

**China's Many Internets:  
Participation and Sites of Game Play Across a Changing Technology Landscape**

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## 1. Introduction

Internet technologies and sites of Internet use in China have undergone rapid transformation over the last ten years. Qiu (2009), for example, highlights how Internet cafés, which once served an elite market, are now discriminated against as sites that serve the lower class and breed Internet addiction. While the number of Chinese Internet users continues to increase, Internet policies and legislation, ranging from mass closings of Internet cafés to the installation of control mechanisms on computer terminals, have impacted technology practice. Such changes have led to numerous debates over both the impact of the Internet in China and the nation's image in a globalizing age. Across these debates, the consequences of technological transformation are often represented in binary and deterministic ways. On the one hand, IT development in China is seen as leveling social inequalities and leading to rise in creativity and new forms of economic production. On the other hand, Internet technology is rendered as exacerbating social difference and suppressing creativity through government control. Beneath these views often lies the assumption of a single Internet and a framing of Internet technology in China as a national site impacted by local policies, cultures and media practices. What tends to be overlooked, however, are the important cultural consequences Internet technologies have across different social and economic contexts and various localities. In our research on digital gaming in China, we found that Internet users do not consider themselves participants in a single Internet. Rather people act across multiple digital media to engage with like-minded others and to form new identities amidst rapid technological, political and economic changes.

Online gaming and other forms of digital entertainment are often used as particularly illustrative examples in broader debates over the impact of Internet technology in China. While officials recognize the economic and creative potential of the gaming industry, digital gaming is also rendered as a site where Internet addiction and immoral attitudes thrive. In official rhetoric, Internet games and the Internet as a whole are often referred to as a “double-edged sword.” This ambivalent discourse is mobilized with regard to both IT content and the greater impact that it poses for economy and society. CNNIC’s<sup>1</sup> 2008 report on Internet development, for example, recognizes the incredible economic potential of the Internet games industry at the same time as it cautions that many Chinese youth have “submersed” themselves in games, a habit that negatively impacts their ability to function normally at work, school and in everyday life.

In this paper, we complicate such binary views by illustrating how individuals and emergent collectives utilize various Internets for their local and trans-local engagements, build trust and form networks across multiple spaces, e.g. Internet cafés, student dormitories, other urban spaces and a variety of digital media. We focus, in particular, upon multiple uses of Internet technology for leisure purposes, seeking to understand the ways in which public versus private access, choice of online leisure activity and politics of use have created different communities of users and become new markers of class and social identity.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **Field Sites**

We ground our explorations in ethnographic fieldwork on digital gaming practices in China conducted over the last 6 years. Lindtner has conducted ethnographic research in urban China over the last three years focusing in particular on two sites: 1) online gaming and social networking in the Internet café (*e.g.* Lindtner et al. 2009) and 2) the expansion of digital technology into newly built urban spaces: China's growing upscale entertainment scene. Szablewicz has followed the transformation of Internet cafés and digital games in Shanghai since 2004, focusing on the transformation of these physical and virtual social spaces and the negotiations of identity that have resulted for those who frequent them (*e.g.* Szablewicz, 2004).

Our research spans both online and offline sites, including digital games such as World of Warcraft, Warcraft III, Counterstrike, Killer Games, QQ Games, the Legend of Miracle 2 and Fantasy Westward Journey. The offline sites of our fieldwork include Internet cafés, student dormitories, gaming clubs, tea houses, workplaces and homes. Research was largely based in Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou. Data was collected from participant observation, informal conversation, many hours of game play, semi-structured interviews, gamer blogs, online comments and bulletin board systems (bbs), and focus groups.

It is important to note that our definition of digital games is purposefully broad, including real time strategy (RTS) games, first person shooter (FPS) games, massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG), social games and mixed-reality gaming. We include this range of games in our study in order to reveal the diversity of gaming practices in urban China, contrasting this picture with that produced by local mainstream media, which sometimes confuses different games and treats them as a monolithic entity that negatively impacts China's youth. In particular, we traced connections and frictions between these sites, the ways in which they emerged and developed across diverse material, social, and cultural practices. Focusing on the relations and frictions between multiple sites of gaming practice—physical, digital and social—in our ethnographic research is then also tied to our analytical commitment to treating Internet technologies as deeply intertwined with other spheres of life.

In this paper, we focus on extracting overarching themes from our long-term research. In particular, we offer insight into the digital gaming practices of young Chinese living in urban Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou. The ages of our informants ranged from 18 to 45, though the majority of gamers were in their 20s and 30s. Though we deal with a diversity of different games and sites, the young people who contributed to our research share the unique position of living at the forefront of a rapidly changing technological environment in some of China's technologically most advanced cities. As such, a comparison of the distinctions and connections made by these different groups can offer a nuanced account of IT development and its impact on social change in urban China.

## **Sites of Play**

Findings across the various technology sites we studied also point us to the importance of recognizing many layers of participation and how identities are enacted across multiple sites, digital, physical, urban and social. As Yang (2009) argues, online citizen activism often takes the form of an “identity movement in search of belonging and recognition” (p. 23). Our fieldwork

examines the changing nature of these online identity movements, siding with Yang in arguing that “the view of entertainment as mere play devoid of politics is simplistic” (p. 158).

An important part of understanding the multiple aspects of online participation in China is to recognize online spaces not as separate but as intertwined with the fabrics of everyday life. While we found that our informants engaged with Internet technology in diverse ways, their experiences were never bound within a single material site. Rather, games and the technologies that supported them were always experienced in concert with physical sites of use and broader social, economic and political transformations. An underlying aspect of this research, then, is to analyze online technologies not as bounded phenomena, but in concert with the wider material and social world. In this regard, our research methodology and analysis corresponds with recent efforts in Internet ethnography and media anthropology (e.g. Hine 2000, Malaby, Miller and Slater, 2001).

Drawing from social and cultural studies of technology, Christine Hine (2000), for example, has analyzed Internet technology and online sociality as inseparable outcomes of ongoing and historically contextualized practice: “*The Internet can be seen as thoroughly socially shaped both in the history of its development and in the moments of its use. The ways in which the Internet is currently understood and used are the upshot of historical, cultural, situational and metaphorical shaping*” (Hine 2000, pg. 32). In line with these observations, an important aspect of understanding the complexities of online sociality and gaming in China required understanding the technology’s role within its material, social, economic, as well as historical contexts.

In China this becomes evident through the ways in which the establishment of new information and communication technologies is often deeply intertwined with ongoing economic processes and modernization discourse. Public Internet access in Internet cafes and new digital media like online games, in particular, have become subjects of heated debate in ongoing re-evaluations of cultural representation. In public media and by government officials, public Internet access, for example, has been discussed as an unsafe place that fosters crime and immorality. The supposedly “unhealthy” effects of Internet technology have become the main impetus behind the Chinese government’s efforts to control the industry. Online games, while not being considered politically motivated, are still rendered as a “threat to a healthy development of China’s youth,” (CNNIC) and, by extension, the future of a harmonious Chinese society.

Concurrent to these ongoing debates, a series of interventions was initiated, ranging from demolition of privately owned Internet cafes to the installation of control mechanisms on the cafés’ computer terminals. In our research, we found that the discourse of Internet addiction and related narratives of Chinese modernization imbued the gaming sites we studied with particular meanings. In this paper, we illustrate how people created their own interpretations and meanings of Internet technology despite these large-scale actions and pervasive discourses. Rather than seeing modernization discourses and larger societal changes as located outside of actual experiences and practice, we show how the meaning of technology arises at the intersection of these wider transformations and daily practice. In the following sections, we will explore in more detail how these institutional and political transformations intersect with the practices and experiences of particular socio-economic groups, urban sites and online sites.

## 2. A Changing Nation, A Changing Technology Scene

In the last decade, Internet use in China has undergone rapid transformation. The post-80s generation<sup>2</sup> experienced these changes firsthand as the popular emergence and maturation of the Internet coincided with this generation's own shift from adolescence into adulthood. One of the most noticeable changes experienced by this generation has to do with the sites of Internet access. With few exceptions, Szablewicz found that the Internet café is a nostalgic site for many post-80s generation gamers, most of whom recall a period between middle and high school when the Internet café was the prime site of game play and online activity.

In many ways, Chinese gamers' reminiscences about sneaking into the cafés when underage parallel American students' stories about sneaking into bars. For example, Feifei, a Tongji University student, recalled that she and her friends would create fake IDs so as to get around the age restriction in the Internet cafés. Bobo, a Caijing University student, recalls a police raid in a café where he and his underage friends had frequently been playing games. His friend was caught by the police and brought into the police station, where his parents were informed, while he himself "ran relatively fast" and was able to escape.

The Internet café also played an important role as a site of leisure practice outside the confines of parental control and an often stressful and monotonous educational career. Xiaozhu, a Fudan University student, for example, highlighted the extreme pressure during his time in high school, a competitive boarding school that was known for its rigorous and successful program prepping students for the college entrance exam. He and his friends would frequent Internet cafés almost daily after class:

*XiaoZhu: "Because when you are in high school studies are extremely intense, and so the school won't allow for Internet [in the dormitories], we also didn't have a television, we had nothing, just a dorm, so therefore you had to go to an Internet café...but you had to find a café that was further away...if you went to one near the school the teachers would find you..."*

For the post-80s generation, then, these shared sites of nostalgia are a form of collective identity; visits to Internet cafés played an important part in these young people's adolescence, just as Internet cafés themselves play an important role in the adolescent phase of Internet development in China. Furthermore, it stands to reason that post-80s youth who once visited cafés often have a different opinion of these spaces than would younger post-90s generation youths who grew up with Internet access available in the home and dorms. As such, reminiscences about Internet cafés serve not only to preserve the memory of a unique period of time in China's Internet development, but also to define and unite a group of Chinese youth around a common experience.

Today, perceptions of the Internet café space are changing, in part because of this shift in sites of access and in part because of the pervasive stigmatization of the Internet café as a space that fosters crime and Internet addiction. Technological infrastructure has not only spread into homes

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<sup>2</sup> In China, "post-80s" generation is a translation of the Chinese term, *baling hou*, used to refer to the only children born in the 1980s. It is a common moniker used by Chinese scholars, media and youth themselves. Among other stereotypes, this generation is described as being more consumer-oriented and technologically advanced than previous generations of Chinese.

and dormitories, but has also ventured into other spaces and spheres of urban life, often being newly built alongside wide-spread urban redevelopment. Expansive urban renewal is one of the most statistically astounding and visually arresting transformations in China. For example, prior to the Olympic Games in 2008, an estimated 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 (Chau, 2008). Since 2008, Lindtner traced the co-development of new urban spaces with the design of new technological infrastructures through a particular site, a series of up-scale entertainment clubs designed around a mixed reality game called the Killer Game.

The socio-technical arrangement of these clubs differed quite significantly from those of the Internet cafés, constituting an exclusive space for young professionals and entrepreneurs. The clubs are equipped with high-end interactive displays and sensor network technology, as such different from the Internet café that offers single PC stations for individual use. The first Killer Game club opened in Beijing in 2004, designed and built by a transnational Chinese, who had studied abroad for several years before he returned to China. In 2007, the franchise spread into other major cities in China and accumulated about 80.000 members. The clubs we visited in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou mostly attracted young professionals and entrepreneurs, who flexibly navigated China's urban hubs and regularly travelled outside China for business and studies. Many of the people new to the clubs were returning after years abroad, often from the US or the wider Pacific Rim.

In what follows, we analyze social processes that simultaneously shaped and were being shaped by these transformations of the urban and technological landscape.

### **3. Socio-technical Distinction Work**

A pervasive trend across the different urban and digital transformations we observed was that sites of Internet access and choice of leisure activity are increasingly used as indicators of social status and class. Where one plays, what one plays and who one plays with were all ways in which urban Chinese distinguished their gaming practices from other less respectable forms of play. This socio-technical “distinction work” serves as an illustration of the multiple and often disconnected technology practices. By distinction work, we refer to Amy Hanser's (2008) definition of the term “as distinctions [that] emerge in the course of social interactions” and in relation to sites that play a key role in the construction and reproduction of broader social hierarchies. Hanser largely focused on service settings and retail industry, e.g. private and state-owned department stores, and processes of consumption and production. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work, her approach of linking particular distinction making processes to larger institutional settings is applicable to our analysis of distinction making through technology practice in China. By socio-technical distinction work, then, we show how distinction making is a process that evolves at the intersection of social and technical practice and in relation to larger social and institutional changes, such as Internet regulations and Internet addiction discourse. We show how the design and layout of the technology sites we studied were not independent of these developments, but rather sites of co-constructing difference.

### 3.1 From Internet Cafés to Dormitories and Beyond

Many who once used Internet cafés on a regular basis now avoid them. Sean, Szablewicz's main guide to Internet café culture in 2004, no longer frequents such spaces. Now, he describes himself as "zhai," a "shut-in," a phrase derived from the Japanese term "Otaku" (Li, 2009). He still occasionally plays games and is a self-proclaimed Internet "addict," but he prefers to log on from the confines of his home. "Internet cafes are a place for the lower class now," he explained; they are disappearing from the city centers and the lives of upwardly mobile young Chinese.

Indeed, while Internet cafés are a shared site of nostalgia for a large percentage of the post-80s generation, some of the younger Chinese have grown up with Internet connections in their home and have never had to rely up Internet cafés for access. Rather than expressing a fond nostalgia for the places, some of these young gamers now express disapproval of them, echoing the negative attitudes of the press and state officials. One such student estimated that he had visited Internet cafés less than 14 times in his entire life, he stated: "*Sometimes I am a bit repulsed by Internet cafés because the interior is so chaotic; there are lots of people smoking, and then, inside, umm, inside there are people of so many different vocations, sometimes there are fighting incidents...they are not very safe places.*" These carefully guarded comments about "different vocations" seem to mask an implicit commentary on the working class status of many café patrons.

As a result of such attitudes and new modes of access, many young educated Chinese have begun to eschew Internet cafés in favor of shared broadband connections in their dormitories and apartments. Despite these changes in attitude towards the Internet café, digital gaming remains a pervasive social practice among urban youth. Often, gamers turn their rooms into a kind of social gaming space, not unlike an Internet café, but open only to their select group of invited friends. For example, in a college apartment a group of seven Caijing University students crowded inside a single bedroom about 70 square feet in size. In the center of the small room was a large table with five laptop computers. While the five at the table played World of Warcraft, the other two lounged on the bed, one playing a mobile gaming unit and the other playing games on his mobile phone. All described the bedroom as being more "comfortable" than the Internet café. Interestingly, they also argued that playing at home was cheaper; once one owns a computer—a luxury that many of those who still frequent Internet cafés can't afford—sharing broadband access with peers is less expensive than paying an hourly rate at a café.

### 3.2 Killer Game Clubs

The relational aspects of socio-technical distinction work become particularly evident when we look across multiple sites of technology practice. In her research on the design of new technology sites alongside urban redevelopment, Lindtner found that processes of socio-technical distinction making were also linked to the ways in which people situated themselves broadly in regards to social and economic transformations in China. For example, members of the Killer Game clubs actively distinguished themselves from the social and technological practices in the Internet cafes, but also in terms of their own status in society broadly. This was often expressed through a common rendering of status and class in China, *suzhi* (quality) (Rofel,

2007). Summer, a 27 year old freelancer, for example, described other club members as *...people of high suzhi... this game provides opportunities for you to meet people, people of a certain circle. Not everyone likes this game!*

Similarly, Jordon, club owner of the Killer Game Club in Shanghai, regards his clientele as being of a certain “level”: *For people here, they are more white collar workers or the like, or people who run their own businesses, it s not like, how should I say, not very mixed, only people of certain levels will be here to play.*

These notions of *suzhi*, people of a “certain level,” personality and profession were brought up both by club members and owners, their employees, as well as by players in the Internet cafes who knew about the Killer Game club scene. These distinctions, then, were also used to legitimize one’s belonging to the group especially in contrast to inhabitants and the spatial and technological infrastructures in the Internet café. Many of Lindtner’s informants described that visitors to the Internet cafe, even if the cafe was located just down the hall from the Killer Game club, did not belong to the same social scene:

*I think, it might be related to education also. For example, there is a wangba 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 comment illustrates, the gaming club did not only provide a shared context for people of a distinct social class to connect with one another, but also produced and reproduced socio-economic positioning within broader society. One of Lindtner’s informants, Kevin, for example, who travels regularly between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> tier cities in China and the United States for his trading business, described the linkages between his own personality, his profession and other members of the club: *The nature of the entertainment attracts certain kind of people, it matches certain personalities... like me, my personality is very cheerful, lively, including a strong thinking ability, this is in line with my profession also. That’s what attracts me most to the game, including your speech and those from others... Only when people are more or less of the same level, can they be together. If there is a gap in terms of career or education level, aeh, then it might be very... they can still play the game, but it is difficult for them to sit in the same room to play the game.*

Similar to Kevin, many of the club members worked in international corporations, had studied or worked abroad for many years. As such, they also distinguished their technology practices from those in the Internet café as being about international networking and helping build a modern and international China. 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...*



What we begin to see here, is that the clubs, their mix of computer mediated game play and face-to-face social networking, thus, became almost 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.

### 3.3 Game Distinctions

Aside from differentiating based upon the *site* of game play, many also draw distinctions based upon the *type* of game played. Many gamers were quick to offer stereotypes about what kinds of people preferred what kinds of games. One of Szablewicz's informants, Bobo, illustrated this very point. When asked if he played games other than WoW, such as Korean MMORPGs, he dismissed them, noting that they were known for their cartoonish graphics and therefore appealed largely to females. By contrast, some gamers who chose to play Chinese games remarked that they chose them in part to support the domestic games industry.

In particular, players had a great deal to say about the differences between Warcraft III and World of Warcraft. Feifei, Yuan and Lunan, all devoted Warcraft III gamers, argued that Warcraft III, an RTS game, was a game that required one to “*dong naozi*” (*use your brain*). Yuan immediately differentiated it from “Internet Games,” referring to it instead as “electronic athletics,” and comparing it to the competitive sports of the Olympics. World of Warcraft is, by contrast an MMORPG, which, in the group's opinion, was more attractive to people who wanted to create a fantasy life for themselves and achieve a *chengjiu gan* (*a sense of success*) that seemed unachievable in real life. Also, because one could play a full game of Warcraft III in the space of half an hour, the group agreed that it wasn't as time consuming as RPG games, which effectively have no end.

Yuan: *Internet Games, to tell the truth, don't have much skilled content...*

Feifei: *[interjects] You don't need to use your brain [to play them]*

Yuan: *...You just have to spend time and money and you will without a doubt be awesome [at playing the game].*

The argument, then, is that games such as Warcraft III are a challenging and perhaps even intellectual activity, whereas games such as World of Warcraft are mere fantasy play that indulges people with time and money. Indeed, electronic athletics has been a recognized form of sports competition within China since 2003, and gamers can aspire to the professional level, sometimes going on to compete for prize money in international competitions. The distinction is such that the Zhonghua Vocational School in Shanghai decided to offer an “electronic athletics” class as part of its elective curriculum in spring 2010.

Despite the distinctions made from within the game community, the government and media often fail to see the differences between these games. When Zhonghua vocational school announced its electronic athletics elective in March of 2010, the media was quick to report on the development, but much to the frustration of the school principal and students leading the class the reports confused Warcraft III with World of Warcraft. For example, one web headline proclaimed “A New Experiment: A Shanghai Vocational School Initiates a ‘World of Warcraft’ Elective.” Similarly, reports about Internet addiction frequently bemoan “Internet Games” and

their effects in general, not bothering to distinguish between the types of games with which they are concerned and the varying ways in which they are being played.

While the many different distinctions made by gamers about sites of play, game choice and social interactions within the games go largely unnoticed by the media, it is clear that such “distinction work” is an important part of identity building and meaning making for our informants. Our findings align with those of games studies scholar T.L. Taylor (2006), who noted that gamers do distinguish between different types of game play and many will go so far as to argue that certain types of “casual” games are not “real games” (pg. 171). In urban China, we might add, it is not only about the choice of game and what constitutes a “real game” but also about the contexts in which game play is situated, where the game is played and with whom.

#### 4. Politics of Game Play

We now turn to our findings on state intervention in game play. We use these findings to illustrate how game play was in part shaped by these interventions, while players also developed creative ways of circumventing game restrictions. It is important to include large-scale developments such as policy change in analyses of digital game culture, not only because it affects game play itself, but also because it highlights complex processes of technological development across multiple, intertwined sites.

In 2007, the Chinese government required the local distributor of World of Warcraft (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. The government’s insistence on changing game graphics became widely known in the public media 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<sup>3</sup>.”

Many of Lindtner’s informants commented on the narrative of harmonious society and its consequences for their game play, often rendering it as an abstract social force that they considered old-fashioned or simply irritating. For many, the change in game graphics made visible a larger political project at stake:

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.*

Xing in the second quote describes how the new game upgrade suddenly lead to changes of the game graphics - something he attributed to “the governmental project to introduce harmony.”

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<sup>3</sup> 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.

The notion of harmonious society has often been promoted in later post-Mao China, as anthropologist Aihwa Ong (1998) for example observed, as a moral force “that can serve as a source for building a new culture.” As a narrative of Chinese modernity, the notion of 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 change of game graphics constituted only one among many interventions into the online spaces of our informants. During fieldwork conducted by Lindtner in 2007, "The Burning Crusade" (TBC), an attractive expansion to WoW that introduced new features such as level cap increase and high-level in-game combat zones was released with a delay of over 6 months (in comparison to release dates in the US, Europe, Taiwan and Hong Kong for example). Players, however, not only discussed the changes of game graphics and the delay of the TBC and the motivation behind them, but often took action. Several set up their own gamer servers, for example, using pirated versions accessed through the local media-pirate industry or logging into American or Taiwanese game servers (Lindtner et al. 2008).

Szablewicz's most recent research shows that little has changed since 2007, as gamers continue to migrate to foreign servers due to disruption of service and restrictions on game play. Most recently, in 2009, a power struggle erupted between the Ministry of Culture and the General Administration of Press and Publications (GAPP), both of which claim jurisdiction over the administration of Internet Games. This dispute ultimately resulted in a disruption of the WoW servers in China, as the two organizations argued about the terms and conditions by which the local distribution of the game was to be transferred from The 9 to Netease. The debacle surrounding this shift caused a second wave of gamers to defect to other servers. It also prompted a growing online discussion about gamer rights, the most obvious example of which is the now notorious video “War of Internet Addiction.”

“War of Internet Addiction” is an hour long machinima<sup>4</sup> production that depicts WoW gamers' struggle to save their beloved game from government controls and Internet addiction “experts” who seek to destroy it. The narrative is intricate, referencing government censorship and the issues surrounding the handover from The 9 to Netease alongside other hot-button news items. The creator of the machinima, a self-proclaimed “post-80s” generation WoW player, made the film over the course of three months, with the help of over 100 WoW gamers who volunteered their time to the production. It was posted on video-sharing sites on January 21, 2010 and received millions of viewers and comments within days.

Following the release of the “War of Internet Addiction,” there was much speculation that the video would be banned. However, the video successfully harnessed what Yang (2009) has referred to as the “playfulness” of the Chinese Internet. The genius of the video lies in its

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<sup>4</sup> As defined by Jenkins (2006), “machinima refers to 3-D digital animation created in real time using game engines” (pg. 152). In the case of “War of Internet Addiction,” the creators combined scenes shot in World of Warcraft with voiceovers to create an hour-long animated film.

humorous take on many political issues, masking serious critique in Internet parody. Yet this video opens up an avenue for examining the political implications of game culture, for while it managed for the most part to elude the censors, it did capture the attention of millions of Chinese gamers, successfully harnessing their passion for Internet games and directing it against government agencies, corporations and professionals who have interfered with game play.

In one of the final speeches of the video, Kan Ni Mei, the hero of the story, addresses Yang Yongxin, one of the Internet addiction treatment specialists notorious for using shock therapy as a method to cure addiction. He states:

*Yang Yongxin, we are the generation that has grown up playing games. Over these many years people have changed and games have changed, but our love for games has not changed and the weak and disadvantaged status of the gamers within this society has also not changed...What we are addicted to is not the game, but the feeling of belonging that games have given us. We are addicted to the friends and emotions we have shared over the past four years, to the nostalgia and the hopes and dreams we have placed on this game over the last four years.*

It should be noted that “War of Internet Addiction” is not the first effort to promote “gamer rights,” though it may well be the most successful with over 10 million views in the space of one month. But “gamer rights” is also a topic of discussion on online forums and bulletin board systems. For example, a member of Shanghai-based forum KDS Life commented on a much publicized corporate battle over the hosting of World of Warcraft in China, connecting the disruption in service to larger issues of gamer rights and Internet addiction. He stated, “*Internet gamers also have rights....In reality, despite their love of Internet games, there are many gamers whose work, life, emotional wellbeing and character go unaffected by them. As such, we cannot, just because of the existence of Internet addiction, cut out Internet games altogether*” (Liu, November 11, 2009).

For these gamers concerned about gamer rights, politics is not so much about disrupting or rejecting the state as it is about asserting the legitimacy of gamer identity and the gamer’s right to play without restriction. The thousands who proclaimed support for the message of “War of Internet Addiction” did so in order to collectively acknowledge their participation in and affirmation of this virtual leisure culture. Similarly, gamers who build private servers and/or access VPNs (Virtual Private Networks) in order to log on to Taiwanese and European servers manage to subvert the authority of the state by circumventing it. While they do not necessarily seek to disrupt or overturn state policies, their actions are an indication of the creative ways gamers circumnavigate game restrictions and also of the way they forge of new identities amidst constantly shifting technology sites and Internet policy.

## **5. Networks of feeling, friendship and trust across digital and urban sites of play**

Politics aside, “War of Internet Addiction” served the purpose of illustrating the unity of Chinese gamers as a social group, confirming an overarching sense of *guishugan* (belonging) that spanned age, class, and nation, among other things. The hundreds of thousands of comments left by viewers are a telling indication of this camaraderie. Many affirmed their collective identity as a World of Warcraft gamer. Some replied in Chinese: “We/I am a World of Warcraft Gamer!”

others use English to claim their identity as “WoWers.” Still others chose to restate the climatic phrase “ju shou” or “raise one’s hands,” an expression of gamer solidarity that echoes the call made by the protagonist, Kan Ni Mei, in the final scenes of the film.

Most noticeably, the viewer comments reveal the emotional link that players share as a result of digital gaming. Some were brought to tears, while others stated that although they had long since quit playing WoW, they sympathized with the plight of the gamers and felt a connection to them. The comments had an unmistakable air of “once a gamer, always a gamer.” Many bloggers elaborated on this further, stressing the resonance of the film’s message and the connections made through the game:

Xiao Hami stated: *This is a rare and outstanding production; after viewing this [video], basically every World of Warcraft gamer can sympathize [with its message] ... in WoW everyone is equal, we can become friends with anyone, we can team up with anyone; the only thing that matters is that I like it, I can play how I want to play, I can develop as I want to develop; ...I love World of Warcraft, I love this game, and love the friends I have made in this game!*

Aether suggests that, beyond appealing to World of Warcraft gamers, the video speaks for an entire generation of Chinese youth: *Its [the video’s] voice is the voice of the same yellow-skinned, black-eyed youth, the same logic and emotions flow through our blood; we grew up in the same environment and under the same circumstances.*

Interestingly, this video also gained a following among overseas Chinese, many of whom reposted the video on YouTube and other video-sharing sites for fear that it would be banned in the PRC. Szablewicz contacted three such overseas Chinese by email, conducting online interviews with them about their decision to repost the video. Each of the three is located in a different part of the world. TheGreatestYang<sup>5</sup>, who is credited with adding English subtitles to the video and posting it on YouTube, is currently a college student at Binghamton University in the United States. He states: *I was moved by this movie. I’m Chinese, immigrated to the US years ago. Although I’ve never played on the Chinese servers [sic], I know a lot of people who do and the necessary annoyance they face every day.* And in a later email: *I just feel bad for these players in China.* Johntxq, a 28 year old overseas Chinese working in Japan said about the video: *“It reflects the innermost repressed feelings of the vast majority of Mainland gamers, its call has caused a lot of long aggrieved gamers to experience a swell of emotion, and it has brought them to tears.*

As illustrated by these passionate affirmations of the video, “War of Internet Addiction” provides a unique example of the emotional power of games and ability of games to unite young Chinese people across boundaries. But on a more mundane level, most of our informants were able to build strong and reliable friendships through gaming, enacting these relationships across a myriad of both offline and online infrastructures.

For example, Lindtner found that during long-term online interactions in World of Warcraft many players started to exchange game accounts and phone numbers as an expression of trust in each other (Lindtner et al. 2009). Tao, a 27-year-old gamer from Hangzhou explained how he

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<sup>5</sup> The author’s screen names are used, upon request, in lieu of different pseudonyms.

built strong trust and quality *guanxi* (social connection) to other players: *I have few close friends purely in the game. We have very good guanxi... 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' [online, in-game] characters...*

*Guanxi*, here referred to by Tao, is a Chinese construct of social relations and reciprocal exchange. It is an important but complex frame in which certain social practices of material and emotional exchange are understood in China. Often, *guanxi* is practiced and experienced through both the flow of material gifts (or capital-as-gift) and favors and the build-up of emotional and moral values such as trust or resentment within a network of dyadic relationships. *Guanxi* and its related socio-cultural constructs have been widely studied in anthropology, sociology, and business (see for example Anagnost 1997, Chen and Chen 2004, Gold et al. 2002, Hertz 2001, Kipnis 1996, Yang 1995). In scholarly work and public opinion, however, there are divergent interpretations of *guanxi* and its meaning for day-to-day management of social relationships and resources. Across these various interpretations, it is often understood in distinction from dominant ways of acting in society, rules and norms. Indeed, a line of scholarly research has interpreted *guanxi* as a form of “navigation around the system” (Anagnost 1997).

Like Tao, many players formed informal connections and eventually developed *guanxi*-type connections with other players. To “have good *guanxi*,” then, often meant to get support in finding ways to circumnavigate restrictions such as the release of the TBC and the change in game graphics. Many of the technical work-arounds we encountered, such as the set up of private servers, were designed by player collectives, who had built strong relationships through social networking and gift exchange around prior gaming experiences. The story of Tao and his close game friends is a telling example of how trust and quality *guanxi* were built more broadly through a mix of long-term online interaction and the exchange of “real life” data, a gaming culture made of self-disclosure and external communication, long-term collaborations, exchange of favors, and a strong sense of comradeship and shared honor. The “exchange” of accounts or virtual characters that Tao was referring to constituted a crucial aspect for many to express trust in other online players. Online games and virtual worlds like WoW or Second Life allow the creation of multiple characters. In WoW, people often share accounts and thus allow others to log on and play with each others’ virtual characters. To access each others’ characters players shared their game account ID, which was password protected and stored a player’s private data such as age, home address, and email address. Ruhong, a 22-year-old nurse, and Xiaowei, a 28-year-old employee at a distribution center, described how other players expressed trust in them through exchanging account data:

Ruohong: *A few online friends trust me to the extent that they lend their accounts to me to play.*

Xiaowei: *It took about a year... to exchange characters. We met each other while we were killing a monster. We had some conversations and felt we got along very well. We asked each other to take care of things. Like helping each other with quests.*

The ability to express trust in an online friend through means that had value beyond online transactions and interactions was crucial for the development of strong ties that strengthened *guanxi* and often provided support in challenging situations.

## 6. Discussion

A growing number of studies have challenged earlier notions of virtual identity (e.g. Turkle 1999) and bounded game spaces (e.g. Bainbridge 2007) that assumed a relatively sharp distinction between interaction in a physical environment and interaction in a virtual environment (e.g. Agre, 1999, Castronova 2005, Dibbel 2006, Malaby 2007, Miller and Slater 2000, Lin 2005, Reed et al. 2008). These efforts have moved analysis of digital gaming and Internet practice beyond simple online/offline and production/play binaries in order to trace how ideas and objects travel and cut across multiple sites and purposes. For example, Lin (2005) illustrated how online gaming in Taiwan's Net Cafes is experienced through both the virtual and physical spaces that players inhabit. Similarly, in their ethnographic study of Internet culture in Trinidad, Miller and Slater (2000) wrote of the importance of Internet-based "places of sociality." They argued: *Spaces of sociality emerge around Internet use in cybercafés and schools, with their own norms and variations based on a complex interweaving of online and offline worlds, frequently more significant in their intensification of offline rather than online relationships, or in the way they integrate the two* (p. 82). Writing on the topic of virtual communities, Phil Agre (1999) argued: *"as long as we persist in opposing so-called virtual communities to the face-to-face communities of the mythical opposite extreme, we miss the ways in which real communities of practice employ a whole ecology of media as they think together about the matters that concern them."* Building on these previous efforts, we take the mutual efficacy of the digital-physical, or the online-offline, as starting point for our analysis.

Such an approach is complimented by anthropological theory that abandons notions of a locally-bound "field" in favor of emphasizing multiple flows and sites of cultural production (Appadurai, 1996; Marcus, 1995). Issuing forth from such theoretical advances, media anthropologists have begun to track different forms of media as they shape and are shaped by local cultures (see Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002). Part of this project entails moving beyond media content to investigate the discourses, sites and practices that flow through and around technologies. For example, Brian Larkin (2002) conducted a historical study of cinema theaters in Nigeria, emphasizing the need to *"analyze the materiality of the theater itself, theorizing its significance for an anthropology of the media that situates technologies in the wider social realms in which they take on significance"* (p. 332). Our project follows along these lines, emphasizing the identity politics implicated in gamers choice of physical location, be it Internet café, dormitory, or upscale entertainment club.

A central theme that we set out to explore in this paper, then, is that Internet technology in China, rather than being a homogeneous space or bounded site distinct from wider social practice and cultural narratives, is constituent of an array of practices, social, technological, political, material and discursive, enacted across many sites of participation. We have explored this in the context of digital gaming, looking at an array of games and the urban sites where game play takes place. Our findings evidence how Chinese youth forged their own connections and meanings across sites of game play, despite the pervasive discourse of Internet addiction. At the same time, we

have also shown how particular sites of game play are used to produce and re-produce social difference. Rather than viewing Internet technology as a single space that connects across differences, we suggest paying attention to the many ways in which people integrate various technology sites into their existing social and economic life worlds, while at the same time also forging new connections and interpretations.

Our contribution lies in the merging of two areas of research: the study of participation from the interdisciplinary field of new media and game studies and the study of cultural identity from the media anthropology tradition. Each of these two research areas is treated separately below.

### **6.1 Participation**

In new media and game studies, the notion of participation was developed to counter traditional binaries of consumer and producer, creator and user (Jenkins 2006, Varnelis 2008, Ito 2009). New media ranging from games and virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life to social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter are sites that engage users through active content creation. These vary in degree, from visual practice such as the creation of an avatar or buildings in Second Life, to textual content creation or the actual modification of the software code as is the case in practices of game mods<sup>6</sup>. Jenkins et al., for example, described this through the notion of “participatory culture, [which] is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways.”

In our research, we build on this notion of participation, but stress that participation does not end with material production and goes beyond the melding of production into use. Rather, through the games people play and the various sites they traverse in doing so, they also participate in wider social processes and discourses. What is produced, then, are not only modifications or new digital media content, but new meanings and socio-cultural values in relation to broader social developments, which are evidenced in our findings on creative work-arounds to state interventions and also in the processes of socio-technical distinction making, where new identities were formed.

This is in line with Ito’s (2009) notion of genres of participation, where she links participation to “institutional structures and resilient patterns in our culture that contextualize the specific media texts in question.” The underlying motivation of this approach is to account for media’s highly distributed and contingent nature of its effects. In the context of China, we have shown that the transformation of technologies is not a single phenomenon, but a contingent process that emerges in relation to wider social and political changes and discourses, such as those surrounding Internet addiction.

By emphasizing participation, we also avoid deterministic renderings of the impacts of technology. As noted by Bolter and Grusin (1999): “New digital media are not external agents

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<sup>6</sup> Game mods (modifications) are software packages and plugins written by developers and or game players themselves to alter certain aspects of the game mechanics such as graphics, virtual equipment, character graphics. Mods are designed to modify elements of the game, to create new tools useful for game play (e.g. interface add-ons in WoW). Others transform larger chunks of game graphics or provide tactical support for larger teams in multi-player games.



that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture. They emerge from within cultural contexts” (pg. 19). Such a statement must be kept in mind when formulating a complex reading of IT development in China. As mentioned in the introduction, ICT development in China is too often portrayed in binary and deterministic ways, as either leading to social change or as being fully controlled by the state. A participatory approach to digital media recognizes technology’s transformative character while also recognizing that individual practices, discourses and cultures in turn transform technology.

## **6.2 The production of cultural identity**

Previous work in anthropology has explored media such as television and film as sites of production of cultural identity and belonging in times of increased transnational migration and mediation (e.g. Appadurai 1996, Yang 2002). Here we employ this notion to discuss the effects of digital media on identity formation across multiple sites.

State officials in China often render gaming as a site of Internet addiction and immorality in China. Though they may have different consequences within the context of Chinese culture, politics and history, these discourses of Internet addiction are not unique. Indeed, fears about the negative impact of digital media use on youth pervade public and media discourse in the United States and elsewhere. Subjects of common debate include the effects of video game violence, the dangers of online predators and access to pornography, and the impact of media multi-tasking on learning. See, for example, the recent frontline coverage of “digital nation.”<sup>7</sup> A growing body of academic literature addresses these various moral panics about the risks associated with the use of IT by children and youth (boyd, 2008; Cassell and Cramer, 2008; Jenkins, 2006; Marwick, 2008; Potter and Potter, 2001; Wall, 2008). There are similar analyses of moral panics about youth and media use in East Asia (see Golub and Lingley, 2008; Yoon, 2006).

Rather than ignoring these pervasive discourses of Internet addiction or treating them as a separate unit of analysis, we regard them as an important factor influencing the self-perception and identity formation of Chinese youth. As such, our research explores the various ways in which such discourses are variously absorbed and contested. On the one hand, increasing prejudice against Internet cafés and gamers’ increasing willingness to label themselves “addicts” indicates that such discourses do indeed affect identity and meaning making. On the other hand, our informants often contested such labels, as illustrated by the popularity of “War of Internet Addiction” and gamers’ readiness to critique government claims that Internet addiction and Internet practices are harmful for the development of a harmonious society.

This contestation of labels and battle for legitimacy in the eyes of the Chinese government and media is in many ways reflective of struggles about digital gaming within the academic community. Indeed, game studies scholars have fought for many years to prove the legitimacy of game culture, which has led to a series of studies on the serious aspects of games and approaches that challenged the notion of a single Internet user or identity such as the Internet addict. T.L. Taylor (2006), for example, suggests that the concept of “gamer” is fraught with stereotypes. She argues that gaming is often discussed in mass media outlets as highly anti-social,

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/digitalnation/view/>, last accessed April 2010

gendered, and meaningless “play.” Ian Bogost (2006), similarly, argues that games are often seen in the context of amusement and distraction and challenges assumptions that a-priori correlate games with fun or a waste of time. Mindful of these debates, we consider it crucial to acknowledge that the construction of a “gamer” identity is entangled in complex webs of social, technological and economic change in China. We have shown in this paper that the formation of new identities is a contested process shaped both by people’s practices, experiences and imaginations as well as by state discourse and pervasive media images. What constitutes “game culture” or “Internet culture” in China is not a monolithic entity, but a process shaped by many diverse actors.

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