Mixed Realities in China's Internet Cafes

Silvia Lindtner

Department of Informatics

University of California, Irvine

Irvine, CA 92697-3425, USA

lindtner@uci.edu

Bonnie Nardi

Department of Informatics

University of California, Irvine

Irvine, CA 92697-3425, USA

nardi@uci.edu

Introduction

In our recent work we have investigated playful activities in urban environments. In particular, we have examined how people transition between play and other activities such as work, tourism, and sports [6][8]. In these playful settings we found that technology gains relevance not only as an infrastructural tool to support a particular activity, but as an instance of a socio-technical system dynamically shaped by the interplay of the virtual and the physical. Whereas approaches within Ubiquitous Computing and Game Culture Studies have challenged the divide between virtual and physical game environments, e.g. [1][2][11], studies of online games within HCI tend to focus on interaction and collaboration within the virtual realm [4][5]. Little attention has been paid to the intersection of one into the other within a particular local context.

We believe that much can be learned from a perspective that looks at online game worlds as negotiated and culturally and socially embedded entities within activity outside of the game. For example, millions of people play the online role playing game World of Warcraft (WoW). The single largest group of WoW players is in the People's Republic of China[1]. The game is based on the same logic, strategies, and interaction mechanisms for American and Chinese game

---

[1] http://www.blizzard.com/press/070111.shtml

servers. However, the cultural contexts that shape understandings of the game are quite different. We propose to look at online activities in games like WoW as mixed reality phenomena that are tied to their spatial, cultural and economic contexts. By mixed reality we refer to the blending between virtual and physical, but also to the mix of social realities when people transition between different spaces like work and play. To understand how technology is incorporated into daily routines and habits we have to make sense of the mixed realities within existing technology sites.

In this paper, we reflect on the ethnographic research on World of Warcraft we conducted in Beijing and Shanghai in July and August, 2007. We describe the types of activities that took place in the game and their impacts on the culture specific renderings of the game. We also examine economic activities, governmental regulations, and cultural values that influenced social dynamics within the game.

Methodology

Over a period of 6 weeks we observed and interviewed WoW players in Internet cafes, university dormitories, and apartments in Beijing and Shanghai. We interviewed 30 people between 19 and 37 years old, 25 male and 5 female, observed their play behavior in the game and interactions at the physical game location. We conducted the interviews with translation and cultural interpretation provided by three native speakers of Chinese. Two were graduate students at Beijing University and one Chinese-American collaborator. Our findings are limited by a small sample size, but we believe they provide important preliminary data on online game play in China.

Figure 1 Internet Café at a train station.

This ethnographic inquiry is one phase in an ongoing project. Nardi has been conducting immersive ethnographic research on WoW since December 2005 [3][9][10]. Lindtner

has been studying playful interactions in work environments [6] and public urban environments [8]. We will continue to explore dynamics in playful settings and between the virtual and physical realm, with the aim to inform system design.

Findings

In what follows, we present a subset of our findings relevant to the theme of this workshop. Compared to players in the United States and Europe, who tend to play games like WoW at home, Chinese players play mostly at Internet cafes (Figure 1 and 2). [12] point out that players go to Internet cafes to access not only the Internet but also their close friends and peers. While we found similar evidence, we also observed that tight living spaces and family dynamics have impact on the decision of where people play the game. Most student dormitories in Beijing and Shanghai provide little or no private space for students. Dormitory rooms are shared by 4-8 people and fit not more than a bed for each that is simultaneously used as workspace (Figure 3). Many young professionals in Beijing and Shanghai live at home with their parents until they are married. The small living spaces as well as parental disapproval of game play render the local public play space in Internet cafes an attractive choice.

"The Burning Crusade" (TBC), an expansion to the game that introduced among other features the increase in level cap to 70 (60 before), new professions and new playable races, was released on January 16, 2007 in Europe, United States and Australia, on April 20, 2007 in Taiwan, as well as the regions of Hong Kong and Macau. In China, however, the TBC was not released until September 2007. Our informants reasoned that The9[2], distributor of WoW and other games in China, should be made responsible for the

2 http://www.the9.com/en/

delay, because of their general bad reputation in terms of server maintenance and player support. The delay of the release was hence attributed to low quality of service provided by the distributor.

However, players did not only speculate about the reason behind the delay of the release. Many of them also took action to get their grip on the TBC, which should change several dynamics in and outside of the game. For example, a strategy players pursued was to create an account on a server outside of China, e.g., a Taiwanese or American server. While others quit playing the game, some players made use of the local media-pirate industry, installed an unlicensed version of the TBC on a privately maintained server, which other players could access. Even though these "private servers" were very often unstable and did not provide the full set of features as the commercial TBC, players logged onto them to experience and practice the new game features. Some of the players we talked to had at least one additional account on a private server, which they played regularly especially during downtimes of the regular Chinese game servers.

Players quitting the game and moving to private or foreign servers also changed certain dynamics in the game. Guilds, an important social structure in the game that allow people to group together in order to achieve high-level in-game goals collaboratively, broke apart because of the decreased number of online members. Consequently, many players engaged in activities that could be successfully accomplished as a single player, like simple quests or training their characters in their specific professions such as fishing or collecting herbs. Others mentioned that they began using the game to chat and meet friends online, because they couldn't find enough people to collaborate on a bigger in-game task. Whereas some of the private servers

did not require the player to pay, others were implemented with a quite different economical system compared to the original game version. For example, players could literally buy their way into the server through membership payments that provided high-level virtual characters based on the amount a player was willing to pay:

You pay a 30RMB, 50RMB, 100RMB, or 1000 RMB membership. I went in there and my character was already at level 60. It's a rip off from the other server.

In North America, Europe and Taiwan players generally pay a monthly fee for a game account. In China players purchase hourly-based point cards that are not linked to one specific account to play the game. A point card costs about 30 Chinese Yuan Renminbi (or ~4 US$) and allows a player to be logged into the game for 66 hours. This payment system affords quite different game strategies: since the point cards are not linked to a specific player account, players trade point card IDs for in-game currency. A point card could be acquired for about 400-550 in-game gold coins at the time of our study. The value fluctuated between servers and was based on the current activities in the game. For example, during a time of high guild activity, a point card could be worth up to 600-700 gold coins. Players who sell point cards usually have less time to invest playing the game. For them, selling point cards was a mechanism to earn gold coins in the game without spending too much time in the game. One of our informants described how this could influence the value of the in-game currency:

Some players don't play the game often, and bring a lot of point cards to sell. And the economy in game will decline like during inflation times. When the game came out, one player could buy a point card for only 70 or 80 gold.

Figure 2 Inside of an Internet Café in Shanghai.

Figure 3 Work, living and sleep space in a student Dormitory

Others saved gold they acquired through the sale of point cards as preparation for the release of the TBC. Whereas some players used the point card system to buy their way into the higher levels of the game, others, who could not afford to do so or did not want to spend too much money on the game, looked at it as a cheap way of playing. Investing time in the game now affords playing the game in the future:

Silvia: Do you spend a lot of money to play the game? Informant: *No, not a lot. I didn't buy so much equipment, but rather point cards. For example, 400 gold coins for a point card. I looked at it as a free game, because I exchanged it for point cards.*

Conclusion

In this paper, we have introduced a subset of our findings of a 6 week long study of players of the online game World of Warcraft and their social environment in Beijing and Shanghai to illustrate how local structures and cultural values influence the process of adopting the technology. Local governmental regulations, family dynamics, and living standards, as well as economic infrastructures in these cities shaped dynamics in and around the game, creating a reciprocal back and forth between the game and its local context. Many in-game strategies were developed to accommodate regulations devised outside of the game or to adapt to the specific infrastructural settings such as slow Internet connections. We believe that a perspective of virtual worlds as not distinct but in dialectal relationship to the local culture's context is valuable for future technology design for ubiquitous computing and mixed reality systems.

References
[1] Barkhuus, L., Chalmers, M., Tennent, P., Hall, M., Bell, M., Sherwood, S., Brown, B. Picking Pockets on the Lawn: The Development of Tactics and Strategies in a Mobile Game, *Proc. Ubicomp 2005*, 358-374.

[2] Bell, M., Chalmers, M., Barkhuus, L., Hall, M., Sherwood, S., Tennent, P, Brown, B., Rowland, D., Benford, S., Hampshire, A., Capra, M. Interweaving Mobile Games with Everyday Life. *Proc. ACM Conf. Human Factors in Computing Systems CHI 2006*, Montreal, Canada.

[3] DiGiuseppe, N. and Nardi, B. Real Gender Choose Fantasy Characters: Class Choice in World of Warcraft, *First Monday*, April, 2007.

[4] Duchenaut, N., Yee, N., Nickell, E., Moore, R.J. Alone Together? Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games, *Proc ACM Conf. Human Factors in Computing Systems CHI 2006.*

[5] Kellogg, W.A., Ellis, J., Thomas, J.C. Towards Supple Enterprises: Learning from N64's Super Mario 64, Wii Bowling, and a Corporate Second Life, *Position Paper for the CHI 2007 workshop Supple Interfaces*, San Jose, CA.

[6] Lin, J.J., Mamykina, L., Lindtner, S., Delajoux, G., Strub, H. Fish'n'Steps: Encouraging Physical Activity with an Interactive Computer Game, Proc. Ubicomp 2006.

[7] Lindtner, S. and Chen, J. mopix: Playful Encounters with Surveillance in Everyday Urban Settings, in *Extended Abstracts of Ubicomp 2007*, Innsbruck, Austria.

[8] Lindtner, S. and Nardi, B. Venice, California and World of Warcraft: Persistence and Ephemerality in Playful Spaces, to appear in *Proceedings of HICSS 2008*.

[9] Nardi, B. and Harris, J. Strangers and Friends: Collaborative Play in World of Warcraft. *Proc. CSCW 2006.*

[10] Nardi, B., Ly, S., and Harris, J. Learning Conversations in World of Warcraft. *Proc. HICSS 2007.*

[11] Taylor, T.L. Play between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture, *MIT Press 2006.*

[12] Qiu, J. L. and Liuning, Z. Through the Prism of the Internet Café: Managing Access in Ecology of Games, *SAGE Publications 2005*, 261-297.