organize, starting social media threads and submitting petitions demanding changes, emphasizing that the characters are player-unfriendly. While Chinese players also discuss characters being "underdressed," their focus is quite different: criticism often centers on "tacky designs," "inconsistency with character identities," or concerns about "censorship risks." More discussion centers on character strength, skill usability, and practical value. For example, while Shen He's appearance drew some attention, the focus shifted once her powerful ice-based support abilities were revealed. Chinese players are more concerned with whether the design is "reasonable" and "practical," rather than primarily regarding it as a gender politics issue.

Overwatch's character diversity always stirs up a stir in Western gaming communities. Every character background update sparks heated debate: one side celebrates progress, while the other criticizes it as "too politically correct" or "inadequate," even organizing petitions to pressure the game. Whether female character design is "objectified" has also been a frequent point of contention. In contrast, in the Chinese community, players are significantly less enthusiastic about these gender identities or backstories. Discussions revolve around hero strength, meta-adaptability, the special effects of new skins, and value for money. Even when evaluating appearances, the criteria often focus on "cool/beautiful" and "practical," rarely delving into the underlying gender politics. Issues like revealing a character's sexual orientation receive generally lukewarm reactions from Chinese players, with discussion far less heated than over game balance changes, and some comments are even tinged with sarcasm[5].

Simply put: Western players tend to treat gender settings in games as social issues and proactively organize campaigns to promote change; Chinese players, on the other hand, are more concerned with whether the design is consistent with gameplay, art, and cultural context, as well as the actual experience. Discussions about gender are often integrated into more down-to-earth evaluations such as "is it easy to use?" and "is it good-looking?", and are expressed in a relatively mild and restrained manner.

7. Conclusion

Chinese and European players react quite differently to gender bias in games. Western players are particularly vocal, frequently posting topics on Twitter and signing petitions, directly calling out characters for "gender stereotyping" or "objectification of women," and constantly talking about "equality" and "rights." This outburst ultimately stems from their emphasis on personal expression and their willingness to publicly fight for what they believe is right.

Chinese players are much quieter. Discussions primarily take place on the game's own forums and online forums. Their concerns are practical: Is this character a good fighter? Are their skills useful? Does their design fit the game's worldview? And, will this design cross the censorship red line? Large-scale public protests are rare.

Why such a huge difference? It's likely that culture and social context play a role. Chinese players value collectivism and practical results. Players are more concerned with whether a design is "reasonable" and whether the game is "enjoyable" and generally avoid singleing out character designs as political issues. When discussing gender issues in China, people don't directly resort to Western feminist rhetoric. Criticisms are often framed as "too tacky," "not Chinese enough," or "worry about corrupting children," making them more receptive.

The gaming environment is also crucial. China's strict censorship policy means there's less explicit content, but this also limits the scope for public debate. Furthermore, mobile games are the mainstream, with their free-to-play, pay-to-play gameplay model. Players directly vote on whether to pay to play, giving developers a clear understanding of public opinion. Europe and the United States have a strong foundation in single-player gaming, allowing for greater freedom of expression and a vibrant independent scene, making it easier for criticism to surface and spread.

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