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What is This?

The Promise of Play: A New Approach to Productive Play

Silvia Lindtner[1] and Paul Dourish[1]

Abstract
Games are woven into webs of cultural meaning, social connection, politics, and economic change. This article builds on previous work in cultural, new media, and game studies to introduce a new approach to productive play, the promise of play. This approach analyzes games as sites of cultural production in times of increased transnational mediation and speaks to the formation of identity across places. The authors ground their explorations in findings from ethnographic research on gaming in urban China. The spread of Internet access and increasing popularity of digital entertainment in China has been used as an indicator of social change and economic progress shaped by global flows. It has also been described as being limited by local forces such as tight information control. As such, gaming technologies in China are ideal to ask broader questions about digital media as sites of production at the intersection of local contingencies and transnational developments.

Keywords
online gaming, mixed-reality gaming, Internet legislation, policy, discourse, imagination, cultural identity, contingency, productive play, China

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Introduction

In the early 1970s, cultural theorist and media critic Williams (1974) identified electronic media such as television as crucial factors in the production and reproduction of social and cultural identity. He argued that media are sites of collective self-imagining as part of everyday practice. Williams suggested that technological innovation and development are not singular events but arise in relation to other developments and broader social, political, and economic change. Williams' early tackling of media as a cultural form resonates with recent research in media and cultural studies (e.g., Appadurai, 1996; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, & Larkin, 2002; Ito, 2009; Larkin, 2002; Marcus, 1996; Poster, 2006; Rofel, 1992). Anthropologist Appadurai (1996) suggests that the "media-scapes" produced by mass media such as print media, film, and TV offer resources for the construction of identity and imagined selves across places, social practices, and values. He elaborates how in times of increased transnational mediation identity formation, the idea of neighborhood and nationhood, is not inexorably linked to a single locality. Like Williams, Appadurai considers media as providing "the resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project," rather than being reserved for elites. However, he goes beyond Williams to describe media also as deeply interwoven with translocal developments, for example, the formation of transnational organizations, global markets, and trading agreements, the movements of objects and goods as well as of ideas and modes of thought across national borders (Appadurai, 1986, 1991, 1996). The conjunction of media and migration, for him, means that what is imagined is no longer the "imagined community" of the nation-state (Anderson, 1991) but numerous "diasporic public spheres."

In this article, we draw on this argument and examine the way that games, like other media, are sites of cultural production, imagination and identity in contemporary transnational configurations. We ground our explorations in findings from ethnographic research on digital gaming in urban China. By drawing from previous work in cultural studies, media studies, and game studies and findings from our research, we introduce a new approach to the theory of "productive play" (Malaby, 2007; Pearce, 2006; Yee, 2006). We suggest that the meanings of games arise at the meeting point of existing, shared interpretive frameworks, local circumstances, and developments that span across different locales. This approach implies that we take seriously not just game content and design but also the relationship between local and translocal configurations of game play; however, it does not view these as determinant of meaning and practice. Rather, meaning arises at the intersections of social and material practice, cultural discourses, and the movement of ideas, people, and artifacts.

The Promise of Play

The study of games has expanded beyond bounded game spaces and focused instead on a framing of game play as a site of economic and social production. Across different

disciplines, researchers have investigated ways in which the production of value extends into play and vice versa, for example, when players utilize games to earn money, when player collectives continue to exist after the game itself disappears, or when gaming feels like work (e.g., Castronova, 2005; Dibbell, 2006; Nakamura, 2009; Pearce, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Findings from this work have shown that the kinds of outcomes produced through playing a game are not necessarily reducible to a game's rules or its supposedly inherent features. Anthropologist Thomas Malaby (2007) synthesized these observations by calling attention to games as legitimate arenas for contingency:

> Games and the kind of 'real' stakes and consequences they produce are cultural accomplishments and grounded in human practice.

Malaby suggests that we consider games and their outcomes not in terms of their intrinsic properties but as sites of production that extends into wider fields of social and cultural practice beyond just fun and leisure.

Similarly, in our approach, we acknowledge that "productive" play does not end with economic or social value generated *in the game* (Castronova, 2005; Dibbell, 2006) nor with the material production by players themselves, turning them from consumers into producers of content (Pearce, 2006). Rather, we suggest a new approach to productive play that considers production *through game play* and in relation to a range of experiences and processes, inside as much as outside the game, material as much as social and discursive. By production, here, we refer to the formation of cultural capital, of aspiration, of selfhood and nationhood at the intersection of particular practices and transnational developments. Cultural production and the formation of identity are not detached from material practice, rather accomplished through them. By what we term *the promise of play*, we acknowledge the potential of digital gaming to produce new practices and meanings (within the game and beyond the immediate experience of game play) but also consider how the practice of game play is inexorably linked to other social and technological developments (Ito, 2009).

We support this argument by data from our ethnographic research on digital gaming in China that points toward the connections between particular gaming experiences and political discourses and transformations concerning China's economic modernization. For instance, we found that the meaning of the games we studied arose as much out of the material and social practice of game play as of player engagement with dominant political discourses on Internet addiction surrounding technology practice in China. Development of new technologies in China coincides with a range of modernization processes, such as rapid economic and urban development, increase in privatization and the stipulation of new policies and legalities, sustained as much by local as by transnational investments (Cartier, 2002; Ong, 1998). Through their own media and technology practices, our informants constructed particular identities for themselves in relation to these large-scale transformations and discourses of Chinese modernization and the consequently changing image of China in global markets and politics.

The notion of *the promise of play*, then, suggests that we should consider games as sites of cultural production and imagination, evolving at the intersection of local and transnational processes and discourses. This approach challenges the view that production through games is either limited to economic value or framed by local or technological contingencies. Rather, we consider an array of processes, ranging from technological infrastructures and game design over Internet policies, game play, aspirations, and imaginations of players. For example, we analyze gaming practice and experiences in concert with how players engage pervasive discourses surrounding technology practice, Internet addiction and modernization processes in China. Throughout this article, we explore the following questions: how is the imagination of selfhood and nationhood produced and reproduced through our digital games today? What role do games play as they are intertwined with transnational economic developments and social practice that spans multiple sites? How do people relate to larger developments such as economic and institutional change through the technologies they use and shape, through the games they play and the many technological and urban sites they traverse? In addressing these questions, this article extends previous work on contingency and productive play by reaching beyond geographically bounded framings of value, culture, and identity production through games.

Field Sites and Methods

We ground our exploration in findings from ethnographic research on digital gaming conducted in urban China over the last 3 years. In particular, we focused on the formation of identity and social connection, the expression of belonging and class across game play and the urban sites where it took place. The question of the relationship between technological development and the formation of selfhood and nationhood is particularly salient in the context of urban China, as many Chinese cities continue to undergo drastic developments more broadly, for example, economic, social, and infrastructural. What is important to recognize here is that technological experience is not bounded by a single locale, for example, a software application like a game or a geographically bounded space like the nation state. In our research, we found that people experience technological change in China not as a single entity under development but through a multitude of digital sites, urban spaces, and social networks. Our informants engaged with digital sites and social dynamics beyond the immediate sites of their own technological engagement and game play. We thus stress the importance of analyzing these multiple sites of technology and gaming practice in concert with one another in order to identify the connections and distinctions that people establish between them.

In this article, we focus on the particularities of two gaming sites and the frictions and relations that emerged between them: (a) online gaming in Internet café and (b) mixed-reality gaming in up-scale entertainment clubs.

Internet cafés are neighborhood-level institutions that often bring together a diverse set of local residents. In contrast, the entertainment clubs we studied are

semipublic and exclusive social spaces a group of up-and-coming young Chinese professionals and the local and transnational connections they value. In the Internet cafés, we primarily focused our research on the American online game World of Warcraft (WoW).[1] At the time of our research, Chinese players constituted the single largest player group of the American online game. However, we did not choose to focus on WoW because of its popularity in China alone. For many players, WoW came to represent American lifestyle, for example, through ''Western aesthetics'' and built-in mechanisms of online sociality and collaboration. As such it was an ideal site to study the role of gaming for the formation of identities within transnational processes of technology adoption.

While online gaming has become one of the most widespread and cheapest entertainment forms for the Chinese youth (CNNIC, 2008, 2009), it also coexists with a wide range of other gaming practices such as emerging combinations of digital gaming and traditional face-to-face gaming. One example is a popular mixed-reality game, called the Killer Game (杀人游戏 sharen youxi), that can be accessed in dedicated gaming clubs engaging players in offline gatherings and online social networking. The Killer Game is a Chinese version of the Russian game Mafia or the American version Werewolf. In China, the game can be played online and/or face-to-face in dedicated urban entertainment clubs, where it is augmented by high-end computer equipment. In the clubs, the Killer Game is played in groups of 8–18 people in separate gaming rooms the club provides. Players usually sit around a table or in a circle (see Figure 1) and are secretly assigned roles (police, killer, or civilian) by one of the club's employees. The main objective of the game is for killer and police to eliminate one another. The remaining side wins.[2]

Although, Internet cafés and up-scale Killer Game clubs seem at first as distinct sites of leisure practice and urban-digital configurations, we intend to show how for their inhabitants the meaning of each site emerged in relation to one another as well as to overarching Internet addiction discourses more broadly.

Across both field sites, data were comprised of public observations and participant observation (many hours of game play–online and offline), informal conversations, and semistructured interviews (in person and over IM), gathering and analysis of collateral gaming material such as online blogs, news websites, player forums, bulletin boards, and advertisement material. In the Internet cafés, study participants included students, a factory worker, a middle school teacher, a bank employee, a nurse, and owners of software stores, news kiosks, and the Internet cafe. For the gaming clubs, study participants included players of the game: students, housewives, business owners, artists, web designers, consultants, and so on; but also employees and owners of the clubs. Research was conducted in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou.

Since we were particularly interested in the relationship between actual gaming practices and wider economic and social processes, these cities constituted ideal sites as they are major hubs for both national and transnational migration, the stage for international events like the Olympic Games and the Expo as well as early adopters of new technologies. Across these three cities, we focused on social networks

Figure 1. Game rooms at Killer Game clubs in Beijing (left) and in Shanghai (right). The computer terminal in the photo on the right is controlled by one of the club s employees, whereas players play face-to-face around the table.

across 10 Internet cafes and 4 gaming clubs. We also spent time with study participants outside the gaming sites in tea houses, night clubs as well as online through instant messaging clients such as QQ and online forums. In total, over 80 formal participant interviews and about 160 hours of immersive game play were conducted.

Our research methodology and analysis build on recent efforts in Internet ethnography and network analyses that treat computer games (as well as other digital sites) not as bounded sites, but as phenomena enacted across multiple sites, digital and physical. Drawing from social and cultural studies of technology, Hine (2000), for example, has analyzed Internet technology and online sociality as inseparable outcomes of ongoing and historically contextualized practice. Similarly, an important aspect of understanding the complexities of online sociality and gaming in China is to analyze games not as single entities but in concert with other existing technology and media practices.

Although we acknowledge the particularities of the material and social practices participatory media platforms like games afford, our analysis begins with the assumption that these new technologies and practices are not divorced from the workings of prior technologies, historical and social developments, and concurrent changes of broader media practice (Ito, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). As Ito (2009, p. 4) comments:

> new technologies never start out as separate or outside of existing structures. Change happens as a result of struggles between different discourses and institutions seeking to shape a new technology and set of genres.

Rather than seeing play as emerging out of experience alone, Ito situates play within an analysis of broader institutional structures such as the marketing and distribution of software, the production of class distinctions, and the discourse of parenting. Similarly, we stress the importance to consider play not as distinct from but tightly interwoven with other fabrics of daily life.

An American Game in Chinese Internet Cafés

We begin by illustrating how online gaming in Internet cafés in China evolved at the intersection of Internet policies and informal player collectives who developed strategies to circumvent Internet restrictions. We analyze the ways in which the meaning of game play was coproduced by in-game practice, local conventions in the Internet café as well as state-wide Internet policies and discourses.

In 2007, state officials in China required the local distributor of the American online game WoW to remove images of skeletons from the game. The game graphics were changed so that skeletal characters were ''fleshed out'' or replaced as large graves. In public media, officials explicated the influence on changing game graphics as ''an effort to purify the Internet of anything that might affect national cultural information security or undermine the attempt to promote a harmonious society.[3]''

The promotion of a harmonious society, understood as the balancing of cultural tradition and economic growth, is not an isolated phenomenon or limited to technology and dates back to China's years of opening up in the 1980s. It has often been promoted in later post-Mao China, as anthropologist Ong (1998), for example, observed, especially by political leaders and academic elites, as a moral force ''that can serve as a source for building a new culture.'' Zhang and Ong (2008) identify more recent urban, technological, and economic developments as a new wave of cultural representation of ''Chineseness'' situated in relation to prior historical developments and China's growing influence in the global market economy.

Online games and Internet cafés, in particular, have become subjects of heated debate in these ongoing reevaluations of cultural representation and building of national identity.

In public media and news releases by government officials, online gaming and public Internet access have been discussed as an unsafe place that fosters crime and immorality. In calling online entertainment a ''double-edged sword,'' the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC),[4] for example, acknowledges the economic potential of the gaming industry, while it cautions at the same time that many game players have ''submersed'' themselves in a habit that is described as negatively impacting people's ability to function normally at work, school, and in everyday life (CNNIC, 2008, p. 38). Due to a series of crackdowns and stigmatization in the wider media, the image of the Chinese Internet café, in particular, ''deteriorated from one of an upper-class service in the late 90s, provided by and for an elite, to a working-class environment for information and communication technology use'' (Qiu, 2009, p. 21).

The supposedly ''unhealthy'' effects''[5] of online gaming and of activities in places like the Internet café have become the main impetus behind the Chinese government's efforts to control the IT industry. Online games like WoW, while not being considered politically motivated, are rendered as a ''threat to a healthy development of China's youth,'' and, by extension, the future of a harmonious Chinese

society (Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2011). In a special report on youth Internet habits published in 2007, CNNIC reported that 73.7% of youth have played Internet games, stating, ''secondary school children are the representatives of China's future, an Internet gaming usage rate as high as this requires the careful attention of society'' (p. 16). This is how some of our participants[6] reacted to discourses of ''harmonious society'' and the material implications it had for their game play. Bingwen commented that the removal of the skeletons might be related to China's political situation:

> Bingwen: What's more, in China I am not quite clear about the reason [for the action], perhaps it's China's political situation. In the past when you died [in the game] there were bones and skeletons but now graves are used instead. What we were told is that the skeletons are frustrating and scaring people. But I feel graves are actually scarier.

> Xing: It's a grave, which didn't exist before. You see, there's a corpse dropping items. When you pick up those items, the corpse turns into a grave. Before ... there used to be a skeleton. It is a result from the upgrade, which is part of the governmental project to introduce harmony.

In the second quote, Xing describes how the new game upgrade suddenly lead to changes of the game graphics—something he attributed to ''the governmental project to introduce harmony.'' Chinese modernization discourse such as the harmonious society gained force under Deng Xiaoping, who promoted valorization of a culture purged of its ''feudal characteristics and superstitions (Ong, 1998). The irony, here, is that game players correlated the aforementioned changes in game graphics and the political reasoning behind it with exactly the feudal past that the post-Mao government tried to distance itself from:

> We dislike the harmony such as the disappearance of skeletons. It is feudal and introduced as part of the whole cultural environment in China.

The changes in game graphics, however, are not single phenomena but manifestations of a broader discourse of the role of the Internet as emblematic of socioeconomic change in China, debated across bulletin boards, blogs, and other online entertainment platforms. For example, in their research on how Internet addiction discourse spreads across various media, Golub and Lingley (2008) found that the government's actions of changing or restricting online content are often associated by Chinese youth with a certain style of ''ruling'' by a controlling elite. At the same time, as they point out, Internet addiction discourse in China does not exist independently from debates over broader social and economic changes. Rather, across both utopian and dystopian speculations on the Internet's influence on Chinese society, frequent references are being made to similar debates in the United States and to imaginings of modern lifestyle (Golub & Lingley, 2008). The ways in which players discussed changes in game graphics, both online and in the Internet café, resembled these discussions across various media. Many of our informants actively participated in these debates, not only

in Internet cafés but also through digital media outlets such as game related blogs and news websites (Lindtner et al., 2008). In our analysis, then, we frame WoW game play in Chinese Internet cafés not as culturally or spatially bounded, but as an ongoing process that generates ideas of selfhood and nationhood across multiple sites.

Ideas of Selfhood and Nationhood

In this section, we elaborate in more depth how, by engaging discourses of Internet addiction and by encountering local game restrictions, players positioned China's social and economic circumstances in relation to their interpretations of foreign, in particular North-American living standards. While sociality in the Internet café in China might at first appear as a culturally distinct phenomenon shaped by local policies and cultural processes, we found the ways in which people imagined their own participation in these spaces to be radically shaped by both their social positions within society and the connections they made beyond the immediate geographic space. For example, many of our informants considered venturing into the game's virtual space and digital graphics as an exploration of Western history and story telling. Changming, a 21-year-old student from Beijing University, for example, noted:

> I learned several things about the West. WoW has a Western story, which is different from Eastern stories and history .... The game belongs to the whole Western culture. The races [character types] are an example. Some races like gnomes, dwarves and elves ... are described in European myths. Their dragons are different than ours. Western dragons are evil while Chinese dragons stand for happiness. Mages, druids, and so on originate from Western myths, and are relevant to the whole Western myth of the story. This game, in the aspect of using Western myths, is very successful .... If there is only fighting in the game, it is less interesting. The key is that a large story background supports the whole game.

While playing in the Internet café was certainly perceived as something that Chinese people do, it became crucial for the experienced WoW player to be able to relate to the game's meaning beyond the local context of game play and networking in the Internet café. In part, this entailed imagining what American game culture was like and to be able to talk about it. Ong (1998) observed similar phenomena in Chinese karaoke bars, describing them as places that at times become alternate ways of "leaving" China: "they are not merely foreign forms of entertainment that the Chinese are mindlessly intimating ... the youth culture in Chinese cities is mediated by overseas Chinese culture" (Ong, 1998, p. 49). Participating in the karaoke experience, then, Ong suggests, is an opportunity to participate in overseas modernity since the video images and songs are mostly produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan. In contrast to Ong's findings, the cultural imagination that we observed in the Internet cafés tended to be coupled with self-reflexivity and engagement with what it meant to be Chinese. For example, those who played on American game

servers often correlated game play on the foreign servers with their image of social life and economic standards in the US. Social ethics and behavior displayed by American players online was often reasoned as being linked to a better economic environment in the United States. In contrast, China's social and economic condition was rendered as chaotic and unpredictable, and so was the experience on the local game servers. Jien, a middle school teacher from Beijing, for example, had played on American servers: *I have tried to play on American servers before. The most different thing is the suzhi* (direct translation: quality; we encountered it as understood in terms of socioeconomic standing and personality traits) *of the player. It's more chaotic on the mainland server. When distributing the equipment, Chinese players have lots of quarrels, while the players on the American server do it in a more organized way.*

Shaoxiong remembered similar experiences on the foreign server: *On the net, there are a lot of these instances (cheating). Especially in China right now with the quality of life, definitely more than in Europe or America. Because in those areas there are more net etiquettes. There are a lot of rip off things, where you perceive it a certain way, but it's not how it is. This is going on in China, because Chinese people find money something very important, because it's just becoming industrialized, it's a little bit more chaotic.*

Cheating in games and instabilities of social groups online, however, are certainly not unique features of social dynamics on Chinese game servers but is also quite common on American and European game servers (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Taylor, 2006). Game play in the Internet café, which entailed face-to-face interaction, engaging with digital graphics and online networking, provided players with the opportunity to collectively imagine and talk about American culture. Through reflecting upon what game play on American servers might be like, players also discussed and reflected on gaming practices on Chinese servers. By this, we do not mean to suggest that our informants necessarily aspired toward an American life style and/or wanted to become "like" American game players. Rather, they positioned themselves and their experiences in Internet cafés in China in relation to their perceptions of American culture.

In the Internet café, infrastructural understandings of the game evolved in relation to sociocultural concerns such as China's position in regards to other nations and cultures. To position the game in relation to its imagined cultural origins, the West, was meaningful exactly because it provided not only opportunity to share gaming expertise face-to-face in the Internet café, or remotely in the game, but provided space to engage with broader sociocultural concerns such as China's global and economic position in relation to the West (Hanser, 2008; Ong, 1998). As such, Internet cafés were rich of an emergent sociality where reflections on Chinese versus Western lifestyle propagated. Becoming a "legitimate" player in the Internet café, thus, entailed participating in these discourses of lifestyle comparisons as much as it meant to be proficient in game play. As such, game play allowed for the establishment of new connections to both imagined and actual cultural spaces. It supported

the forging of new relations and imaginary resources for identity formation (Appadurai, 1996). While Internet technology and places like the Internet café are often rendered by officials and in public media as in China harmful toward state-scale projects of achieving a balanced market economy, it became here also the symbol of Western modernity.

Collective Self-Imagining and Building

In the previous section, we discuss how local gaming sites were experienced in relation to modernization discourse and social shifts in China today. We now go on to analyze the relationship between imagination and practice and how it lead to the forging of identities but also to the design of alternate infrastructures of game play. For example, players not only discussed restrictions of the game graphics and the motivations behind them but often also took action. Several set up their own game servers with pirated versions of the American game copy, to experience—as many told us—authentic game play and original game graphics. Many of the work-arounds we encountered were designed by informal player collectives, who had built strong relationships through social networking and gift exchange in and beyond the game.

In particular, the combination of online and offline social interaction in urban spaces like the Internet cafe could provide crucial support to form reliable social connections (关系 guanxi in Chinese) and trustworthy relationships (see, for example, our prior work on this topic: Lindtner, Mainwaring, Dourish, & Wang, 2009). Many of the game players we met in the Internet cafés were migrant workers and students from smaller cities and rural areas who moved to larger cities for work and studies. For many of them, establishing a strong social network was crucial for the success in an unfamiliar and competitive environment like Beijing and Shanghai. Through the exchange of virtual artifacts such as in-game characters and password-protected game accounts, as well as data outside of the game such as phone numbers and institutional background (e.g., school and/or job), players extended their social networks beyond the immediate game space. Tao, a 27-year-old gamer from Hangzhou, for example, explained how his social network expanded through the use of a multitude of sites:

> I have few close friends purely in the game. We have very good guanxi (connection) . . . . I trust him and he trusts me. We shared our game accounts with each other. When I had already started working, he was still in college. We called each other to talk about games as well as other things. I discussed with him how to prepare in school to find jobs . . . we played as a highly organized team . . . . We all disclosed our phone numbers. We looked after each others' characters . . . the saddest thing that happened in the game was when one of our game accounts got stolen and our enemy bought it and used it to fight us . . . when my account got stolen, my friends immediately offered to buy me a premium account that was worth several thousand RMB[7] at that time.

Many developed a sense of mutual trust and reliable friendship at the intersection of online game play and face-to-face interaction in the Internet café, which provided the space for imagining and building alternate spaces of game play. Using pirated versions of the game, for example, several player groups set up their own game servers that allowed themselves and others to play the game without the limitations due to state restrictions. In addition, the underground private servers were built on a financing model that differed from the official game version in that many of them allowed the direct trading of virtual artifacts and selling/purchasing of virtual characters. The private servers constituted a cheap alternative to Taiwanese or American game servers and although the quality of game graphics was often worse than on official servers, many were excited about venturing into these self-made spaces and exploring new modes of game play, new opportunities to trade virtual artifacts, and the long-awaited unrestricted content. These informal organizations of players are reminiscent of larger trends of informal economies that developed in China after opening up. In the early 1980s, the state encouraged an informal sphere of activities to solve the increasing problems of goods shortages, unemployment, system inertia, and to meet the demands of a growing market economy (Parker & Hongxing, 2008). Parker and Hongxing (2008) and Greenhalgh and Winckler (2005) theorize that despite being subject to increasing regulation, the informal economy remains a potent force in China, sustained through traditional and new forms of social networking, because of the continual and fast-paced development of new industries and customer demands.

Turner (2006a) observes a similar phenomenon in the United States, where with the creation of the "New Games Tournament" in the 1970s its inventors not only marked a new form of play but also imagined a particular form of life. In-line with Turner's observations, participating in game play as well as in the creation of hardware and software infrastructures around WoW in China was linked to the imaginary of a particular lifestyle, one removed from parental and governmental reach, built on trust and strong interpersonal networks that were maintained across various sites, game play being one of them. Malaby (2007) offers "semiotic contingency" as a concept to interpret these processes of national identity expression linked to the workings of a game. To consider *the promise of play* takes this one step further in that it points to the production of cultural positions and identities continuously evolving and being challenged through dynamics inside as well as outside of the game. We found how players expressed identity in online social interaction and reactions to large-scale state interventions. At the same, this lead to new forms of media participation, for example, players creating their own game infrastructures and informal economies and social networks that sustained these newly built spaces.

A Chinese Game and Transnational Experiences

We are now turning to findings from the research on Killer Games. The goal of this section in part is to illustrate how gaming as site of cultural production and imagination is a broader phenomenon, not reserved for players of WoW or dependent on

an urban site like the Internet café or a particular technology. We show how meanings of the two gaming sites, Internet cafés and Killer Game clubs, were coproduced, not through a literal or physical infrastructure that connects the two but through the narratives that travelled across and underneath. We found that many participants in the up-scale Killer Game clubs positioned themselves in distinction to labels of public Internet use, Internet addiction and governmental surveillance. As such, they were crafting a particular kind of transnational identity for themselves, in distinction to practices in the Internet café and its inhabitants, yet similarly interwoven in ongoing modernization processes and discourses.

Transnational Networking and Suzhi (素质, Quality)

As much as WoW was an "import" into China, so was the Killer Game—as it was originally invented in Russia. Players of the game in China, however, rarely engaged with the site of the game's origins, as did the Chinese WoW players. Rather, our study participants repeatedly told us that the game originated in Silicon Valley and was brought into China by a transnational Chinese on his return to the homeland. When we asked if the Killer Game was, then, an American game, we received repeatedly answers like: *Of course not, this is a Chinese game*. Given that both WoW and the Killer Game were in a sense foreign imports, what makes one American and the other Chinese?

Killer Game clubs were sites for practicing wider, translocal and transnational networking and business relations. The Killer Game clubs primarily attracted a crowd of up and coming young professionals and entrepreneurs, who flexibly navigated China's urban hubs and often also beyond China's national borders, for business and studies abroad. Many of the people new to the clubs, for example, were either new to the city or returned after years of study and work abroad (often from the United States or the wider Pacific Rim). They valued the club scene exactly because it invoked an image distinct from the neighborhood-level socializing in the Internet café and its reputation of attracting blue-collar workers and a space where Internet addiction flourishes (Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2011; Qiu, 2009).

The Killer Game clubs were exclusive urban spaces equipped with high-end technological infrastructure and sensor network technology used to augment game play and to support networking across different clubs. The payment structure also differed significantly from the Internet café: Clubs required payment of a yearly membership fee that ranged between 50 and 150 RMB (or $\sim$ 7–21 US\$) and charged 10 RMB per hour of game play (compare: an hour of Internet access in an Internet cafe cost around 2–3 RMB and 60 hours of WoW game play cost 30 RMB).

The ways in which face-to-face interaction and high-end computer equipment were assembled in the clubs emerged within a particular socio-cultural climate of public entertainment and leisure activity: most of the Killer Game club businesses were established between 2004 and 2006 responding to a growing number of leisure

Killer Game players at home and in tea houses. Many of the business owners had played the game with other passionate players, which had motivated them to establish a club often as business on the side and as secondary income. The Killer Game club in Beijing, for example, had to be newly built. The owner therefore rented state-owned property for a monthly fee. It was the mutual dependency of technologically mediated game play and face-to-face interaction, however, that rendered the Killer Game clubs such an attractive choice of leisure practice for the socioeconomic group who could afford attend to it.

Jordan and Summer, members of a Killer Game club in Shanghai, characterize players of the Killer Game and participants in the club scene as follows:

> . . . *people who come here [to the club] are of high suzhi . . . this game provides opportunities for you to meet people, people of a certain circle. Not everyone likes this game*

> *For people here, they are more white collar workers or the like, or people who run their own businesses, it is not like, how should I say, not very mixed, only people of certain levels will be here to play.*

Suzhi (素质), here invoked by Summer in the first quote, is a common rendering of status and class in China, which roughly translates into English as "quality." Discourses around *suzhi* are said to have originated at the time of the idea of population control in the 1980s where China's failure to modernize was attributed to low quality of its population. It later began to circulate more broadly as a general explanation for everything that held the Chinese nation back from achieving its rightful place in the world (Anagnost, 1997; Rofel, 2007). Anagnost points to more recent interpretations; as economic reforms increased privatization, she suggests, *suzhi* appeared in new discourses of social distinction and the discursive production of middle classness, thus defining a "person of quality" in practices of consumption and a middle class desire for social mobility.

Members of the club scene invoked *suzhi* on several levels to distinguish their gaming practices from those in the Internet café: human quality, material infrastructure and transnational connections. Distinctions through education and profession and the reach of one's social network were used to legitimize one's belonging to the club especially in contrast to inhabitants of the Internet café. Another member, for example, made clear that visitors at the Internet café that was located just down the hall of one the Killer Game Clubs in Shanghai did not quite belong to the same scene:

> *I think, it might be related to education also. For example, there is an Internet café out there, but it's for sure there, there are more these youths, but here, for us here, the age ranges from 20-40, it's a group of people who are successful in their careers in society, or things like that . . . it has something to do with social status and their own education.*

As this quote illustrates, the Killer Game clubs did not only provide a shared context for people who considered themselves members of distinct social and cultural

quality to connect with one another. It also constituted a place where one's belonging to that distinct class could be staged and reproduced through continuous interaction across a range of clubs spreading across first and second tier cities in China. This was then also concretized by the technological infrastructure and architectural layout of the clubs. For example, when asked why he would not provide computer equipment with Internet access similar to the Internet café, one of the club owners in Shanghai replied that he instead provided a free wireless network so that members would be able to bring their own computers in case they want to play online games. He explained that providing officially registered PC stations would require him to install official spyware, as is the case for PC stations in the Internet café. For the owner, the wireless network stood for an alternate technology space to the Internet café, located beyond the stigma of Internet addiction, control and restrictions at the Internet café.

Transnational Imagination and Cosmopolitan Lifestyle

The Killer Game itself fit right into this sociotechnical distinction making in that it resonated with both Chineseness and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Often, players emphasized that they considered the Killer Game play in the clubs a form of training. Training their analytical skills, how to present and represent themselves, but also how to read others, their language as well as their actions. Tianlong, who moved to Beijing about 4 years ago from Hebei province, and now works at a Chinese company with international business offices, described the abilities she acquired through playing the game as follows:

> *This game makes your language more refined, more attractive .... I think what you get the most from the game is that it can improve your ability to express yourself. It teaches you how to speak, but also how to be more calculating. This game makes you speak, and listen, others have to listen to you. That way, it will make you more open, and more self-confident.*

The training in refined manners and eloquent speech, self-confidence, and self-reliance through the game provided the apt environment for learning how to become member of and simultaneously represent a new and progressive China. These socio-cultural practices are reminiscent of what Rofel has described as ''cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics[8]'' (2007). Living and enacting a cosmopolitan lifestyle, however, entailed also being able to look beyond national borders. Many of our participants, for example, mentioned that they considered the Killer Game a particular apt training in social and entrepreneurial skills relevant for their work in international companies or for their own transnational lifestyles, for their businesses in China and abroad. Zhen left China 8 years ago for studies and work in the United States. Shortly after his return, one of his friends took him to one of the Killer Game clubs in Beijing, which Zhen described as not only a valuable resource to

reconnect to local Beijing culture but also—as he emphasized—to practice the kind of ''international thinking'' he considers a necessary skill for employment in a Chinese companies today:

> *I think this club really helps people to speak out, to speak their opinion. In Chinese enterprise, people are more and more outgoing these days, this is a good thing. this kind of club is a good thing .... This game is training you for international thinking and language ability, and it's good for guanxi (social connection).*

In contrast to the online gaming scene in the Internet café, members of the Killer Game clubs practiced social networking with social and professional ties across China's first and second tier cities and at times with contacts beyond national borders. The clubs, their mix of computer mediated game play and face-to-face social networking, thus, came to function as an iconic representations of Chinese life style for an upper middle class of young professionals and entrepreneurs, who maintained both local and international connections and professional ties. The language of *suzhi* and modern lifestyle was not limited to players' discursive practices across digital game play and physical gaming sites. It also penetrated yet another public: marketing campaigns and advertisement. Commonly, marketing of the Killer Game clubs spanned a mix of word-by-mouth advertising through passionate players, web presence, paper flyers distributed in malls and at public events. Clubs also gained visibility through artifacts that members carried around with them such as club membership cards.

The club advertisement often spoke to a generation that has become known as ''cultivating cool'' (Wang, 2008). The membership card for one of the clubs in Beijing, for example, reads (freely translated): *This ''cultivating'' club is for people who care about cool and people who are concerned with their self representation.*

In this mix of marketing language and practices of sociotechnical distinction making, spaces of potentiality such as the Killer Game club provided the necessary means to represent and simultaneously produce a culture of cool.

The Promise of Play

In this article, we show how digital game play in Internet cafés and up-scale entertainment spaces in China were sites of production and interpretation of identity, cultural positioning, aspirations and ideas of belonging. We illustrate how WoW and the Chinese Killer Game are not just interesting case studies of new forms of game play and sociality, but also how both sites, put together, are illustrative of broader sociotechnical change and modernization narratives in China. By teasing out how differently positioned people experience and react to broader changes in China through their technology practice, we point to games as rich sites of cultural production and identity. Gaming in China is not a locally bounded phenomenon but experienced in relation to transnational connections and social changes. In what follows, we

discuss in more detail what the notion of *the promise of play* entails for a theory of productive play.

The Production of Transnational Identity and Imagination

Across our research on WoW in Internet cafés and the Killer Game clubs, our findings point to games as sites of cultural imagination residing within local practice but entangled with processes of modernization, economic growth and transnational networking. *The promise of play*, then, entails seeing games as productive sites, where people form identities at the intersection of local particularities, for example, the tackling of Internet addiction as a disease and immorality of gaming sites in China, and broader developments, for example, international business relations and transnational migration. This approach in part entails treating games not as single and bounded sites but seeing them as sites interwoven in broader technological, economic, and political agendas and developments. As such, we analyze findings from our two research sites in concert with one another through the many discourses, social practices and overarching historical developments that link them together.

So far, processes of transnational imagination and identity have been largely explored in the context of electronic media and transnational migration (Appadurai, 1996). Studies in media anthropology have pointed to how electronic media afford similar processes even when people do not physically migrate (Larkin, 1997; Rofel, 1992; Yang, 2002). While digital technologies broadly have been described as playing a crucial role in processes of globalization and transnationalism (Castells, 2006; Mazarella, 2004; Miller & Slater, 2000; Poster, 2006; Sassen, 1991), little attention has been paid to the ways in which digital technologies are appropriated and experienced within these contexts. By introducing the notion of *the promise of play*, we do not wish to stipulate yet another terminology for productive media use nor to celebrate the production through play as a stage set free of labor issues. Rather our goal is to take up the "productive" in "productive play" discussions and decenter its linkages to the market, monetary value, and local production. In doing so, we have taken prior research on the production of identity and imagination in media and cultural studies and applied it to a new approach toward productive play. In particular, we argue for an understanding of the "productive" of play that does not end with material creation. Rather, we suggest viewing digital production and participation also in relation to political, economic, and social developments and the ways in which people imagine themselves as participants within these processes.

If we take new forms of mobility and global processes seriously as important aspects of technology development and appropriation, we need to explore the specificity of different technologies, their material, and cultural forms as they span across diverse places, cultures, and values (Poster, 2006). It is these contingent processes of technologies, and digital game play in particular, and how they are both

symptomatic and incentive of contemporary transnational processes and discourses, that we have set out to explore in this article.

In many ways, the gaming sites we studied constitute a particularly focused lens into broader societal changes in China as they are both part of everyday practice and heatedly debated in mass media and by Chinese politicians. Internet technologies have been theorized as equalizing across social inequalities but also as potentially exacerbating the differences between the ones in power and those being controlled. What these binary oppositions obscure are the important social and cultural consequences technologies have across different social, economic, and political locales. For example, we found online gaming in China to play a crucial role in representations of social and cultural status, as well as for social networking upon the move to an unfamiliar urban environment.

What we show in this article is that gaming is not simply the site of a countermovement, nor does it prescribe social behavior. While players in China circumvented restrictions, built software and hardware platforms on their own, and set up their own gaming sites, socioeconomic distinctions remained and at times even intensified through the staging of difference across digital and urban infrastructures, as evidenced in the findings on the Killer Games.

While we found that gaming in China was productive of new forms of sociality and that players engaged in the discussion of alternate views and interpretations of the role of Internet technologies more broadly, in particular, in contrast to state legislation and censorship, we also found that the technological infrastructures of gaming did not exist independently of broader social power geometries (Massey, 1993). *The promise of play*, then, suggests that we should analyze "productive" play not just in terms of activities within the game, but also how instrumental, means are accomplished in and around the game, by players as much as by state officials.

Ideological Creations

What is crucial for understanding the role games like WoW and the Killer Game played in China is to see them as sites embedded in larger webs of cultural and social production. Geertz (1973) has famously described gambling around the Balinese cockfight as "deep play," highlighting the culturally situated meanings of the cockfight, and the production and interpretation of social status through participation within it. WoW and the Killer Games in China were similarly "deep." Where our findings differ, however, is in the ways in which local meaning of game play was accomplished: through a form of production that remained local, yet at the same time spanned transnational process of social networking and ideas of a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

The second aspect that we would like to underscore with our approach is the importance of understanding the role that games like WoW and the Killer Game play today in relation to their cultural and historical developments and those of the political projects that enable and disable them. Since their inception, participatory media

platforms ranging from online networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter to virtual worlds such as Second Life and WoW have been embedded in both local practice and wider economic and political networks. For example, Silicon Valley itself—known as the United States' most prominent driver of technological innovation and emergent digital platforms—has sustained its leadership through transnational labor migration. Crucial for the region's early developmental advancement in technological innovation were changes in national and California state legislation that granted workers from Asia, Mexico, and South America to immigrate for a limited period (Barbrook & Cameron, 2001; Pellow & Park, 2002).

Online games like WoW, similar to other participatory platforms like Second Life, are often used as particularly illustrative examples of outcomes of these new forms of production. At times these platforms are then celebrated either as sites that emerged out of countercultural movements carrying the potential for more humane and creative ways of forging work and play, or as platforms imagined and motivated by military and other institutions (Turner, 2006b). New media and participatory platforms like games in particular are often associated with a sense of empowerment of the masses allowing a wider range of participation, value and opinion expression, especially in contrast to print and electronic media. What these at times utopian visions of empowerment tend to overlook is first, how "traditional" media were already sites of user participation and imagination (Appadurai, 1996; Manovich, 2002) and second, how digital media are embedded in contemporary industry and labor conditions, similar to how print and electronic media evolved in relation to other post–World War II technological and industrial developments (Williams, 1974).

A potentially more constructive view, then, is to point to the ways in which digital technologies afford new forms of mediation and material practice and to consider their relation to contemporary economic and political processes. For example, a growing number of scholars is exploring the tight correlation between new forms of participation that new media afford and altered labor and work conditions. Digital technologies and the kinds of engagements and forms of participation they allow, here, are cited as contemporary sites for the production of cultural objects and values (Hardt & Negri, 2001; Jenkins, 2006; Manovich, 2002; Terranova, 2000). Some have pointed to the specific material qualities of these new software and hardware infrastructures and how cultural logics are embedded within these coded artifacts (Manovich, 2002). Others have analyzed technology design that reproduces the ideological frames and values that underlie the workings of our creative industries today (Barbrook & Cameron, 2001; Boellstorff, 2008; Turner, 2006b).

These efforts have demonstrated how design and use of participatory media platforms have been embedded in both local practice and wider economic and political networks. For example, what Silicon Valley produced was not only technological innovation but also what Barebrook and Cameron famously termed the "Californian Ideology." The Californian Ideology merges technological narratives of progress, techno-utopianism and political ideologies of a free market economy and capitalist

democracy. It emerged, as Barbrook and Cameron suggested, at the intersection of technological advancement, technoutopianism and political ideologies of a free market economy of the post-60s. As such it is a "loose alliance of writers, hackers, capitalists and artists from the West Coast of the USA." What the Californian Ideology produced were not merely digital tools and media, immersive interfaces, and digital spaces but also an ideology of creative production and communal engagement. Turner (2006b) traces this back to the workings of Steward Brand and the Whole Earth network, an assemblage of people and publications that span across bohemian San Francisco and the emerging technology hub in Silicon Valley. The movement came to represent a countercultural vision of the Internet, one that depicted the emerging digital world in revolutionary terms and antithetical to the technologies and social structures powering the cold war state and its defense industry (Turner, 2006b). Yet at the same time, the Internet was rendered as both the infrastructure and the symbol of a new economic era. Information and communication technologies came to be stand-in metaphors for social process and individual empowerment and attracted both members from the countercultural movement in the 1960 and capital investment that eventually evolved into the Silicon Valley we know today.

The ideas and values that sustain these industries, spread across new and older forms of media, travel as much as the platforms themselves. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that game play in China was understood in relation to these prominent stories and histories of technology drivers in the United States. In this article, we have explored how technologies imbued with such particular meanings and values are then encountered as part of people's experience and daily practice. We have discussed, why it mattered for a Chinese game like the Killer Game to be thought of as invented in Silicon Valley. At the same time, we have also shown how the American game WoW was perceived as something that Chinese people do, yet how it opens up imagination of lifestyles and sociality elsewhere.

Play and game studies continue to be a contested research topic, challenged not only from within the academic community but also by mass media outlets as a legitimate field of scientific inquiry. Last year, the Orange County Register, a major regional daily newspaper in the U.S. reported findings from a study on online gaming in China. The article sparked a wider discussion around gaming research and its merits for society.[9] Readers, for example, commented online and challenged the purpose of the study as well as the claims made in regards to the implications drawn from the findings. One respondent who presented himself as a Chinese game player responded to the claim made that most Chinese prefer playing in Internet cafés: "I am a Chinese guy, ... most of us play WoW at home. The Internet café is not very clean, it's only for students and low incomer ...." This comment brings out one of the central agendas of this article. Playing a game like WoW or the Chinese Killer Game did not end with a bounded game space, digital or discursive. Rather, gaming meant participating in the broader social world in which these contexts of socioeconomic and cultural positions were produced.

Conclusion

In this article, we introduce the notion of *the promise of play,* a perspective of productive game play that takes into account detailed play experience in concert with players' broader concerns and contexts. We ground our explorations in findings from ethnographic research on online and mixed-reality gaming in urban China.

The approach we take with *the promise of play* suggests that production of identity and value through games emerges at the intersection of local contingencies and transnational developments; social, economic, political, and technological. We have shown in this article, that what is produced through our games today is not just social and economic value but also transnational identities and cultural imaginations of belonging. We do not wish to suggest, however, that production, whatever its form, always is or should be the player's main objective, an argument that is often central to popular serious gaming research. All of the games we studied were inherently fun; they were perceived as such by the people who played them and fun and pleasure was also one of the central reasons why they have become so popular (Fine, 1983). As researchers we experienced the gaming sites and playing the games with participants not only as work that is extremely enjoyable and inherently fascinating, but also as a particularly fertile ground to immerse ourselves in Chinese culture, Chinese urban lifestyle and sociality in ways we believe unique to the study of gaming and entertainment practice. While spending many hours in Internet cafés and gaming clubs playing games with participants face-to-face, for example, we became quickly integrated into their practices, were invited to dinner and other after-game activities and were able to express ourselves through the games despite cultural barriers.

In summary, then, we have had three primary goals in this article. The first emerges in light of past and ongoing efforts across the wider gaming and new media research community to challenge stereotypical views of game, play and new media such as waste of time, of money, and entertainment-centered (e.g. Boellstorff, 2006; Castronova, 2005; Bogost, 2006; Fine, 1983; Lowood, 2006; Malaby, 2007; Mayra, 2006; Pearce, 2006, Turner, 2006a, Yee, 2006). Our first goal was not so much to justify the study of games and new media practice in China itself, rather to provide a new vantage point to consider the mutual reliance of game play and the production of value and meaning.

Our second goal has been to introduce a new approach toward common renderings of productive play by building on previous work in cultural studies and media studies. We ground our approach in findings from our ethnographic research, focusing first on online gaming in Internet cafés and second on the spread of digital gaming into a growing up-scale entertainment scene. We show how both gaming sites became embedded in narratives of progress and change in China. While the increase of Internet access in China has often been theorized as carrying the potential to equalize across social conditions, we found that new sites of friction and distinctions emerged. While online gaming was continuously challenged by tightened information control and heated debates about Internet addiction and immorality, the

upscale entertainment scene was rendered by its members and creators as a site that exercised Chinese modernity, thus in-line with state rhetoric of nation state modernization.

Our third goal has been to elaborate an argument that games are sites of cultural production like the formation of identity and imagination. We take the notion of cultural production beyond the binary framing of resistance from the bottom-up or control from the top-down. This includes workings of the state, the ways in which players counteracted and/or appropriated dominant discourses such as Internet addiction and how they modified the game itself for their own means, both materially and discursively. Our informants experienced gaming at the intersection of broader discourses such as social change and modernization in China and local implementations thereof such as legislation around Internet access and addiction. Here, we found that making game play function for one's own means was not restricted to a single gaming site or technology space, but rather was enacted across a multitude of urban and digital sites, local and transnational connections, aspirations, and imaginations.

Notes

1. In WoW, players create and develop an animated character in a setting derived from the fantasy game Dungeons and Dragons. Game activities include slaying monsters, fighting other players, and participating in a vibrant in-game economy. Although the game can be played alone, WoW is fundamentally a social game. The game provides distinctive mechanisms of collaboration for a variety of social forms including among others guilds, parties, and raids (see Nardi, 2010 for more detail).
2. The game is played in several rounds, each one consisting of a day and night phase. During night, killers assassinate and police "hunt" killers. During the day phase, all players (including the civilians) debate the identities of the killers and vote to eliminate someone the majority suspects. Succeeding in the game highly depends on players' skillful handling of argumentation and debate, observation, and memorization.
3. See, for example, coverage by China Digital Times in 2007: http://chinadigitaltimes.net/ 2007/07/china-starts-war-with-world-of-warcraft-addicts-max-brenn/m, last accessed April 2010.
4. CNNIC is China's central governmental station of Internet policy. In a yearly report, CNNIC publishes latest trends of Internet development in urban and rural areas of China.
5. A news release by the Chinese ministry of health about classifying Internet addiction as a disease in 2008 sparked tremendous commentary in Western mass media and fuelled ongoing debates on health-related consequences for children and youth due to digital entertainment use.
6. All names of participants in our research are anonymized to protect their privacy.
7. RMB or Yuan RMB stands for renminbi, which translatates as "people's money," the official currency of the People's Republic of China.
8. Rofel uses the term playfully in order to speak to the cultural practices and experiences of the middle class in relation to state discourses such as "socialism with Chinese characteristics." Socialism with Chinese characteristics has become the post-Mao rhetorical

strategy of aligning modernization strategies with the promotion of national autonomy—to modernize without being westernized (Anagnost, 1997; Ong, 1998; Rofel, 2007,). By cosmopolitanism with Chinese characteristics, then, Rofel speaks to the adoption of consumption practices and modern lifestyles by China's upper middle class, while state officials and consumers render them as deeply intertwined with cultural tradition.

9. http://sciencedude.freedomblogging.com/2008/09/11/uci-tackles-world-of-warcraft-mystery/

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Bios

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