From Addicts to Athletes: participation in the discursive construction of digital games in urban China

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Abstract

Based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Shanghai and Beijing, China, this paper analyzes different applications of the Chinese terms *wangluo youxi* (literally defined as 'internet games') *danji youxi* (literally defined as 'single computer games') and *dianzi jingji* (literally defined as 'electronic sports') in order to unearth cultural assumptions and contradictions about different types of game play and their varied motivations and effects. By problematizing the manner in which gamers, the media and the government employed the terms *wangluo youxi*, *danji youxi*, and *dianzi jingji*, the author reveals the processes by which different types of gamers are alternately constructed as 'addicts' and 'athletes', and the links between such constructions and larger cultural discourses on Chinese nationalism, 'spiritual civilization' and neoliberal ideals.

Keywords

internet games; pc games; e-sports; china; internet addiction.

In *Play Between Worlds* (2006) T.L. Taylor noted that she was interested in "gaps or boundary work in that such locations can be the place in which different definitions become problematized or previously hidden practices are accounted for" (p. 10). Among other things, Taylor's fieldwork addressed gaps such as those between "power gamers" and others, noting that gamers do indeed make strong distinctions between different types of game play, with some power gamers going so far as to suggest that some 'casual games" are not "real games" (p. 171).

Similarly, a colleague and I have discussed the manner in which Chinese gamers' efforts to respond to the dominant discourse of 'internet addiction' have led them to make distinctions between different kinds of games and different locations of play (Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2011). This type of boundary work can also be cast as a form of participation, a process whereby gamers actively contribute to the construction of a game's social meaning and engage with dominant cultural discourses in seeking to explain and justify their gaming practices. This usage of the term participation aligns most closely with that of Ito (2009), who makes an effort to link participation "to institutional structures and resilient patterns in our culture that contextualize the specific media texts in question" (p. 13). In other words, participation here is conceived broadly, as being the product of a complex web of individual actors, discourses and institutions that shape the meaning and use of technology.

In the instance to be discussed herein, I will analyze different applications of the Chinese terms *wangluo youxi* (literally defined as 'internet games') *danji youxi* (literally defined as 'single computer games') and *dianzi jingji* (literally defined as 'electronic sports') in order to unearth cultural assumptions and contradictions about different types of game play and their varied motivations and effects. By problematizing the manner in which these students and professionals employed the terms *wangluo youxi*, *danji youxi*, and *dianzi jingji*, I will reveal the processes by which different types of gamers are alternately constructed as 'addicts' and 'athletes', and the links between such constructions and larger cultural discourses of Chinese nationalism, 'spiritual civilization' and neoliberal ideals.

In order to avoid confusion with English terms and associated cultural assumptions about what they mean, I will throughout the course of this paper employ the Chinese romanization of the terms as used above. Specifically, data is drawn from a year of observation and semi-structured interviews with over fifty gamers and games industry professionals in the Shanghai and Beijing areas. As it is impossible to include all of these voices in one paper, the following focuses upon my discussions with 6 self-proclaimed *danji* gamers, 5 professional *dianzi jingji* athletes, and a small number of *dianzi jingji* industry professionals. Though my fieldwork also included many interviews with and observations of professed '*wangluo* gamers', their testimony is largely omitted from this paper, and remains the subject for another discussion.

Situational analysis

When I first embarked upon this line of research, I often summarized my work by stating that I was studying 'internet games' (*wangluo youxi*) in China. As with most attempts to briefly encapsulate one's research topic, this was, of course, a gross oversimplification. Yet the description was accurate insofar as the research did not focus on any one *wangluo* game but rather a variety of them. Many people, especially those who were avid gamers themselves, were surprised and concerned by this fact, noting that each game has its own cultural practices, rules, and social norms. This is certainly true, but the choice to focus on such a broad category and cut across a number of different games was in fact a conscious one born of my desire to study the diversity of practices and meanings permeating the physical spaces where play took place. In such a situation it would be impossible to study one game and not another, as many different types of games were played in the internet cafés, dormitories and apartments that would serve as my field sites.

This decidedly broad research topic was designed using a methodology known as "situational analysis" (Clarke, 2005). Clarke explains, "Situational analysis allows researchers to draw together studies of discourse and agency, action and structure, image, text and context, history and the present moment—to analyze complex situations of inquiry broadly conceived" (xxii). Like Taylor's (2006) emphasis on "boundary work," such an expansive compilation of data permits what Clarke refers to as "incisive studies of differences of perspective" that "push grounded theory around the postmodern turn" by emphasizing positionality and situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991).

Given this methodological orientation, it is important to note that although *wangluo* games occupy a central position in this paper, the goal here is not to explain life within these games as much it is to explore the social relations, imaginaries and discourses that flow through and around them. How are *wangluo* games and the people who play them constructed from various perspectives within urban China? Contrary to technologically determinist arguments that cast technology as an agent of social and cultural change, this perspective emphasizes the social and cultural forces at work in shaping our relationship to and understanding of technology. Put in Clarke's terminology, *wangluo* games are the "nonhuman actants" in my situation, the material things that, like a clay-ball, are molded and shaped and then remolded by the various government policies, media discourses, and participatory practices of those who engage with and seek to define them.

Internet games: what's in a name?

What I did not bargain for is the fact that many of the young gamers I encountered in the cafés, dormitories and apartments I intended to study would deny that they played *wangluo* games at all. As one might imagine, the response initially left me dumfounded. In one case I vividly remember, a Tongji University student, Xiaomei, made this point after I had already spoken with her about the many years she had spent playing games in internet cafés (*wangba*) with her friends[1]. I felt as though I was missing something. If she wasn't playing *wangluo* games in the *wangba*, what was she playing?

As I soon discovered, the young gamers who played *Warcraft III* or *Counterstrike* were themselves engaging in acts of boundary work. Rather than calling the games they played *wangluo* games the young gamers insisted that the games they played were *danji* games. The literal translation of *danji* is 'single computer' or 'single device', but as defined on the Chinese wiki Baidu baike:

> *Danji youxi* (console games) refer to electronic games that operate independently through a single computer or other gaming platform. As opposed to internet games, these games do not need a specific server in order to operate normally, some of these games also allow for multiplayer competition through the use of a local area network. On a single unit, console games can operate in hotseat or split screen mode[2]. The game can be played on a single computer without the use of the internet, mostly in man vs. machine battle mode. Because it cannot connect to the internet, the game's interactivity is slightly worse, but with the use of a local area network it is possible to conduct multiplayer battles, and the game does not need a specific server to operate normally[3].

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[1] *Wangba* is the Chinese term for Internet café, literally meaning 'Net Bar'. In many ways, net bar is a more accurate translation, as it connotes a semi-illicit leisure space. While alcohol is not served in most *wangba*, age restrictions do prevent minors from entering. Many newspapers have also compared the Internet and games to drugs, going so far as to call *wangba* "opium dens." For more on this see Szablewicz (2004 and 2010).

[2] Hotseat or split screen modes are different forms of what is known as "local multiplayer" game play, whereby two players make use of the same screen and keyboard to play against one another.

[3] Here, I would like to suggest that "console game" is not actually the correct English translation of *danji*, as in English a console game often connotes a non-PC game that operates through an independent unit such as Xbox or Playstation. In another online Chinese-English dictionary (www.nciku.com), *danji* is defined as "a computer not linked to the Internet." As such, I believe the accurate English translation of *danji youxi* should be "PC Game."

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Historically speaking it makes sense that games such as *Warcraft III* and *Counterstrike* would be referred to as *danji* games because they were initially designed so that they could be played on a single computer without the use of an internet connection. But the term 'single computer' is also inaccurate, because rarely are such games actually played in a single computer scenario. In fact, throughout my time in China, every self-proclaimed *danji* gamer I met played *danji* games almost exclusively in a multiplayer scenario with friends. One Caijing University student, Xiaolong, went so far as to state, "*Danji* games are not interesting unless you have lots of people. Unless you have [at least] two people to play a *danji* game it is boring." What is more, these gamers did not play on the same computer (what is referred to above as hot seat or split screen gaming) but rather through multiple computers that were linked.

As many know, when not using the internet, computers can also be linked through the use of a Local Area Network (LAN). Playing LAN games in internet cafés was once an important aspect of many young people's coming of age in urban China. Many of the students I encountered, who came of age in the late 1990s and early 2000s, spoke nostalgically about days (and nights) spent in the café with friends. For these students, the internet café offered a much needed and affordable escape from stifling home and school environments, where pressure to excel in academic studies left little time for extracurricular activities. Students related many stories of instances in which they would '*fanqiang*' or sneak out of their school compounds in order to play in the cafés. Li explained that when he was in middle school he had to go to an internet café in order to play *danji* games with friends. He states:

> It is one thing to have a computer [at home], but if you are at home alone playing against the computer it is boring, it is only interesting if you are playing with classmates, this is why there are so many people in the internet café … in high school the dormitories didn't have computers, of course I could play at home. .but if you are playing *danji* games you can't play if each person is at his/her home, you have to go to an internet café…

Like Xiaolong, Fudan University student Li reiterates the concept that *danji* games must be played in groups to be fun. And because few households in China would have had either laptops or more than one computer in the 1990s and early 2000s, the internet café became one of the few spaces where young people could play their games together. Indeed, these observations align with my findings from preliminary fieldwork conducted in Harbin in 2002. At that time, one of the most popular internet café activities was Counterstrike, an FPS game played through a LAN. This also remained true in 2004, when I studied internet cafés in

Shanghai and noted that Counterstrike was the "quintessential *wangba* activity." The popularity of LAN gaming in the internet cafés helps to explain how someone like Xiaomei could claim she spent a great deal of time playing games in the internet café but argue that the games she played were not 'internet games'.

Yet another East China Normal University student recalled sneaking LAN games after hours in the computer classroom at his high school:

> When we were in our second year of high school, we took that class, Computer Science. When we were in class we could download CS, once we downloaded it then all the computers in the room could play the game together. During class the teacher saw that we were playing, and so he immediately disconnected the network cable, but later, because there was a LAN and the game was on the computers' hard drives … you just couldn't play during usual times, but if you went on Friday afternoon or Saturday, you could connect the LAN and play together or you could play *danji* (on a single computer).

Here, the student explains the process by which a game, such as *Counterstrike*, could be downloaded from the internet and placed on a computer's hard drive. His description also unknowingly illuminates the semantic inaccuracies in calling multiplayer LAN games '*danji*' as he notes that the game, once downloaded to the school computers' hard drives, can either be played through a LAN or in a single computer (*danji*) mode.

But while many recall a time when games such as *Warcraft* and *Counterstrike* were played using LAN connections, it has since become possible to play such games by connecting through online servers. For example, in 2002, when *Warcraft III* was released in the United States, the game had built-in online capabilities and could be played through Blizzard's official online server, *Battle.net*. In China, a number of similar companies offer online 'battle' platforms. By the time I conducted my fieldwork in 2010, most of the *Warcraft III* players I spoke with connected through one of two domestic servers: *Haofang* (www.cga.com.cn), established September 2002, or VS (www.vsa.com.cn), established September 2004[4]. The advent of these online servers also precluded the need for a physical gathering space, such as an internet café.

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[4] Battle.net did not become available in China until 2008, when Blizzard partnered with Netease to bring the platform to the Chinese market. Prior to this, Blizzard sold publishing rights to Chinese company Aomei Soft. But while Aomei owned official publishing rights, many gamers in China played with pirated copies of the game and chose to play through sites such as Haofang and VS. In 2006, Aomei sued Shanda games, the company that held the controlling share of Haofang, over copyright infringement but lost the case in Chinese court.

Many of the students now played via the internet from their college dormitories while internet cafés were increasingly associated with *wangluo* games. As such, it is clear that, at least since the early 2000s, even *danji* gamers are able play their games through the internet (and most now do).

Conflating technology and genre

So, how should one describe a game that is not a 'single pc' or 'single player' game but which is also not fully reliant on the internet? In English, the term 'online' addresses this very dilemma. Consider the following two scholarly definitions of online games. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004) argue that online games are defined by four traits: immediate but narrow interactivity, manipulation of information, automated complex systems and networked communication. Noticeably, the word internet is not mentioned in the criteria, thus allowing for the inclusion of games played over other kinds of networks, such as LAN games. And as noted by Adams and Rollings (2010) "online gaming is a technology rather than a genre." In other words, any genre of game, RTS, RPG, FPS, etc., can be 'online' if the proper technology is in place. According to them, 'online game' is used:

> to refer to the multiplayer distributed games in which players' machines are connected by a network. (This as opposed to multiplayer local games in which all the players play on one machine and look at the same screen.) While online games can, in principle, include solitaire games that happen to be provided via the internet, such as Bejeweled, the online aspect of solitaire games is incidental rather than essential to the experience. Online games do not need to be distributed over the internet; games played over a local area network (LAN) also qualify as online games (p. 591).

Aside from allowing for games that are not played over the internet, both of these definitions place an emphasis on networked sociality. This would seem to apply perfectly to the gaming style of the *danji* gamers I interviewed, who all stressed the need to play these games with friends.

Yet in Chinese, the term 'online' (*zaixian*) is rarely used in this way. Instead, the precise kind of confusion that Adams and Rollings warn against has occurred: technology has been conflated with genre. Indeed, when I asked many of the young people who played *danji* games to define a *wangluo* game, they would often respond by giving me examples of types of games rather than a technical definition of one. In general, the games that were served up as examples

7

of *wangluo* games were Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* or the Chinese game, *Fantasy Westward Journey*. My research assistant Liang, who studied and played games for a living, even went so far as to argue that only those who played MMORPGs qualified as 'real' *wangluo* gamers[5].

The question was, why was this happening and why were the self-proclaimed *danji* gamers so adamant that I not confuse their style of gaming with *wangluo* games? As I will show, the crux of the matter was this: *danji youxi* and *wangluo youxi* were being separated on the basis of qualitative differences rather than quantitative ones; it was not the fact that they were played on the internet or on the PC that separated them (as the literal translation of the terms *wangluo* and *danji* would suggest) but rather a number of judgments about the kind of social interaction, competition, skills, and time/monetary investment that these different game genres were presumed to entail. What is more, I came to understand that the *danji* gamers' insistence on separating their style of gaming from that of *wangluo* gamers was in fact in line with a government led mission to keep the two separate. To both the government and the students I spoke with, *danji* games were simply described as being better than *wangluo* games. Better how? Better in the sense that *wangluo* games were considered 'addictive', while *danji* games were understood to be 'athletic'.

From addicts to athletes

In previous work, I have discussed the nature of China's growing moral panic about internet addiction and internet (*wangluo*) games (Szablewicz, 2010). My findings have shown that internet cafés, now strongly associated with *wangluo* games rather than *danji* games, are commonly portrayed as the breeding ground of internet addiction, with *wangluo* games being cast as the source. Newspaper articles portray the lengths that parents go to in order to rescue their children from such cafés, including wrestling children to the ground and stabbing themselves in order to elicit a reaction from their otherwise nonresponsive video-game addict teens. Stories about teens dropping dead after sitting in front of a computer for 72 hours straight or falling asleep on train tracks after an all night gaming session abound. In 2009, there were

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[5] There were instances when other genres of games would sneak in to the *wangluo* category. For example, Xiaolong enjoyed playing a game called *Paopao Kadingche* (sometimes translated in English as *Crazyracing Kartrider*), a cartoonish racing game in which players drive a go kart and race against one another. Another couple of gamers enjoyed playing a dance competition game, in which players controlled their avatars' dance moves and competed in 'dance-offs'. But these types of games, while begrudgingly included in the *wangluo* category, were the rare exception; almost all the gamers I spoke to associated *wangluo* with MMORPGs.

over 7,000 mentions of the term internet addiction (*wangyin*) in the Chinese press, trumping other forms of addiction such as drug addiction (*duyin*, over 4,000 mentions) and alcoholism (*jiujing zhongdu*, over 2,000 mentions) by the thousands.

But while *wangluo* games have caused a great deal of hysteria, another kind of gaming, *dianzi jingji* (E-Sports) has been the subject of much official fanfare. In 2003, the Chinese government declared that E-Sports was China's 99th professional competitive sport. Since that time, there have been numerous efforts to legitimize *dianzi jinji* and call attention to it as a source of national pride. For example, in 2008, Chinese professional gamer Sky carried the Olympic Torch through Hainan as it made its way to Beijing, and in 2010, a German-Chinese 'friendship' match took place at the Shanghai World Expo.

E-sports is not a new term and in recent years it has garnered increasing attention from western games scholars (e.g. Hunh, 2008; Hutchins, 2008; Jonasson and Thiborg, 2010; Lowood, *n.d.*; Rambusch, Jakobsson & Pargman, 2007; Taylor, forthcoming). Broadly speaking, E-Sports involves a number of different game genres including first person shooters, sports games, racing games, action games and real time strategy games. These games are played competitively, either one-on-one or in small teams. Importantly, games usually gain acceptance as 'E-Sports' once they have been selected for official inclusion in an international E-Sports competition such as the World Cyber Games or (WCG) (Hutchins, 2008).

But in China, I quickly perceived that *dianzi jingji*, aside from being promoted as a professional competitive sport in its own right, was also being positioned as an alternative to *wangluo* games. This constructed dichotomy between healthy *dianzi jingji* and harmful *wangluo youxi* was made most clear when I attended a government-sponsored E-Sports competition in the spring of 2010. At the Esports Champion League (ECL) tournament held in Beijing, an official opened the competition and declared in his speech that, "*dianzi jingji* is a sport, it must be strictly separated from *wangluo* games." At this same event, I was interviewed for cameras about my views on the industry. Prior to the interview a young ECL employee rehearsed a few questions with me. He asked me about my research and I noted that I had observed many young people playing both *wangluo* games and *dianzi jingji* in the *wangba* (internet cafés). When I mentioned the terms *wangluo* and *wangba* it was as though an alarm had sounded. The young man took me aside and carefully coached me to avoid any mention of *wangluo* games or *wangba* when speaking in front of the cameras.

These kinds of examples abound, so much so that it is difficult to find examples of official rhetoric where *dianzi jingji* is not positioned in contrast to *wangluo youxi*. In an article published by the *Global Times*, Zhao Li, who works for the center of sports administration in China, expounded upon the difference between the two:

> E-sports is very different from online gaming, but people always tend to see them as the same thing. The great competitiveness which requires sophisticated strategies and quick reactions within a certain period of time makes e-sports worth watching just like other sports events, but online gaming is only self-indulgent and time consuming.

Interestingly, while the students I spoke to differentiated between *danji* games and *wangluo* games, the officials made a point of separating *dianzi jingji* from *wangluo* games. And when pressed for elaboration, almost all of the *danji* gamers I spoke to made the same leap. For example, Tongji University student Yuanqi, after differentiating between *danji* games and *wangluo* games, went one step further:

> This game is a *World Cyber Games* competition game, many people mistake it for an internet game, but strictly speaking this game should not be considered an internet game, it should be an E-Sports real time strategy game, it is just like the Olympic competition.

What makes the *wangluo* game so bad?

In general, gamers described the difference between *danji* and *wangluo* games as hinging upon three main points: investment of time/money, skill, and individual competition versus groop cooperation. Not surprisingly, the use of the internet and multi-player capability were not considered important or distinguishing criteria.

To begin, many of the *danji* gamers considered *wangluo* games to be a waste of time and money, a black hole of temptation for 'internet addicts' who had no self-control. Many MMORPG games such as *World of Warcraft* charge an hourly rate of 4 mao (40 cents) an hour. Other *wangluo* games were 'free to play' but required one to purchase items in the game in order to achieve any sort of success. Some of the 'free-to-play' games were purportedly so bad that money completely trumped skill. In other words, a relative newbie could win a PK against a

longtime player if he or she was willing to invest enough money in virtual equipment [6]. Alternatively, those with money could purchase a pre-leveled avatar so as to skip the less exciting and more time-consuming work of playing through the different levels. Rather than working their way up, these gamers began at the top. This has led many *wangluo* gamers to complain about those *renminbi wanjia* or RMB gamers, who only win by spending RMB (Chinese currency) in the game. Unlike these *wangluo* games, *danji* games were relatively inexpensive to play. In fact, for most Chinese gamers, who play with pirated copies of the game, they were entirely free. What is more, in games such as Warcraft III and Counterstrike, there were no virtual items to be bought. Every gamer started on a level playing field and had to build up his/her strength throughout the game.

Connected to the issue of money is the issue of time investment. Those MMORPG gamers that could not afford to buy a pre-leveled avatar or expensive virtual items had to invest a great deal of time into the practice of 'leveling-up'. And, even once the highest level was achieved, the *wangluo* game did not end. This 'never-ending game' scenario is one of the features of MMORPGs most commonly associated with internet addiction (see, for example, Lee, Yu & Lin, 2007 and Shaw, *Why World of Warcraft*). By contrast, Tongji students Xiaomei, Yuanqi and Wanghui explained that the structure of real time strategy games keeps gamers from being 'addicted' because games have a concrete end point. Where fantasy role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* go on forever, the average RTS game comes to a conclusion in under 30 minutes. Of course, there is nothing to stop RTS gamers from playing multiple games in one sitting, a kind of 'change smoking' style of play. Indeed, I observed many such *danji* gamers do this very thing.

As the links between the 'never-ending' game and discussions of internet addiction suggest, the issue with *wangluo* games and those who played them came down to one of self-control. The first time I spoke with Xiaomei, she told me that she, Yuanqi and Wanghui had recently quit playing the *danji* game *Warcraft III* in order to study for graduate entrance exams. The notion that games, whether they be *danji* or *wangluo*, took a back seat to 'real life' was an important one for many of the students I spoke with and they used this as one of the criteria by which they separated themselves from game *wangluo* game 'addicts'.

The gamers also differentiated between *dianzi jingji* which was all about skilled individual competition and *wangluo youxi* which promoted relatively unskilled 'group

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[6] PK or 'player kill' refers to an instance in which one player's avatar kills another player's avatar. Often, gamers will challenge each other to battles to prove whose avatar is stronger.

cooperation'. When the *danji* gamers spent hours playing *Warcraft* or *Counterstrike*, they perceived this as being acceptable, because, from their perspective they were using strategy and skill. Indeed, much like chess, *danji* gamers would often watch replays of professional *dianzi jingji* matches in order to study the strategies used by professional players. At night when chatting over the instant messaging service QQ, Yuanqi and Wanghui would occasionally share links to replay videos so that they could 'study' the strategies. What is more, following matches, Yuanqi, Wanghui and Xiaomei often had discussions where they would analyze the different moves made in the game.

In some cases, these kinds of study skills extended to other kinds of game play. Wanghui took the study of games seriously. Xiaomei and Yuanqi joked that Wanghui had once stayed up all night to chart out the best possible times to harvest vegetables in the game Farmville, an online social networking game where gamers cultivated a farm and could steal vegetables from other farms. And, when I had the opportunity to introduce Wanghui to a professional *dianzi jingji* gamer, I was not incredibly surprised to learn that he had prepared a list of targeted questions for the pro. Though Wanghui himself noted that he did not aspire to become a professional *dianzi jingji* athlete, he did aspire to success in general, and the pro gamer was an example of an individual who was highly successful not only in the game, but also in real life.

By contrast, *wangluo* games were portrayed as requiring little skill. *Danji* gamers would allow that *wangluo* games did have a certain learning curve, but they would argue that once a basic skill set was acquired no further strategy or study was needed. What is more, while *danji* gamers were all about competition against their peers, *wangluo* games were about cooperation with groups (guilds) to defeat the computer. When combined with the fantasy 'role-playing' component, all of these factors contributed to *danji* gamer's characterization of *wangluo* games as nothing more than immersive escapist fantasies for people who were dissatisfied with real life and could only achieve of sense of 'satisfaction' or 'success' in a relatively unchallenging game. To these students, *Wangluo* games were a quick fix, an addictive drug, while *danji* games were all about skill and competition, about sports.

Between patriotic professionalism and patriotic leisure

The distinction between addict and athlete masks an age-old issue concerning the relation between leisure culture and responsible citizenship. In his recent publication, leisure scholar Chris Rojek (2010) critiques the conflation of 'freedom' and 'leisure', noting that we are

never really 'free' to do what we like with our 'free time'. In establishing his argument, he cites the influential scholarship of E.P. Thompson, Marxist historian and theorist of the British working class. Thompson (1967) wrote of the manner in which the rise of industrial society brought with it the 'problem of leisure' and how 'free' time should be spent. Rojek summarizes Thompson's argument, noting that, in the context of the industrial capitalist system, workers could:

> spend their free time in whatever fashion they selected, so long as their non-work activities reinforce their competence as credible consumers and reliable workers… This is a very strange idea of 'freedom' and comes with an even more peculiar idea of what 'leisure' means. In effect, 'free' choice and non work activity is held to be inter-laced with principles of fitness-to-work and responsible citizenship (p. 2).

To summarize, acceptable 'leisure' is the kind which reinforces one's standing as an 'ideal citizen' where unacceptable leisure interferes with 'real life' or at least what respectable society considers to be real life's 'priorities', i.e., becoming a productive citizen.

But presumably the definition of 'responsible citizenship' varies depending on factors related to culture and political system. To that end, we might say that the Chinese notion of the responsible citizen revolves around the cultivation of what the CCP calls *suzhi* (quality) and *shehui zhuyi jingshen wenming* (socialist spiritual civilization). Numerous scholars trace the rise of *suzhi* discourse to survey findings in the late 1980s that blamed the poverty of rural areas on the low *suzhi* of the population. And, as explained by Ann Anagnost (1997), aside from revealing Chinese insecurities about appearing 'modern' and 'Western' in the eyes of the global community, the slogan "Socialist spiritual civilization" has also been widely used to encourage certain social and cultural activities while stigmatizing others.

Though the discourse surrounding *suzhi* and and spiritual civilization emerged in 1980s, the emphasis on cultivating the ideal citizen is not new. As noted by Lucy Xing Lu (2004), despite political and ideological changes, a focus on individual morality persisted from Confucian times through the Maoist era and on. Lu states, "Confucius and Mao seemed to find agreement in the notion that a perfect society requires the perfection of its people" (p. 47). Of course, over time, there have been noticeable shifts in what defines the morally upstanding, civilized and/or 'high quality' citizen. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, the Confucian notion of the moral 'gentleman' was replaced by the notion of the 'model worker', exemplified by the martyr Lei Feng. Lei Feng became a martyr because he was willing to

sacrifice all, even his life, for the good of the nation. Lisa Hoffman (2010) notes that "The acquisition of skills in the Maoist era was 'for the improved performance of the organization or the fulfillment of political objectives of the central or local party leaders…(p. 88).

The question becomes, what kind of attributes are necessary to become a high 'quality' and 'spiritually civilized' citizen in the context of the contemporary Chinese state? Hoffman (2010) describes how the notion of the 'model worker' has, in the post-Mao years, been replaced by the concept of the 'patriotic professional'. Hoffman, rather than suggesting that either a neoliberal or socialist ethos prevails in China, shows the complex ways in which these different orientations combine under the umbrella of the 'post-socialist' Chinese state. In comparison to the Maoist era, in which individual interest was sacrificed for the interest of the state and all skill-building was couched in collective terms under the guise of improving the nation, in contemporary China there is an increasing emphasis placed upon the development and training of the individual, both for oneself and the nation. Hoffman notes:

> The notion of developing and training the self through work was not alien to China's socialist path, but the kind of self-development, career advancement, and family prosperity sought by the young and aspiring professionals I met was distinctly different from that of the Maoist era… Similar to—although not the same as—prevailing rationalities in U.S. and British neoliberal regimes that encouraged people to 'enterprise themselves', these reforms governed in a more distanced way, requiring the formation of subjects who were both autonomous and responsible (p. 89).

Simply put, the emphasis has shifted from centrally directed 'self-sacrifice' for the nation, to autonomously choosing 'self-development' for the nation. At the same time, Hoffman explains that the Chinese state has taken an active role in 'conditioning autonomy', shaping the choices, goals and ideals of the young generation through campaigns that promote a 'harmonious society' or 'socialist spiritual civilization'. This results in a generation of young people who simultaneously speak the language of individual choice and act in the interest of the nation, a fusion of both neoliberal and socialist ideologies.

As the above discussion of healthy *dianzi jingji* and unhealthy *wangluo youxi* illustrates, the ethos of the skill-building 'patriotic professional' extends to leisure culture. Indeed, in its efforts to condition autonomy, the government has also paid close attention to its citizens' leisure choices. In urban areas, state-mandated 'civilization' projects aim to craft a carefully

14

controlled 'leisure culture'. Wang (2001) stresses that in the construction of the "civilized subject" the "significance of leisure culture campaigns in Beijing cannot be overstated" (p. 40). The 1996 campaigns to which Wang referred promoted certain respectable leisure activities such as visiting museums, going to the movies, using a computer and learning English. And, in anticipation of the 2008 Olympics, the government created a list of 'dos and don'ts' to demonstrate civilized behavior such as standing in line and not spitting (Poleg, 2008).

We may now extend this concept of leisure culture to the realm of digital games, noting the manner in which the distinctions between *wangluo youxi* and *dianzi jingji* provide a roadmap for the "do and don'ts" of civilized gaming. As my ethnographic data suggests, the kind of language employed by Hoffman's young urban professionals in Dalian was also used by many of the college students who played *danji* games or *dianzijingji*. Where Hoffman's interlocutors spoke of the desire to find jobs that would "*fahui nengli*" or allow their "abilities to flourish" and "*duanlian ziji*" or "get good experience," gamers such as Yuanqi and Xiaomei talked of using games to "*kaifa ziji de danao*" or "engage my brain" and "*xuexi*" "study." A similar trend was noted by Lindtner (Lindtner, et. al, 2009; Lindtner & Szablewicz, 2011) who followed a group of young urban professionals that joined *Killer Game Clubs* in order to network with peers of similar *suzhi* (quality); they justified their leisure activities by pointing out their productive and self-developmental aspects.

Fuzzy boundaries

The major problem with the diametric opposition of *wangluo* games and *dianzi jingji* is this: increasingly, these genres are blurring. On local level, it is often only a matter of preference that separates 'E-Sports' from online games. Experientially, the stories of those who play internet games and those who play E-Sports blend in a number of ways. As I noted at the outset, in the internet cafés online games and e-sports are played side-by-side, and many gamers play both. The professional e-sports players that I spoke with discussed the origins of their e-sports career, almost all of them noting that they began by playing in the internet cafés. This helps to explain why E-sports competitions have been sponsored by online game companies and chains of internet cafés, this despite the fact that I was told not to mention online games or internet cafes in my interview.

And, despite efforts to separate healthy 'e-sports' from unhealthy online games, they are often confused. While the media published numerous stories of parental opposition to *wangluo* gaming, there are also numerous examples of parents who oppose *dianzi jingji*. The professional

dianzi jingji gamers I spoke with noted that when they were young there parents tried to stop them from playing. It was only by defying their parents' wishes that they became professionals at all. Similarly, an online movie entitled *King of Sports* portrays a young man's rocky road to ESports success. Along the way he has to face a disapproving father and sister, both of whom hope to stop him from competing so that he can pursue a more respected profession such as medicine. And, when speaking with the people who worked the grounds of the Beijing stadium where the government hosted the ECL tournament, few of them could tell the difference between e-sports and internet games, believing that both were bad for children.

This confusion extends to the media. For example, when the Shanghai Zhonghua Vocational School announced plans to offer a *dianzi jingji* 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."

Perhaps most telling of all, government regulations, while paying lip service to the development of E-Sports, have also stood in the way of the continued development of the industry. In April 2004, the State Administration of Radio Film and Television (hereafter SARFT) released the *Circular Regarding the Prohibition on Broadcasting Television Programs about Online Games*. Arguing that such programs "adversely affect the healthy development of minors" the administration ordered that all shows about online games be removed from the air. Included in this ban was the popular CCTV 5 television show *Electronic Sports World* which had been broadcast nationwide since 2003, the same year that the government proclaimed E-Sports to be the country's 99th national sport. Despite protests from the shows' creators, who argued that 'E-Sports' was not an 'internet game' and therefore not subject to the ban, the show went off the air in June 2004.

Finally, even professional *dianzi jinji* athletes acknowledged the fact that *wangluo* games and *dianzi jingji* are bleeding together. One professional *Warcraft III* player had this to say about the matter:

> Even we ourselves sometimes mix the two together, for example today many internet games, like *World of Warcraft*, also have a competition arena, they also have PK, they have a highly competitive nature, and today many *dianzi jingji*, such as StarCraft2, require you to play through Blizzard's online battle site, although it

16

maintains its high level competitive nature, there are also characteristics of it that are becoming more and more like a *wangluo* game, so in the future, I feel that many *dianzi jingji* games will be *wangluo* games, and some *wangluo* games will also be considered *dianzi jingji*. I think we may see this kind of trend.

Conclusion

These 'fuzzy boundaries' should make us wary of drawing too many conclusions about the connections between *dianzi jingji*, *wangluo youxi* and neoliberalism. Lest we get ahead of ourselves in thinking that young Chinese students' online leisure activities are now guided by a neoliberal ethos of skilling-building and individual competition in the interest of the nation, a few words of caution are in order. The critiques of neoliberalism offered by Kipnis (2007) and Steinmüller (2011) offer useful and, in the later case, particularly parallel insight. Steinmüller conducted an ethnography of gambling in rural China, noting the temptation to cast it as either a consequence or form of resistance to neoliberalism. But he warned that, "by positing a social whole instead, the trope of 'neoliberalism' masks more than it reveals" (p. 266). Instead, Steimüller investigated claims that gambling was a form of 'social heat' or *renao*. Indeed, *renao* is a word that has also been used by gamers to describe the social atmosphere of the internet café. Steinmüller goes on to state that *renao*:

> is characterized by a certain ambiguity: while expected and necessary sometimes, it can also turn into deplored anti-social indulgence. … I have traced the boundaries of acceptable forms of 'entertainment' (wan) against that which should be condemned as 'gambling' (du), both in local sociality and vis-à-vis the local state.

Here, Steimüller's distinction between harmless "*wan*" and unhealthy "*du*" cannot but bring to mind the distinction, both in local and state discourse, between healthy *dianzi jingji* and addictive *wangluo youxi*.

In conclusion, there is no doubt that students who played *danji youxi* or *dianzi jingji* spoke what appears to be the language of 'patriotic leisure', stressing skill-building, individual competition and self control that are hallmarks of the neoliberal ethos while also supporting the government and media position that *dianzi jingji* was healthy while *wangluo youxi* were unhealthy. But the motivations for portraying the games they played in this light may, in fact, be less about an actual desire to make their leisure 'productive' than it is about finding a way around totalizing discourses such as those of internet addiction. As the gamers' stories of spending time in internet cafés with friends reveals, at their core, *danji* games were also about

17

social networking with friends. Indeed, in the cafés, *danji* and *wangluo* games were often played side by side, and many of the *danij* gamers I spoke with admitted to playing *wangluo* games as well. Yet *danji* gamers went to great lengths to downplay these similarities and crossovers. Where scholars might use the English term 'online game' to group the different genres of games played by both the *danji* and *wangluo* gamers, the young students I spoke to were intent on keeping them separate. This is most likely because they still faced opposition from their parents and society at large, who tended to lump all manner of games together and saw, rather than any of gaming's redeeming qualities, only a path to addiction. It is, therefore, no surprise that the gamers most willing to acknowledge the similarities and crossovers between *wangluo* and *dianzi jingji* were the professional gamers, who, for the most part, had already overcome the stigma of addiction by entering the realm of the celebrity 'athlete'.

Acknowledgments

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