

"A sheep, a sheep" -Viral marketing packaged as a game

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Abstract. "A sheep, a sheep", is a recently popular mini game related to consumer goods. In terms of entertainment and classic gameplay, it cannot compare with many excellent works of the same type. With incomplete gameplay and superb operational methods, it has been lifted to a height that does not belong to it by netizens. This article attempts to discuss its viral marketing process and logic, as well as the industry causes and harms that cause this phenomenon, in order to decipher the key to the popularity of this phenomenal mini game.

1 Introduction

Mini games account for over half of the gaming revenue in China, according to the 2022 white paper[1], the number of developers for WeChat mini games has exceeded 100000, and the user base has reached hundreds of millions. The proportion of users over 30 years old has been increasing year by year, from 59% in 2018 to 69% in 2021, and the scale of high paying users continues to grow. According to a report released by a market research institution[2], "4 out of every 5 mini program users are mini game players, and the traffic dividend of WeChat mini games is very amazing."

"A sheep, a sheep" is a very simple three elimination game, simple graphics, simple gameplay, and even similar products grabbing a lot in the app store. This kind of casual game with creative competition gameplay will become popular after a period of time, and it is not uncommon for it to become popular. This mediocre mini game stands out among a large number of similar games, frequently appearing on the hot search lists of various platforms within a few days of its launch. Weibo topics quickly gained up to 2 billion views, and it is estimated to earn 25 million yuan in revenue in the market in a single month[3](Figure 1). How can the ratings plummet overnight after only two days of nationwide popularity?

The game rules of this mini game are very simple. It is a stacked elimination game based on mahjong elimination as the gameplay prototype, which is a combination game of "Microsoft Mahjong+Xiaoxiaole". Three of the same will be eliminated, that is, three elimination, take all the tiles that is to pass, or be judged as a failure. There is no prompt in the first level. There are 7 spaces for 3 types of cards, and even if 2 cards of each type occupy 6 spaces, the 7th card, regardless of which one you choose, will definitely pass the level successfully. This is the clever design of the first level, which is actually a teaching level and is not an obvious beginner tutorial.

The second level is what the game is all about. From only 3 types of cards in the first level, it suddenly becomes a combination of 14 types, with two extra piles of blind cards. The explosive increase in the variety and quantity of cards has led to a seemingly nonsensical increase in difficulty, but in reality, it hides two objectives, namely the important conditions of viral marketing - toxicity and contagiousness.

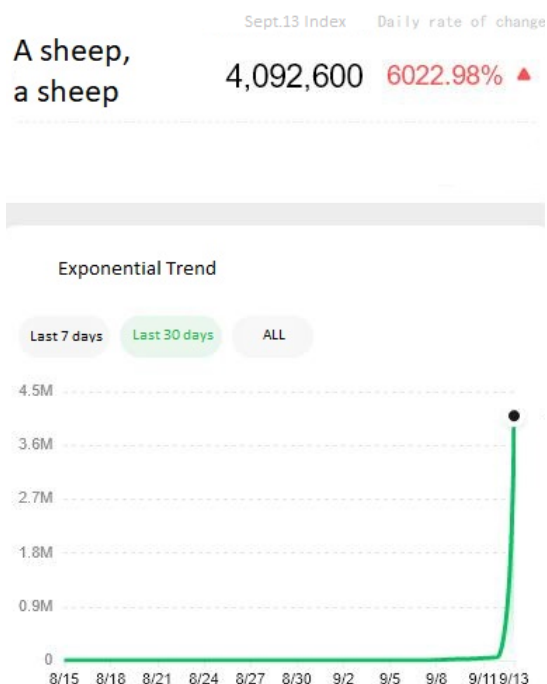


Figure 1. "A sheep, a sheep" WeChat Index from Aug.15 to Sept.13 [3]

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2 Toxicity- the gimmick is more exciting than the game itself

2.1 "Difficult" as a gimmick

Although the difficulty of the second level has increased sharply, there are still quite a few identical three at first glance. The opening is basically fine, but as you play you'll find that the later stages are basically insurmountable. In the first generation version, it was difficult to play to the end, when the elimination to few enough, after all the cards have been open, will find that the remaining cards on the scene would be dealt, and they could not gather enough to pass, resulting in a so-called dead end. The reason for not passing is simply that the level is unsolvable, and it's surprising that a game is mostly unsolvable. It feels like you've been working hard for several hours to solve the problem, and to realise that the lack of solution is not due to some extreme difficulty, it's just a mistake in the problem. Whether you can pass the level depends on your luck. You can draw 0.009% of the pass deck^a, and the pass rate is only one in 100000, which is consistent with the actual situation where less than 200 people pass the level every day in the country. Success is random, not only the cards are randomly played, but even the availability of solutions is random. The screening mechanism of the game, like the lottery mechanism, the game pass becomes a probabilistic problem.

Traditional game levels are difficult because of the clever design, allowing players to meditate and gradually discover the game rules, find the optimal solution, or even watch the so-called clearance secrets before passing. There is a positive feedback of "encountering problems - thinking - solving problems", and this kind of instant feedback is most likely to stimulate the secretion of dopamine, which is self-addictive and increases the repurchase of the game. Therefore, traditional games use ingenuity to arrange levels and set some game difficulty to retain players. The corresponding "A sheep, a sheep"

^a Quoting from the netizen "Anonymous User", using high probability theory to calculate and deduce, there are 14 types of cards and more ways to arrange and combine them. Even if the optimal solution is reduced layer by layer, there are still 2162160 possibilities in the end. Among them, if there is a solution, there are 256 arrangement methods, and if there is no solution, there are 1296 arrangement methods. Therefore, there are a total of 2802159360 possibilities in the last layer of the game, excluding the situation of no solution, There are a total of 55351296 clearance situations (which are all based on layer by layer reduction, and the actual situation cannot be so ideal). Assuming that all cards are sorted according to the optimal situation, there are a total of 720 situations, so the optimal clearance probability is only less than 0.0013%, while the clearance probability is 1.9%. If the clearance is not cut perfectly layer by layer, even if there is only one card in the fifth layer, So the total possible ranking will also reach 39230231040, at which point the probability of passing the level is only 0.1357%. Based on the statistics of 30 games, the number of games that can achieve this ideal situation is only two, which means that even in the most ideal card order situation, the probability of passing the level is only 0.009%.

is simply and roughly difficult for the sake of being difficult. Using the randomness of probability theory, it is destined to be impossible for the vast majority of people to pass the level. However, since the usual game is passable if solved correctly, it gives the player the illusion of being accustomed to it, and when it fades to the point where a quick glance reveals that there is no solution, they realise that it's randomly dead and that they've been tricked. When you realize this, you have already paid a lot of sunk costs, and there are many people playing hundreds of games that have not been cleared.

2.2 The social comparison of "becoming the chosen person" surpasses the game itself

The common feature of popular mini games is that they are easy to use and have no entry pressure. The game "A sheep, a sheep" is obviously simple graphics, simple gameplay, the game profile actually provocatively written "super difficult elimination game, pass rate of less than 0.1%". The foundation of the game is not based on gameplay, but on the gimmick of ultra-low clearance rate - "becoming the chosen one", which captures the player's desire to challenge and show off[4].

From the first level to the second, it's a straight jump from "novice" to "hell" mode, and the excitement is all over the place. You thought you could easily win, but ended up being counterkilled. At this point, you could give up, but the special mechanisms of the game are all about socializing and comparison that are unrelated to gameplay. Ranking, leaderboard, WeChat Moments, bullet screen, facelift, allowing players to see that someone has won and got the reward. It's hard to let go of their own immaturity when they see someone else pass. So players generally subconsciously feel bad luck, inspired by the inexplicable desire to win, once in the game, become "emotional slaves". The desire for victory and challenge drives rationality into madness. This is not playing games, but satisfying one's emotions.

Many players just want to become one in a million, a very few, just because they see a 0.1% clearance rate. When everyone says that the second level is too difficult, who does not want to use their own intelligence to pass the level, take a screenshot, post a WeChat Moment to show off, to prove themselves, just want to be in the crowd to show the speciality of the desire is just. The pursuit of "I am one in a million" is more exciting than the game itself.

3 Infectiousness

Players are attracted by the toxicity of gimmicks and social comparisons in the game. Entering the game is only the beginning, the following into the real core of this game, infectiousness and profitability.

3.1 Viral marketing operational chain- Squeezing social and advertising value

There is no game license, cannot have internal purchasing function, profitability can only be achieved through the main function of mini program traffic. This game props and resurrection options, need players to watch video ads, that is, inducing players countless times to watch two or three ads to make money. The pass rate is only 1 in 100,000, which determines that there will be a lot of people, who have to choose passively to continue the game. The majority of the advertisements watched come from advertisers who want to increase their user base.

Tencent is an advertising intermediary, Mini game receives advertisements distributed by it. Currently, there are 6 types of advertising components, including video advertising of "A sheep, a sheep", which is an incentive component, that is, whenever the player watches the ads through the game, it will earn advertiser's fees, which is commonly known as buying volume advertising. First, attract players into the game, and then let them watch advertisements. In order to make more money, it is necessary to find ways to make individual players watch more advertisements, and rely on a large user base to monetize and make money from advertisements^b. According to Sina Finance report, the monthly advertising revenue of "A sheep, a sheep" exceeded 100 million yuan, with a daily revenue of 4.68 million yuan[3]. To convert, it requires players to watch a total of 8.3 billion adverts in this small game in a single month^c.

"A sheep, a sheep" deliberately designed the cards to be completely random and unrefined in order to prolong the player's time in the game watching more adverts. Players initially think it's their own fault, thus endlessly watching adverts and repeating levels. The extremely low clearance rate directly leads to the player watching the game's rubbish adverts countless times in order to revive after failure.

After the advertising value of the individual player has been harvested, it comes to the key link in the viral marketing chain - squeezing the social value. The outrageous thing about this game is that transforming normal gaming functions into sharing only for use, and it is impossible to pass the game without using these functions. So players began to get props by forwarding the sharing link, relying on props to refurbish the cards, which easily drained the social relationship chain of the players, adding power to the game's promotion and publicity, and obtaining the key conditions for viral dissemination and outbreak.

^b Here appears CPM (cost per mille), a new unit of measurement, that is, every time 1,000 people watch this advertisement, the game maker will earn how much money from the advertising platform to the advertiser, such a business model that is IAA, in-app advertisement, advertisement realisation model.

^c Currently the cpm's for Apple are around 200-500 yuan and Android are between 50-150 yuan, so every time you look at an advert in the game, it translates to a few cents for the game.

So combing the entire viral marketing operation chain: players see the game introduction, think they are the less than 0.1% of the "Chosen One"; the first level, easy to pass, complacent; the second level began to go well, with the gradual elimination of the pile of cards, the vacancies gradually filled up, began to face the difficult, and finally tasted failure; seeing the pass screen posted by others in the WeChat Moments, can't believe that you are dumber than others, so in order to resurrect share with friends; to get the props to watch the 30-second ads, at the same time, shared friends saw the introduction of "less than 0.1% pass rate", did not hesitate to become the next victim, forming a closed loop of the chain, and that's how "A sheep, a sheep" went viral.

3.2 Contagiousness - Pinpointing the herd effect

"A sheep, a sheep" has taken normal gameplay features and made them share-able only, otherwise it's impossible to get through the game, and WeChat Moments and WeChat groups automatically become privatised advertisement-receiving channels. On top of that, there's another mechanic of the game to make it better for players to stay in, the setup the flock function. The main page of the game gathers players who have passed the level together according to their province, adding a "fight for the province" to the gameplay experience. Only those who pass the second level can join the flock, adding a sheep to your province. The ranking of the provinces has stimulated the desire of many players to fight, and the comparison mode has been activated, adding the regional and virtual collective honor of "I fight for my hometown" to this simple mini game. As of the time of writing, Hunan Province ranked first, followed by Shandong Sheep Team, and Zhejiang Team in third place, leading to a fierce competition among provinces. Under this mechanism, players feel that as long as they think a bit, watch advertisements, and use props, they can add a little sheep to their province.

Taking advantage of players' hometown sentiment and competitive spirit, it is easy to form some form of social gaming experience, and "Sheep a Sheep" has officially begun its viral spread. "How to pass the second level" quickly hit the hot search, coupled with the game developer's pre-buy hot searches, increasing popularity, and speculation by game developers in the early stages, instantly ignited the participation of the entire society. So "the game is too difficult" on the hot search, "the server crashed" on the hot search, "the company urgently recruited employees due to the server crash" on the hot search, "alleged plagiarism" on the hot search, "suspected of plagiarism" on the hot search, "denied plagiarism" on the hot search, "cheating players" on the hot search, "players wake up to curse the game" on the hot search and so on, and so on, all kinds of data dominance charts.

The more such nationwide participation, the more toxic and contagious it is, greatly enhancing the effectiveness of viral marketing and dissemination, and playing the herd effect⁹ widely. In fact, the essence of

chasing the heat and following the trend is to seek a sense of identity, security, sense of belonging, otherwise it seems out of place, out of touch, and even anxiety. Ranking, leaderboard, WeChat Moments, bullet screen, facelift, as well as the ultra-high difficulty that only a few people can pass in the game, these have nothing to do with gameplay, but are all about socializing and comparison. Do players really like these things? What they like is just the feeling of chasing trends, and by the way, showing off in the WeChat Moments to show that they are fashionistas and superior to others and to satisfy their vanity.

"A sheep, a sheep" a kind of three elimination game, has been elevated to a height that does not belong to it by netizens due to its incomplete gameplay and superb operational methods. In terms of entertainment and gameplay cannot compare to many excellent works of the same type. A random program that creates a provincial and city ranking, packaged as an intelligence test to make a big fuss, can be described as "marketing with your heart, making products with your feet". Game companies have started not studying how to play the game, not thinking about the gameplay and aesthetics of the game, but to study the weaknesses of human nature, trying to do everything to do the marketing, all the skills point to the marketing, become a viral marketing packaged as a game, isn't it the darkest moment of the Chinese game?

4 Under the rule of "traffic first, algorithm king", ultra-low quality collision pop-up probability

Nowadays, internet platforms only focus on data and prioritize algorithms. Content creators face a harsh competitive environment where traffic is king and content is not respected. An excellent work, without the favor of algorithms and traffic, is difficult to escape the fate of mud cows falling into the sea. Something that is made with all one's efforts may end up being introduced into the black box of algorithms because of strange feedback from the first few users, one or two sensitive words, one or two immature, strange, or even monstrous filtering mechanisms, or even the inaccuracy of algorithmic traffic.

"Algorithm first, feedback speak", the industry used to value the careful design, super high input, conscientious production, the algorithm ignores this. The result is that the creators exhaustively and attentively do the content, may be silent; casually do the rubbish, perhaps a hit. Under the cruel rule of traffic supremacy, three parts quality and seven parts marketing. Traffic is not equal to quality, which is a top insult to content creators.

"A sheep, a sheep", this kind mini game based on advertising sharing is actually a "R strategy monster"^d

^d Species have two survival strategies. Strategy K: Cultivate one or two high-quality, long-lived individuals, that is, specialize in one or two to achieve the best. The R strategy cultivates many, many individuals to gain survival probability

which is born to confront this unpredictable and unpredictable internet market. It composed of ultra-low development costs, only two levels of farm style, simple design, and simple mechanism gameplay, playing against the unpredictable market. It uses the most basic gameplay of similar games, none of the other complexity, copying homework only copy the answer, even bothering to write the process! Using the same method to create hundreds of rubbish games, constantly eliminating them until a "super individual" is raised in the game to confront algorithms and become a powerful survival rule. Under the horse-race mechanism, this practice is a wasteful law of one will be a success, a crude production or even plagiarism, a probability game under the shelter of absolute quantity, and a precise take on the Internet traffic algorithm.

In the face of the market, the market doesn't care how much energy, effort, and creativity are invested. A mini game that can be copied in a few days and earn so much money, how many people still want to spend a few or even ten years to truly change domestic games. The market does not follow rules, algorithms do not respect content, and content producers do not respect martial arts. What kind of sense of difference will those who are working diligently, have ideals, and are determined to change the current situation have in their hearts.

5 Conclusion

Games are not simple commodities, they belong to a category of cultural products, and cannot follow the market mechanism completely[5]. As a commodity, it is necessary to consider audience preferences and market demand, but the media characteristics of game works require creators to uphold a sense of social responsibility, and the two are not contradictory. On May 6th this year, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) notified 56 mobile Internet applications (APPs) and third-party software development kits (SDKs) that infringed on the rights and interests of users, requiring these 56 APPs and SDKs to carry out rectification in accordance with the relevant provisions[6]. A good work should prioritize social benefits while also balancing social and economic benefits.

Under the influence of today's powerful market, the media characteristics and public attributes of cultural products were once overshadowed by the brilliance of commodity attributes. In the second wave of viral marketing, "A sheep, a sheep" has been constantly evolving, bringing profits and attention to levels that should not have belonged to it. If it is not restricted, then the personal views of the creators will inevitably affect their peers; secondly, future workers will follow this example and instead of putting in effort to create good

based on quantity. Each individual is relatively fragile and dies a lot. The cultivated ones are mostly eliminated and tested, and in low probability, the last few lucky ones find a suitable environment to survive.

Stable environment suitable for K strategy, eugenics, strong population; Environmental riots are suitable for R strategy, breeding crazily, and one or two can always survive.

works, it is better to rely on the probability of explosive sales in ultra-low quality games. As long as capital can profit, the negative impact on society is not within their consideration range. In a fiercely competitive environment, the ultimate winner in the market is the lack of integrity, lack of quality, and unscrupulous methods, treating marketing as a probability game of its own.

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