

Game Development: Starting by Healing the Players

Chapter 5: I Didn't Expect You Were Making *This* Kind of Game!

Mirror was, in many ways, a very unique little game.

It combined match-three puzzles with RPG mechanics, along with a visual novel (galgame) format featuring multiple endings.

Together, these elements made for a surprisingly engaging gameplay experience.

As for the match-three mechanics, they were essentially an evolution of classic tile-matching games. This type of gameplay already existed in this world and was quite popular, so Chen Xu wasn't worried about whether players would accept the mechanic.

Besides, the match-three gameplay wasn't Mirror's only selling point.

The real appeal lay in its story and its CG illustrations.

On that front, Chen Xu had no concerns whatsoever. From the memories he had inherited, Ruan Ningxue possessed more than enough artistic skill.

And so did he.

After quickly putting together a basic Game Design Document (GDD), he outlined the match-three gameplay system and different character progression paths.

Once that was finished, he began writing the game's stories.

The first story featured a dark elf thief who steals from a lord's treasury to help the poor. However, she discovers that the lord is secretly a demon and ends up captured by him.

From there, the player can choose between two routes, the pure romance route, or, the NTR ("bull") route.

The second story centered on a female general from ancient times who is transported into the modern world, where she encounters an otaku. Because of the time-travel, the once-powerful general loses all of her martial abilities.

Again, the story branches into two endings.

The pure romance route naturally leads to a happy ending.

The other route is much darker, yet emotionally moving.

In modern society, the otaku mistreats the general. Eventually, the two of them travel back to ancient times together. After spending a long time together, they gradually develop genuine feelings for one another. In the final battle, with defeat inevitable, the otaku is given the opportunity to return to the modern world—but instead chooses to stay behind and die alongside her.

The remaining planned stories involved a tale about zombies and the cycle of reincarnation, and a story featuring a dragon knight.

For the initial release, however, Chen Xu only intended to include these four stories.

The reason was simple.

He was running out of money.

The match-three gameplay still needed programming, and he also had to pay for voice acting and background music licenses.

As for where the money would come from, that wasn't much of a concern.

His savings of just over ten thousand yuan were obviously nowhere near enough.

But with Huabei, JD Baitiao, and his credit cards...

He could scrape together the necessary funds.

The next morning, inside Chen Xu's apartment.

Ruan Ningxue sat beside him with her graphics tablet and laptop, looking at the hand-drawn story summaries and storyboards Chen Xu had prepared overnight.

Her expression was... complicated.

"I never imagined the game you're making would be this kind of game!"

"I knew it! I knew it!"

"Being a manga artist or a game designer isn't your true calling."

"Come draw doujinshi with me!"

"With your storytelling talent and my artistic skills, I'm sure we'd make it big. We could build a fanbase through doujin works and eventually become

famous manga creators. Lots of well-known artists followed exactly that path."

As she flipped through the materials Chen Xu had prepared overnight, Ruan Ningxue once again launched into her long-term career plan.

What a waste!

How could someone with this much talent choose to make games instead?

She knew her biggest weakness was storytelling.

That was why she'd decided to support herself by drawing fan-made doujin works while slowly honing her writing skills.

But now...

Looking at Chen Xu's short stories...

They were incredible.

Pure romance.

NTR.

Reincarnation.

Every kind of dramatic element was there.

Listening to her enthusiastic praise, Chen Xu couldn't help twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"Thanks for the compliment," he said diplomatically, "but I'll pass."

"Anyway, Senior, from here on, just create the illustrations in order."

"Unlike manga pages, every image needs to be fully colored and much more detailed."

"The story itself won't be told through the artwork. Most of the narrative will be conveyed through dialogue," Chen Xu explained.

"I understand."

"The artwork should be more refined while highlighting each heroine's charm."

"It's basically like treating every illustration as the opening color page of a doujin book."

"I'm an expert at that, so leave it to me!" Ruan Ningxue replied energetically.

"...That's actually a pretty accurate way to think about it."

Chen Xu nodded.

Then he took a deep breath.

"If there aren't any questions..."

"Let's get to work."

Hearing that, Ruan Ningxue smiled, gave him a thumbs-up, and opened her drawing software.

The development of Mirror turned out to be progressing far more smoothly than Chen Xu had expected.

The remaining, less important art assets were mostly outsourced.

The four initial heroines planned for the game were a dark-skinned elf, a dragon girl, the female general, and a cute zombie girl.

As for the background music, Chen Xu could compose it himself if he really wanted to.

But doing so would consume too much time and effort. Since he didn't have much money to begin with, it was actually simpler and more practical to purchase a license for existing music.

That left only the voice acting.

The BGM could be compromised on if necessary.

But there were two things he absolutely could not cut corners on: the character illustrations and the voice acting.

Those two elements were the true core of Mirror.

"Perfect... though it still needs a few adjustments."

Looking at the illustration Ruan Ningxue had just finished coloring, Chen Xu couldn't help but feel genuinely impressed.

In his previous life, he hadn't been an unknown figure in the game industry.

He had met and spoken with many of the industry's leading professionals at various conferences.

Naturally, he also knew a fair bit about game art.

He was familiar with the work of renowned concept artists such as Yang Qi, who had worked on Asura's Wrath/Asura-style projects like Slay the Gods (Dou Zhan Shen); Shigenori Soejima, the celebrated character designer for the Persona series; and Tetsuya Nomura, the designer responsible for iconic characters such as Tifa Lockhart from Final Fantasy VII.

Chen Xu had studied their artistic styles in considerable depth in his previous life.

Yet when it came to character illustrations, Ruan Ningxue still left him genuinely astonished.

Her talent was not to be underestimated.

That wasn't to say she had no shortcomings.

After all, game artwork was different from manga.

Even illustrations for a visual novel were fundamentally different from comic panels.

"I see... It really is different from drawing doujinshi."

After listening to Chen Xu's explanation, Ruan Ningxue nodded thoughtfully.

"Exactly."

"Even for visual novels, the CG illustrations and manga artwork are completely different," Chen Xu nodded as he explained.

Inside the small rented apartment, the two discussed many of the finer points of the game's art direction.

At this stage, the project was basically nearing completion.

The only major task remaining was hiring voice actors.

For a bishoujo game like this, voice acting was one of the most important components.

In fact, it represented one of the largest expenses in the entire budget.

Of course, Chen Xu had no intention of fully voicing every line.

That would exceed his budget by far.

Having voice acting only for the more important scenes and dialogue would be more than sufficient.

As for the male protagonists in each story?

Would they be voiced?

Of course not.