In this talk I am drawing from ethnographic research that I conducted in China over the last three years to discuss how participation in digital media often entails entering a political stage – where multiple actors and their various interests intersect. Before I cover some examples from my fieldwork, I would like to draw your attention to a tech story that made international news earlier this year.
On Tuesday, January 12, this year, Google, releases the following statement on their official corporate blog, entitled “A New Approach to China”:

IN here google announced to discontinue censorship of search results on Google.cn due to sophisticated cyberattacks that originated from within China.

Reactions to the announcement spilled into blog post, magazine and newspaper articles, and even NPR’s Fresh Air. Discussions were consumed by debates over the ramifications of the announcement, not just for China but also for the American IT industry, global markets and international relations. Topics ranged from speculation over Google’s “true” motives to discussions over class differences in the usages of Google.cn. Over the last couple of weeks, the debates eventually merged into a discussion over conflicting values and ethics.
Internet Freedom - State of secretary, Hillary Clinton, January 21, 2010:

“The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly in cyber space… When we face serious disputes or dangerous incidents, it’s critical that people on both sides of the problem have access to the same set of facts and opinions.”

Information Imperialism - Foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu, January 22, 2010:

“We urge the U.S. side to respect facts and stop using the so-called freedom of the Internet to make unjustified accusations against China.”

On January 21, shortly after Google’s news release, Hillary Clinton delivered a speech on Internet freedom in Washington, D.C. In that speech, the secretary of state added a new freedom to Roosevelt’s 1941 list of four: the freedom to connect, or as she put it, “The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly in cyber space.” She also emphasized the importance of information flows explaining that “When we face serious disputes or dangerous incidents, it’s critical that people on both sides of the problem have access to the same set of facts and opinions.”

Response from the state media and foreign ministry in China was quick and referred to Clinton’s speech as merely the latest expression of US imposing its “information imperialism on China,” nothing more than yet another example of postcolonial hegemonic behavior. Foreign ministry spokesman Ma Zhaoxu stated that China’s regulation of the Internet was in keeping with “national conditions and cultural traditions.”

What the online debates over the broader impacts of Google’s announcement and China’s economic growth more broadly illustrate so well, however, is the importance to look at digital media not in isolation, but rather through the dynamics of values and politics, and through the international relations within which their meaning arises.
We all see that technology becomes a politic stage and a site of conflicting values. Something we tend to associate much less with digital media like WoW or SL.

In what follows I will discuss how these digital media become sites of friction and tension between at times conflicting values and politics... and what that means for how we talk about who participates in their production and use.

In particular I am bringing in a couple of examples from ethnographic research that I have been conducting in China over the last three years. I have studied the use of online gaming in Internet cafes for youth on the move from rural to urban areas and the use of digital media amongst young professionals and young media users who travel abroad.
Drawing from a subset of the findings from this research, I will discuss the tensions and relations among some of the actors involved in shaping digital media in China.

Three actors:

1. State politics
2. Urban renewal
3. Digital Media Art
Digital media are prominent subjects in debates over ICT development broadly in China. State media for example discussed digital media as an unsafe place that fosters crime, immorality and addiction. The China Internet Network Information Center calls the IT industry a Double-edged sword – speaking to the potential of the IT industry as it also cautions users. The narrative of Internet addiction and social instability have become the main impetus to control the IT industry. This manifested in a series of interventions ranging from the operation of the “great firewall of China to the demolition of privately owned Internet cafes.
An example from my fieldwork. Here on the slide you see a series of Internet cafes in Shanghai and Beijing. I revisited these cafes last summer during field research and found them to be vanished. What we see here is part of a larger project of urban renewal and economic change with which sites of digital media use and production are deeply intertwined. Expansive urban renewal is one of the visually most astounding transformations in China. For example, prior to the Olympic Games in 2008, 5 million square meters of residential housing were slated for demolition in Beijing, which meant relocating 300,000 households (around 1.1 million people) and drastic changes in the urban landscape.

The building of new digital spaces – whether those be virtual spaces or physical spaces infused with technology – takes place, then, within a broader context of continual transformation of the urban infrastructure.
Where Internet cafes and low-income neighborhoods in key city areas are being torn
town and moved elsewhere, what is being built in their place? A common image that
might come to mind are new architectural icons such as the CCTV building,
headquarters of China Central Television in Beijing, designed by Dutch architect Rem
Koolhaas, and completed just in time before the opening ceremony of the Olympic
Games in 2008.
In debates over urban transformation, such iconic buildings take on symbolic value. On February 10, 2009, the last day of the Chinese New Year celebrations, Koolhaas’ five-star hotel, built adjacent to the CCTV building, bursts into flames. The New York Times reports the same day that images of the burning hotel had been immediately removed from China’s main Internet portals.
Nevertheless China’s digital landscape thrived with images and re-interpretations of the burning building such as space invaders and dragons taking over the city, displaying a reaction of bleak and mockery. These constructions and destructions of the urban space, enmeshed in the politics of renewal and modernity, have shaped spatial explorations in the digital space.
III Digital Media Art

Cao Fei

In the near future, I will build a city dubbed RMB City within Second Life. This will be the condensed incarnation of contemporary Chinese cities with most of their characteristics; a series of new Chinese fantasy realism that highly self-contradictory, inter-permeate, laden with irony and suspicion and extremely entertaining and pan-political. China’s current obsession with land development in all its intensity will be extended to Second Life. A rough hybrid of communism, socialism and capitalism, RMB City will be realized in a globalized digital sphere combining overabundant symbols of Chinese reality with cursory imaginings of the country’s future.

In 2007, digital media artists Cao Fei, for example, wrote the following artistic manifesto:
What this manifesto probably describes best is, as Jiang Jun, one of Cao Fei’s collaborators, puts it, *the belief in the virtual reality to stimulate reality on a more profound level* – a reflection of urban changes in China that both critiques and celebrates its infrastructural and cultural explosion.

RMB city assembles a hybrid of images of the past, personal encounters with a rapidly changing city landscape, cultural references (e.g. the panda floating atop), and iconic representations thereof (chairman mao statue saluting visitors). It is named after the abbreviation of China’s currency, the renminbi, people’s money or people’s currency – as Cao Fei puts it “RMB is the name for the ‘real’ life Chinese currency.”

RMB city tells a non-linear story of urban renewal to infiltrate the dominant rhetoric of positive processes of modernization that has dominated design politics in China over the last decade. The design draws simultaneously on the materiality of digital media but also on the social, economic, historical, and political contexts in which those media are put to use and are encountered.
Cao Fei has received international attention through works like RMB City. Cao Fei exhibited physical copies of the digital original in the Lombard-Freid Projects Gallery in New York, as well as during art festivals in Europe – thus expanding the range of sites and actors involved in the participation in the use and production of the SL space.
In summary, What I want to draw attention to across these short snippets from my fieldwork, is Participating in digital media is productive of new social and cultural values, constituting a site through which the state acts as much as others act to create alternate narratives. This however is not simple a story of domination versus resistance; rather, interactive media become a new political realm where institutions, media producers and users alike expand their own political space.

Rather than seeing these as isolated... or geographically bounded, I suggest looking at how values and meanings arise in contemporary settings of globalizing processes and international interactions. Theoretically I am drawing in particular from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s work who suggests a methodology of following things in motion across sites in order to speak to their social, political and cultural biographies.

Kevin leander yesterday in the closing plenary spoke about “learning as being distributed across large social systems, involving rhythms and spaces that are difficult to study”

It is that type of learning and participation that I refer to here. We tend to center participation on the user side – those who appropriate and adopt technology for civic engagement, learning, leisure and entertainment, family practices, etc. What I want to suggest here is detach participation for a moment from the user side and pay attention to the multi-tude of actors and stakeholders involved.
Questions?

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