China's many Internets:

Participation and Digital Game Play across a Changing Technology Landscape

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1. Introduction

Internet technologies and sites of technology practice 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. Changes in access and control of online content have led to numerous debates over the social impact of Internet technology in China and the nation's image in a globalizing age. Consider for example recent events surrounding Google's announcement to discontinue the censorship of search results on their local search engine in China, Google.cn, due to sophisticated cyber-attacks that supposedly originated from within China. The announcement led to heated debates about the divergent values and ethics of Chinese and American politics. In a speech delivered at the Newseum in Washington, D.C., secretary of state Hilary Clinton, for example, referenced Google.cn to discuss China-US relations more broadly, (*e.g.* Barme, 2010, Chow 2010, Eckert and Buckley 2010, MacKinnon 2010, Martinson 2010, Segal, 2010).

What the Google.cn case illustrates so well is that the interface, content and wider social meaning of Internet technologies today are not determined by software developers and designers alone, but rather by a complex web of actors, including, but not limited to, users, corporations, state actors and policy makers. As such, it is important to acknowledge that online practice, including such things as the use of search engines or the creation and modification of digital content, is not divorced from cultural processes, e.g. social discourses and political debates. Rather than portraying the rapid changes of the IT landscape in China a single, unified process, we stress the importance of tracing "multiple Internets," the development of which are contingent upon broader cultural changes such as shifts in socio-economic class, political projects of modernization and economic reforms. Throughout this chapter, the notion of "multiple Internets" thus serves as a playful reminder that Internet technologies shape and are shaped by these diverse forms of participation, values and interests.

We ground our explorations in findings from ethnographic research on digital gaming practices in urban China conducted over the last 6 years. Our research reveals how urban youths and young professionals in China utilize digital games to position themselves amidst China's rapid economic and technological transformations. Digital games are not only inherently participatory but are also one of the most popular forms of Internet technology in China today[1], and as such they are particularly illustrative examples of relations between technological practice and social and economic change in China more broadly. Our goals in this article are twofold. First, we show how digital participation is not a priori defined by a single software application, but is a contingent process evolving in relation to wider social, economic and political developments in China. Second, we show how digital games become a means by which young Chinese engage with and express ideas about social belonging, identity and class.

Our ethnographic 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. 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. We offer insight into the digital gaming practices of young Chinese living in Shanghai, Beijing and Hangzhou. The ages of our informants ranged from 18 to 45, though the majority of them 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.

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 trace connections and

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[1] For detailed statistics see latest report of the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), China's Internet policy maker (CNNIC, 2009).

frictions between different games and urban sites of game play, the ways in which they emerged and developed across diverse material, social, and cultural practices. This emphasis on the relations and frictions between multiple sites of gaming practice—physical, digital and social—is then also tied to our analytical commitment to treating Internet technologies as deeply intertwined with other spheres of life[2].

1.1 Participation in technological and cultural production

Recent work in new media studies has employed the notion of participation to speak to the ways in which users become co-producers of our Internet technologies today. New forms of Internet and communication technologies, ranging from online games and virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft and Second Life to online networking forums such as Facebook and Twitter, allow users to engage in active modification or creation of digital content. Across these platforms, the level of participation varies; some allow users to manipulate textual content and visual interface while others require users to create virtual avatars or buildings. In the case of game mods[3], users actually modify software code, creating unscripted alterations of the program. Jenkins et al. (2006) describe digital participation as leading to a more broadly termed "participatory culture, which is emerging as… new media technologies make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and re-circulate media content in powerful new ways." Ito (2009) takes this one step further by situating media participation not just in relation to technological production, but also to cultural production and institutional processes such as the marketing and distribution of software, the production of class distinctions, and cultural discourses.

In our work, we build on these prior studies, and use the notion of participation to encompass the production of both digital artifacts and cultural meanings. In particular, we explore how digital media in China become sites of participation in changing social structures and cultural discourses of modernization. While we found that our informants engaged with Internet technology in diverse ways, their experiences were never confined to a single digital site. Rather, games and

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[2] A growing number of studies (*e.g*. Agre, 1999; Castronova, 2005; Dibbel, 2006; Hine, 2000; Malaby, 2007; Miller and Slater, 2000; Lin, 2005; Reed et al. 2008) have emphasized the importance of moving beyond simple online/offline and production/play binaries in order to trace how ideas and objects travel and cut across multiple sites and purposes.

[3] 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.

the technologies that supported them were always experienced in concert with social, economic and political processes.

By emphasizing the relation between people's participation in both technological and cultural production, we avoid deterministic renderings of the impacts of technology. As noted by Bolter and Grusin (1999): "New digital media are not external agents that come to disrupt an unsuspecting culture. They emerge from within cultural contexts" (pg. 19). Our focus on multiple Internets and media participation foregrounds this interplay between digital media practice and cultural processes, thus providing a nuanced reading of technological development in China.

2. A changing nation, a changing technology scene

In China, digital games are particularly illustrative examples of the aforementioned broader debates over the impact of technological development. 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[4] 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.

Digital media like online games, and Internet cafés where games are predominantly played, have become subjects of heated debate in ongoing re-evaluations of cultural representation. Mainstream media and government officials have, for example, portrayed places of public Internet access as dens of iniquity that foster crime and immorality. The supposedly "unhealthy" effects of excessive Internet use 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,"

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[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.

(CNNIC) and, by extension, the future of a harmonious Chinese society[5]. Various scholars have referred to this crisis over Internet addiction in China as a "moral panic" (Golub and Lingley, 2008; Qiu, 2009).

Responding to the purported negative effects of Internet games and Internet cafés the state initiated a series of interventions to control the two industries: Internet cafés have been subject to raids and mass closings, control mechanisms have been installed on café computer terminals, Internet companies have been encouraged to take a "public pledge of self-discipline" and Internet Games companies are subject to "service standards" that stress the production of "healthy" games (for details see Chen, 2008; Ernkvist and Strom, 2008; Human Rights in China, 2005; Liang & Lu, 2010; Qiu, 2009; Qiu & Zhou, 2005; Tsui, 2003; Weber & Lu, 2007).

The post-80s generation[6] experienced these changes firsthand as the popular emergence and maturation of the Internet coincided with this generation's own shift from adolescence into adulthood. However, despite increases in private access and the stigmatization and regulation of public access sites, 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[7].

In many ways, Chinese gamers' reminiscences about sneaking into the cafés 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.

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[5] 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).

[6] In China, "post-80s" generation is a translation of the Chinese term, *baling hou, 八零后*, 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.

[7] For more on the role of the Internet café as a leisure and social space for urban Chinese see for example Szablewicz (2009), Lindtner et al. (2008), Lin (2005) and Liu (2009).

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:

> *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. 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 groups of young Chinese around shared experiences.

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. Internet is now readily available in college dormitories and many young people grow up with Internet access and private computers in their homes. Technological infrastructure has also ventured into other spaces and spheres of urban life, often being newly built alongside wide-spread urban redevelopment. Since 2008, Lindtner traced the development of such a new site of urban-digital technology use, a series of up-scale entertainment clubs designed around a mixed reality game called the Killer Game (sharen youxi, 杀人游戏). The socio-technical arrangement of these clubs differs 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 Lindtner 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 the following section, we show that increases in Internet access in China did not necessarily lead to a homogeneous space of online participation that eradicated the importance of socio-economic difference. Rather, we show how young Chinese dealt with technological transformation by distinguishing between sites of online participation and modes of play.

3. Socio-technical distinction work

Alongside technological changes such as the increase in private computer ownership (CNNIC 2009) and transformations of the public sites of Internet access in China, young people's own experiences and perceptions of technology have also changed. A pervasive trend we observed across technological and social transformations over the last years 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. We describe this form of technological participation for social purposes as socio-technical "distinction work." By this, we intend to illustrate how increasing access to technology does not necessarily lead to egalitarian use across distinct social geographies. Rather participation is shaped by people's social positions and negotiations thereof. 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 links particular distinction making processes to larger institutional settings. Just as Hanser shows that consumers emphasize class difference through the choice of sites of consumption, so too do we seek to show that sites and

forms of technology practice have become markers of social and class identity. For the young people we studied, 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.

3.1 Distinct sites of game play

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 a shut-in (*zhai, 宅*) a term derived from the Japanese "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.

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 relation 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 cafés, 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). 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.*

Suzhi (素质), 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, so 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.

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 cafés who knew about the Killer Game club scene. These distinctions, then, were also used to legitimize one's belonging to the clubs 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, being a participant in 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 society.

3.2 Distinct modes of game play

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 Zhang, all devoted Warcraft III gamers, argued that Warcraft III, an RTS game, was a game that required one to *dong naozi 动脑子 (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 成就感 (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 require investments of both time and money for success.

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 national and international competitions. At such events, officials emphasize the need to separate these "healthy" electronic athletics from other addictive online games. At the 2010 Esports Champion League Competition held in Beijing, one official remarked "electronic athletics and Internet games must be strictly separated." At this same event, Szablewicz was interviewed for cameras about her views on the industry and, prior to the interview, coached to carefully avoid any mention of Internet cafés and/or Internet games in her discussion.

Despite the distinctions made by those in the gaming industry or gaming community, parents and media sources often fail to acknowledge the differences between these games. When the Shanghai Zhonghua Vocational School announced plans to offer an 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. In the case of "electronic athletics," distinction work is a necessary step in seeking legitimacy in the eyes of the government and public. These 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.

We see this again in Lindtner's findings on the Killer Game clubs, where the type of game play was used to mark social distinction. Members of the clubs highlighted that the Killer Game itself attracted a particular personality type that was linked to once ability for international networking or background in higher education. One of Lindtner's informants, Kevin, for example, who travels regularly between 1st and 2nd 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...*

With their mix of computer mediated game play and face-to-face social networking, Killer Game clubs 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. Participating in the clubs then did not only entail to know how to play the

Killer Game, but also how to position oneself within the new cultural climate of international networking, transnational business relations and/or education.

4. Political and cultural discourse

The socio-technical distinctions made by Internet gamers, those within the electronic sports industry, and those who frequent Killer Game clubs are particularly important in light of the government's concerted effort to control and eradicate "unhealthy" games. In recent years, the popular American online game World of Warcraft (WoW) has become the target of much negative media and government attention, as officials seek to control and restrict what is deemed to be its inappropriate content. In this section, we show that young World of Warcraft gamers exhibit multiple scales of participation through both their technology practice and their engagements with the broader political and social environment that surrounds their technology use. Specifically, we illustrate how said gamers find new ways to creatively navigate game restrictions and respond to dominant discourses about Internet addiction.

4.1 Engagement with local politics

While technological experience was in part shaped by the aforementioned interventions, we found that Chinese youths developed numerous ways of circumventing game restrictions of local software. For example, in 2007, the Chinese government required the local distributor of World of Warcraft 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 was widely disseminated in the local 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[8]." 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：

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[8] 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.

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 led to changes of the game graphics - something he attributed to "the governmental project to introduce harmony." 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.

Aside from switching servers, World of Warcraft gamers have also found creative ways of responding to negative government and media representations and participating in political discourse. "War of Internet Addiction" is an hour long machinima[9] production that depicts WoW gamers' struggle to save their beloved game from government controls and Internet

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[9] 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.

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 humorous take on many political issues, masking serious critique in Internet parody. Yet 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:

> *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 (see Lindtner et al. 2008 and 2009 for more details). While they do not necessarily seek to disrupt or overturn state policies, their actions are an indication of the creative ways gamers overcome game restrictions and forge new identities amidst constantly shifting technology sites and Internet policy.

4.2 Translocal engagements and identities

Aside from illustrating the engagements of gamers in broader political and social discourse, gamer reactions to the video "War of Internet Addiction" also reveal the feelings of unity among the players; there was an overarching sense of *guishugan,* 归属感 (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. Blogger 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;…I love World of Warcraft, I love this game, and love the friends I have made in this game!*

Another blogger, 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.*

The video also gained a following among overseas Chinese, many of whom reposted it on YouTube and other video-sharing sites for fear that it would be banned in China. Szablewicz contacted three such overseas Chinese by email and conducted online interviews with them about their decision to repost the video. Each of the three is located in a different part of the world, one in Japan, one in England and one in the United States. TheGreatestYang[10], who is credited with adding English subtitles to the video and posting it on YouTube, attends college in New York state. 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… 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. As such, an important part of understanding the multiple aspects of digital media participation in China is to recognize online spaces as sites where new ideas of self-hood and solidarity emerge, sites which are notably not bound by a single technology or the geography of the nation state.

5. Discussion

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[10] Screen names are used at the request of the informant.

Through the games young people in China play and the various sites, both urban and digital, they traverse in so doing, they also participate in wider social processes and discourses. In this chapter, we show that what is produced through digital media participation are not only the production or modification of digital content, but new meanings and socio-cultural values in relation to broader social developments. The creative ways in which gamers circumnavigate and respond to restrictions and the complex nature of socio-technical distinction work, through which new identities and social markers of difference are produced, serve as evidence of these various participatory processes. This is in line with Ito's (2009) notion of genres of participation, which she links to "institutional structures and resilient patterns in our culture that contextualize the specific media texts in question (pg. 13)."

The underlying motivation of this approach is to account for the highly distributed and contingent nature of media and its effects. As Ito (2009) puts it, "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." In the context of China, we have shown that the transformation of technologies is not a single phenomenon bounded by the geography of the nation state. Rather, technological change and people's experience of it emerges in relation to wider social and political changes and discourses, such as those surrounding Internet addiction and the harmonious society.

Such an approach is complimented by anthropological theory that recognizes media as sites of cultural production and identity formation (Appadurai, 1996; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod & Larkin, 2002). Such media anthropologists have begun to track different forms of media participation as it shapes and is shaped by local cultures. 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). This chapter follows along these lines, emphasizing the identity politics implicated in gamers' choice of physical location, be it Internet café, dormitory, or upscale entertainment club.

In writing an ethnography of the "social life of technology," Larkin goes on to note that cinema theaters in Nigera are entangled in larger discourses related to modernity, civilization and colonialism. The case of Internet cafés and digital gaming is no different. In the Chinese context, pervasive modernization discourses, ranging from efforts to promote a "harmonious society" to efforts to combat "Internet addiction," both shape and are shaped by technology practice. As such, our research explores the various ways in which such discourses are 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, 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. Gamer identity is not simply shaped by the digital software one participates in, but rather emerges at the intersection of technological practice and participation in wider cultural discourses and debates, like the one in Internet addiction. We have shown in this chapter that the formation of identity is a contested process shaped both by people's practices, experiences and imaginations as well as by state discourse and pervasive media images. Game culture" or "Internet culture" in China is not a monolithic entity, but an

ever-changing conglomeration of participatory practices and identifications shaped by many diverse actors.

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