

Immersive Mechanisms and Optimization Pathways in Social Games: A Case Study of “Script Murder”

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Abstract: Social games such as “Script Murder,” “Werewolf Murder,” and “Escape Room” leverage immersive capabilities to form a youth community communication model centered on human perception and facilitated through game interaction. This paper takes “Script Murder” as an example to attribute the generation of immersion in social games to the triple efficacy of scene mechanisms, intertextual mechanisms, and feedback mechanisms. Based on this, it examines the potential social alienation manifestations of immersive games, aiming to provide sustainable optimization paths for immersive social games.

Keywords: Immersion; Game Dissemination; Script Murder; Social Interaction

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1.Introduction

“Script-based murder mystery games” are a type of social interactive game that combines “role-playing” and “plot deduction,” which has gained popularity among young people in recent years. It originated from a British party board game called “Murder Mystery Game” in the 1930s, whose game format is similar to that of today’s script-based murder mystery games. Later, “Murder Mystery Game” was introduced to China and gained popularity among young students in the form of “Werewolf.” Due to the highly fixed textual narrative and character settings of “Werewolf,” there is a growing trend for it to be replaced by “Scripted Murder Mystery.” “Scripted Murder Mystery” is an experiential social game based on scene setup, with a script as its core, where real players assume roles and advance the plot according to the script. Typically, 4–10 players participate, with an average duration of 3–5 hours. While following the script’s storyline, players can improvise based on their character settings, but the entire process is guided by a host (Dungeon Master, abbreviated as DM) to prevent deviations from the plot. The complete “Script Murder” game process is divided into seven stages: character selection, script reading, evidence gathering, analysis and discussion, voting for the murderer, revealing the true culprit, and reviewing the script. In 2019, a wave of live-action script performances sparked by online variety shows ushered in the “script-Murder” era. To date, “script-Murder” has become a popular social game, encouraging more young people to return to offline interaction. Further exploring the “fan-attracting” principles behind the game’s ‘experiential’ and “social tool” labels, understanding the immersive mechanisms of social games is key to grasping the interactive characteristics and development trends of youth communities.

2.Immersive Social Games: A New Paradigm for Community Communication

The elements of “scenario experience,” “role-playing,” and “social interaction” in “script-Murder” games align with the

dissemination form of immersive games. American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes ‘immersion’ as a “flow” state where individuals act according to completely voluntary psychological drives. As the degree of flow intensifies, individuals gradually filter out irrelevant perceptions, channeling their personality and skills into a single mental state, ultimately achieving a state of “self-forgetfulness.” This is the flow theory proposed by Csikszentmihalyi(2019). Script-based games are experiential social games designed to immerse players in a scenario, inducing a cognitive state where the player identifies as the character, naturally engaging in interactions as dictated by the script’s plot. This process temporarily causes the player to forget the real world, either actively or passively. This is the “self-forgetfulness” aspect of flow.

Scholar Yu Guoming has proposed that the surplus era has allowed modern people to release their desire for games, and games themselves have gradually developed into a medium. The interactive elements they contain, such as plot, tasks, and operations, can serve to regulate emotions, facilitate social interaction, and construct values (Yu, 2018). Games are activities that satisfy desires. Immersive communication uses games to attract young communities, keeping their attention constantly flowing within the dialogue and interaction of the game space. The fluctuating emotions eventually crystallize into virtual identity recognition and social rituals within the game space. In this way, simulated spaces, fictional texts, assumed roles, and game rules interact with real people—the purpose of immersive social games is to eliminate temporal and spatial differences through “immersion,” to promote group communication through entertaining game media, and to build game-based social interaction through ‘experience’ and “interaction,” thereby forming a new community communication paradigm.

3.The Generation Mechanism of“Immersion” in Social Games

During the social gaming process, players gradually immerse themselves in their game roles through the sequential effects of scene mechanisms, intertextual mechanisms, and feedback mechanisms, reaching a state of flow and constructing interactive rituals, as specifically illustrated below.

3.1 Scenario Mechanism: Sensory-Level“Interconnection Between Self and Object”

Goffman proposed that a “scenario” is a tangible physical barrier. Merrowitz built on this by introducing the concept of a sensory barrier, arguing that a scenario transcends the physical medium to become a media information system, representing an unbounded process of information flow (Che, 2011). In social games, the scene is an artificially constructed scenario information system centered on the “self.” Based on the establishment of physical locations, environmental information is set up, and the story background and plot development of the script are reimagined through visuals and imagery. In this way, the integration of “objects” (scene information) and “self” (subject’s sensory experience) creates a sense of scene authenticity, enabling players to achieve physiological immersion at an instinctual level.

From the perspective of script-based games, the initial immersive scene design includes specific spatial settings, player costume and prop design, lighting, sound effects, and live NPC (Non-Player Character) assistance—all tools to enhance sensory experiences. For example, in the script “Memoirs of a Geisha,” players don traditional Japanese kimono due to the story’s setting and are placed in a scene with Japanese-style furnishings; In the script “Spring in the North,” background music such as Russian folk songs, children’s cries, and the sound of matches being lit is played during character analysis to help players immerse themselves in the story faster. During the evidence-gathering phase, important evidence and clues are physically recreated as much as possible, such as folding fans, swords, and masks. The script “The Great Wine Miracle” also provides real wine for players to drink. In some hardcore scripts, the DM arranges for real-life NPCs to portray witnesses, voiceovers, and other roles within the script. These are non-player characters existing within the script but outside reality, often appearing unexpectedly to significantly enhance the game’s realism.

Today, virtual reality technology has opened the door to the advanced stage of the “script metaverse.” VR script-based murder mystery games are being continuously developed. When players put on the equipment, their consciousness is transmitted into the script world through simulation systems such as sensory management and signal transmission, creating an “ultra-realistic” virtual simulation state where any scene information within the script becomes tangible. Communication technology reinforces the ‘remoteness’ of the scene and the “ubiquity” of the subject (Li, 2013), truly breaks down the boundaries between virtual and reality, present and history. As scholar Paul Levinson describes: The evolutionary trend of all media is to increasingly replicate the real world (Levinson, 2007). The scene mechanisms of immersive social interaction are gradually

revealing this future form of media.

3.2 Intertextual Mechanisms: “You and I” Interaction at the Narrative Level

The script is the core of immersive games. The social significance of the script does not lie in the characters or plot themselves, but in the narrative construction between players and characters, and between the script’s temporal-spatial framework and the current field. Intertextuality emphasizes interaction beyond textual semantics, referring to the phenomenon where a primary text incorporates other texts (intertexts) into itself, and the characteristic of a text establishing relationships with other texts (Zhang & Liu, 2021). Intertextual mechanisms operate at the script narrative level, referring to the projection of the real “I” onto the ‘characters’ in the script, and the multi-perspective interaction between “I” and other characters. This integrates the originally scattered textual fragments and independent characters into a narrative system, generating narrative interactions within the text that transcend semantic boundaries.

First is the narrative interaction between the “I” and another “I”—Jection (Adams-Price et al., 2008). In the game, players utilize the surreal character settings in the script, the detective-versus-murderer narrative, and distinctive character portrayals to project aspects of their true self that are concealed beneath the “other self” onto the characters. From a psychological perspective, this reflects an outward-directed defense mechanism, where the “self’s” inner psyche (impulses, desires, etc.) is projected onto the external world’s screen, thereby partially fulfilling the “self’s” need for non-routine expression or escaping certain real-world emotions or responsibilities. As a result, character development in the script is no longer confined to written descriptions. Instead, players absorb the character’s personality, background, and behavioral patterns, internalizing them to create a virtual persona that can interact and perform within the script but outside the confines of the character.

Second is the “I” and “you” narrative interaction—the POV (Point-of-View) narrative technique (Zhang, 2021). POV means that each player is a single viewpoint. During the script reading process, players only receive an introduction to their own character, narrating and experiencing their script role and story progression from the first-person perspective of “I.” Initially, players enter the story under this non-omniscient perspective, feeling the emotions experienced by “I,” maintaining logical analytical abilities amidst confusing dialogue and complex situational information, and completing their character’s game tasks. Subsequently, through successive theatrical performances and public discussions, “I” and “you” engage in continuous interaction, with the viewpoints of various characters intersecting. Theatrical clues are gradually reconstructed, piecing together the complete script story, ultimately presenting a multi-textual interactive process transitioning from single-narrative to interactive narrative. The entire intertextual process provides players with autonomous thinking and unlimited imaginative space, generating unforeseeable dramatic conflicts in the scripted game and endowing narrative interactions beyond the relationships between characters.

3.3 Feedback Mechanism: The Construction of “Rituals” at the Emotional Level

Feedback, as an indispensable part of the game’s communication paradigm, serves as a reference mechanism where self-generated output rebounds and acts upon the self. Feedback can be intermittent or real-time for individuals, but within an immersive scripted space, feedback occurs constantly because the interaction between “self and object” and “you and me” is perpetually ongoing. The ultimate outcome of interactive feedback is the crystallization of players’ emotions, the formation of group identity symbols, and the ritual construction of community space, which aligns with Collins’ concept of “interactive rituals”.

Collins describes interactive rituals as processes characterized by causal relationships and feedback loops. He identifies four conditions for the formation of interactive rituals: group aggregation, setting boundaries for outsiders, a shared focal point of attention, and shared emotions triggered by brief emotional stimuli (Zhou, 2021). The purpose of groups engaging in social games is to gain the attention of internal members. This attention is predicated on real-time feedback from “you and me” interactions. Thus, the back-and-forth collision of attention and feedback constitutes the process of emotional cohesion within the group, with the resulting emotional bond being the outcome of this feedback. The core of the feedback mechanism is to gather the emotional energy of the group within the same field, enhance players’ role immersion and the relationship chains and sense of belonging between other roles, and achieve the “ritual” construction of emotional bonds within the community. From this perspective, the social gaming scene can be viewed as an interactive ritual market for the exchange of emotional

resources (Collins, 2009)—a social environment that integrates real-world interpersonal relationships, virtual character experiences, and social emotional values as intangible symbols. Each character and every relationship between characters represents a social symbol, and the purpose of player interaction feedback is to exchange emotional resources and obtain emotional energy.

From the perspective of the overall immersion mechanism, players provide feedback through interaction and gradually immerse themselves through feedback: “I” interact with the scene information of the scripted story within the scene mechanism, receiving sensory feedback. In the intertextual mechanism, “I” absorb the identity symbols of game characters, fulfilling my own need for non-daily experiences and achieving self-defense feedback; When “I” interact with other player characters, the performance of the plot, multiple narratives, shared focus, and the eruption of dramatic conflicts release personal emotions through the game format. Within the group, emotional resonance is formed toward the scripted story and the experiences behind the characters, creating emotional bonds and giving rise to a fully immersive “interactive ritual.”

4.The Potential for “Social Alienation” in Immersive Games

Immersive social games are rapidly expanding among young people—their transcendent narrative settings, virtual reality spaces free from responsibility, social performances that satisfy needs, and immersive, relaxing interactive rituals all possess powerful appeal and influence. The “immersion” experience signifies a new demand for sensory freedom and personalized social experiences. The market’s competition for consumption lies in continuously fulfilling needs. However, unlimited sensory stimulation and the lack of regulation in the gaming industry can lead to the alienation of players’ cognition and behavior, deviating from the original purpose of social games to relax the mind and body and provide social value.

4.1 The “limited-time frenzy” of immersive games

The popularity of offline immersive social games like murder mystery games can be used to reverse-engineer a social trend: the “disembodied” interactions of electronic media can no longer fill current social needs, and the countless isolated individuals behind mobile devices reflect a phenomenon known as “group loneliness (alone together)” (Turkle, 2010)—we have sacrificed real-world dialogue for the sake of online connectivity, and the cost of over-reliance on cyberspace is even greater loneliness upon returning to the real world. Immersive social games break the drawbacks of digital socializing where the body is absent, opening up an interactive space for young people to return to face-to-face interpersonal interaction. From this perspective, such social games do to some extent satisfy players’ needs for emotional transition and interpersonal interaction. However, players’ immersion in the game is relatively short-lived, and from a long-term perspective, this limited-time experience may not necessarily alleviate inner loneliness or provide social value. On the other hand, some scripts are overly detached from reality, overly pursuing a sense of excitement. Players who adopt character personas become like “containers,” interacting with others to escape feelings of loneliness. However, such interactions are merely superficial collisions between the container walls and rarely penetrate into the inner world (Guo, 2011). Therefore, social forms such as “experiencing another life” and “character pairings” in scripted games are not true spiritual exchanges but rather limited to temporary celebrations within the game space.

4.2 “Behavioral Disorder” in Virtual Environments

In immersive social interactions, players’ cognitive spacetime is constrained by the scripted scenes, and their behavioral reference frames are restructured by game rules. The autonomy of social behavior is largely constrained by the virtual game space. Once influenced by irrational factors, players may engage in behaviors that are rational within the game rules but irrational in real-world terms, such as tendencies toward violence and pornography, imitation of criminal behavior, or game addiction. For example, the script “Not Just One Day” includes content such as rape and pedophilia, and the poster for the script “Sting” uses a woman’s nude body as its promotional cover. Additionally, some low-quality DMs may request players to perform detailed scenes involving explicit content in the script under the pretext of enhancing the experience. Furthermore, the disclosure and portrayal of criminal methods’ details can easily lead to players imitating criminal behavior. From a future development perspective, virtual reality technology and irresponsible game rules feed into each other. When users immerse themselves in virtual reality, their perceptions and illusions become completely integrated. When the narrative of the game influences the moral standards of reality, if not regulated, group violence within the game can easily escalate into widespread

urban violence.

4.3 “Emotional Compensation” in Scripted Spaces

In real life, players navigate family, school, and societal roles while managing various conflicts and issues. The fast-paced nature of modern society has sparked a series of emotional anxieties. When individuals feel unable to cope with real-life challenges and emotions, they activate defense mechanisms, subconsciously seeking ways to temporarily detach their bodies and minds from reality and immerse themselves in a fantasy world to achieve psychological balance. Script-based games serve as such an “emotional projection” window. Players don the guise of a character, embodying another version of themselves in the game’s “parallel universe” setting, interacting with others; they use the script to escape the real world, compensating for emotions like anxiety, unease, inferiority, and failure stemming from real-life experiences. Such games often deviate from the narrative rules of the real world, guiding players to set aside real-world rules and logic. Players do not have to pay the actual consequences for their characters’ negative behaviors. Instead, they follow the game’s immersive experience and scene immersion, creating their own survival rules and interaction methods, and retreating into the script’s story and characters to engage in compensatory experiences for their negative emotions. While this emotional compensation releases emotions, it also indulges people’s escapist tendencies. Those who become immersed in such games may gradually abandon the value of real-world social interactions and the rational, fulfilling sense of self-identity that comes with them.

5. Optimal Development Paths for Immersive Social Games

Immersive social games should not merely cater to the superficial interests of the masses by offering purely sensory, addictive gaming experiences. Instead, they should enter a phase of innovative integration closely tied to real-world values, breaking free from the fleeting “fast-paced” trends and charting a development path rooted in humanistic care and value-oriented principles.

5.1 Sustainable Development: Value-Oriented Output

Game culture, as an intangible soft environment, influences youth communities. In future development directions, social games should delve deeper beyond sensory development to construct a youth subculture practice activity oriented toward value output. This is the inevitable path for game culture, which is both rebellious and distinct, to transition from “limited-time experiences” to “sustainable development.”

The relationship between game culture and mainstream culture will inevitably undergo a coordination cycle from confrontation to reconciliation, and from resistance to assimilation (Hebdige, 2009). Referring to the case of mainstream media such as CCTV entering Bilibili, mainstream ideology has guided Bilibili from its initial role as a “base for following anime series” to its current role as a “subculture knowledge hub.” Immersive social games, as a new form of entertainment activity, should also leverage the advantages of hypermedia art forms such as “interactivity,” “openness,” and “virtual reality” to actively coordinate and integrate with mainstream culture, emphasizing “social+value” while de-emphasizing “game+desire.” For example, immersive scripts can venture into the field of red education, creating scripts based on revolutionary stories and the spirit of the times, constructing corresponding immersive scenes and interactive tasks, deconstructing and restructuring positive energy in an entertainment-oriented manner, and embedding the values of truth, goodness, and beauty into the narrative intent, wrapped in cultural depth, presenting players with a series of social gaming landscapes that align with real-world values while remaining entertaining.

5.2 Institutional Monitoring: Ensuring Compliance Through Clear Rules

Immersive social games have now entered a highly competitive market phase. Behind the proliferation of scripts and gaming venues lies a uniform capital operation model. Currently, issues such as inconsistent store quality, unclear script intellectual property rights, unregulated operational methods, and inadequate industry technical controls exist, with gaps and loopholes in both industry regulation and legal provisions.

As a new type of venue, immersive games should be incorporated into routine management frameworks. Scripts containing violent or horror elements should restrict minor participation or implement a rating system. Additionally, in today’s highly virtualized and gamified communication environment, the issue of rule disorder in gaming spaces cannot be ignored. Excessive reliance on game rules to the point of undermining real-world ethics must be addressed through institutional

norms and legal safeguards, creating social gaming venues backed by explicit rules. To further regulate and guide the healthy development of the escape room script-based game industry, the Shanghai Municipal Culture and Tourism Bureau officially released the “Shanghai Escape Room Script-Based Game Content Filing Management Regulations”. Shanghai has become the first city in China to formally incorporate the escape room script-based game industry into its regulatory framework, providing a reference for the standardization of immersive gaming industries in other cities.

5.3 Emotional Release: Aiming for Emotional Healing

Immersive games offer a low-pressure social experience, serving as a “connection” that is closer than the internet yet safer than interactions with strangers. While providing emotional compensation, they should also deliver tangible benefits, offering players healthy and beneficial emotional release. Therefore, immersive projects like script-based games should abandon the one-size-fits-all narrative formulas of suspense, horror, and time-travel themes. Instead, they should draw from current social contradictions to create original, high-quality textual stories, forming “therapeutic social interaction” aimed at genuine emotional healing.

Psychologist Jacob Moreno proposed psychodrama therapy—a method centered on stage performance, aided by stage design elements like lighting and sound effects, using verbal and physical language to portray characters’ inner emotions and conflicts on stage, enabling audiences to resonate with the actors and achieve psychological intervention and self-regulation (Imna, 2018). By leveraging the performance format of psychological situational dramas, diverse therapeutic script content is created, such as depression and anxiety relief, heartbreak healing, and family conflict resolution, guiding individuals with emotional anxiety or social barriers to participate in a customized “Truman Show”-style experience. This helps them revisit past traumatic situations, shift perspectives, resonate with characters, and perceive the multifaceted nature of emotions, thereby achieving mind-body healing effects.

6. Conclusion: Co-creating an Immersive Social Ecosystem Space

Immersive social games represent an upgrade from traditional social formats like TV shows or mobile apps, which extend sensory experiences in one-way or multi-directional ways. They have shaped a community communication form highly aligned with space, body, narrative, and emotion for the younger generation. Mechanisms such as scene-based interaction, intertextuality, and feedback elevate sensory engagement into behavioral interaction and crystallize into emotional rituals. Under the influence of these three immersive mechanisms, the future dissemination of social games will take the form of cross-media, multi-sensory, on-site participation, and real-time feedback. However, issues of social alienation also emerge. While immersive social games drive rapid growth in industry coverage, it is more important to improve the management and guidance of social values, strengthen connections with real-world issues, and avoid becoming low-level spiritual exchange products manipulated by cultural industries and technological effects. Additionally, the development of immersive games can be integrated with other cultural industries for innovation, leveraging VR education, film and television, tourism, and cultural creativity to jointly create immersive IP projects, enriching scenarios and narrative forms, and assisting immersive social games in navigating the process of natural selection. Under the empowerment of technology and creative collaboration, a new era of immersive social interaction is set to begin.

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