

Games and Gaming in China

Peichi CHUNG

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
peichi@arts.cuhk.edu.hk

Ling-Yi HUANG

Nanfang College of Sun Yat-sen University
lingyi0713@gmail.com

Bjarke LIBORIUSSEN

University of Nottingham Ningbo China
bl1895@gmail.com

Abstract

This panel highlights scholarship in the area of games and gaming in the Chinese-speaking world. The panel thus fits a wider pattern of increased attention to regional games and gaming. The three papers explore various “globalized” ways in which the global and the local—or here, rather, the regional (“the Chinese”)—intersect in terms of design and production of, as well as discourses around (news media coverage, scholarship, fiction), games and gaming in China.

Glocalizing game studies

The development of the Chinese game industry over the last 10 years is well-reported. According to Fan, at the end of 2012 revenue from online and offline PC and mobile games in China stood at just over 60 billion RMB (9.5 billion US dollars), having increased by 33% in 2011 and 35% in 2012. [1] This rapid development has drawn the attention of many scholars, commentators and game producers eager to understand the political, social and commercial implications of increasingly vibrant and diverse gaming cultures (and markets) across the Chinese-speaking world.

This panel has been put together to highlight some of the scholarship currently happening in and related to games and gaming in the Chinese-speaking world. Such scholarship has been on the rise since a 2008 *Games & Culture* dedicated to gaming in the Asia-Pacific, [2] the edited collections *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific* (2009) and *Gaming Globally* (2013), [3, 4] and the annual Chinese DiGRA conference held since 2014 (with the 2014 conference in Ningbo, the 2015 conference in Beijing, and the 2016 conference planned for Taipei). This regional attention to games and gaming fits a wider trend: 2012 saw the first *Nordic DiGRA* conference, the autumn of 2014 saw the first *Central and Eastern European Game Studies* conference, and the number of regional DiGRA chapters is steadily growing. This trend has led Espen Aarseth to compare, with a slightly odd choice of metaphor (diaspora), “the heyday of DiGRA in 2003, when the Utrecht conference had over 500 participants” with a present situation in which “there seems to have taken place an academic diaspora, into smaller and more glocalized foci and events.” [5]

Glocalization—understood loosely as an ongoing process of negotiation between the global and the local, which is sometimes smooth, sometimes leads to friction—is perhaps fitting as an overarching label for the papers presented in this panel. In “Development and Distribution Strategies of Independent Mobile Games in China”, glocalization is a production and design issue: the paper considers how an “alternative design system that gives rise to local culture and creative talent . . . goes beyond [the] current creative system controlled by major transnational corporations”. “How Active is the Audience? A Study of Chinese Game Fandom” includes discussion of what could be termed the glocalization of theory: how do fandom studies and theory developed in a western context work in relation to Chinese game fandom?. Finally, “After the Gold Rush: Gold Farming in China—and in Western Academia, Journalism, and Fiction” draws together existing western scholarship, journalism and fiction dealing with the Chinese gold farming phenomenon and frames coverage in these distinct yet interconnected fields as a case study of how discourses around video game economics resonate with western perceptions of China and its role in the global economy.

Peichi CHUNG: Development and Distribution Strategies of Independent Mobile Games in China

This paper proposes to study the development and distribution strategies of independent mobile games in China. The paper examines the alternative game culture that is different from the dominant cultural form of MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game). Literature in Chinese game studies has focused on the outcome of a rapidly growing Chinese game industry in both game developing and publishing sectors. [6, 7] As the Chinese game market will soon grow to surpass the United States and becomes the world’s largest online game market in 2016, [8] a comprehensive framework to study the Chinese game industry, market and its game art and culture is necessary. The paper considers China’s game development one of the cases for game production locale in Asia that is capable to produce different form of game art from the creative style of

western games. This creative capability deserves research attention as it opens up the possibility of alternative design system that gives rise to local culture and creative talent. This creative framework goes beyond current creative system controlled by major transnational corporations.

A review of current Chinese game development in the mainstream sector, however, points out both strength and weakness in the design of Chinese games. Relevant industry report has identified censorship, over-commercialism and shanzhai (an act of copying in the creative process) as challenges that hinder the creative freedom of game designers in China. The paper will contextualize discussion on China's independent games in this creative context. It will first provide an overview of the game industry development, highlighting the structuralization and concentration process of major game companies including Tencent, Alibaba and others. The paper will then introduce the history of development on independent games in China. It dates back to 1970s based upon historical material that the author gathers from her research fieldwork. The paper will also introduce the rise of current independent game culture by connecting the discussion to current game jam tradition and global independent game culture. The paper illustrates the political and economic significance of independent game creation within limited industrial resource in China. The paper lastly reviews major award-winning independent games of *Mr. Pumpkin Adventure*, *Finger Balance* and *Breezy Bay*, etc. It analyses alternative game art represented in these games. It also discusses publishing network adopted by these major independent game developers in China. Conclusion section of the paper will focus on the contribution of independent game in reviving a progressive game development culture in China. It concludes with the contribution of alternative game art to revitalize industry dynamics at forming a sustainable value chain in China's game industry.

Ling-Yi HUANG: How Active is the Audience? A Study of Chinese Game Fandom

What is unique to fan studies in comparison to audience research in general is that the former emphasizes more on both social aspects and interpretive activities. [9] Moreover, the resistance power and textual productivity among a group of audience members is the best example of audience activism.

John Fiske noted that fandom is "associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class, and race". [10] Fiske claimed that fans established a sense of ownership over their favorite media texts, and engaged in interpretive play with these texts to resist their negative characterizations in popular culture. Fan participation was related to political

resistance because fandom appealed to "subordinated" groups in society.

Following John Fiske, Henry Jenkins further defined "meaningful participation" of the audience. In this discussion, he contrasted two different phenomena to show what constitutes meaningful participation: (1) Participation vs. resistance; (2) the public vs. the audience. [11] He argued that participation means that people are organized in and through social collectivities and connectivities. However, resistance means that people are organized in opposition to a dominant power. When it comes to the differences of the audience and the public, the former is produced through measurement and surveillance and the latter is different from the former in that the public actively directs attention onto the messages they value.

However, not all of the fans can reach this ideal situation with meaningful participation. Some fans may be less social or less participatory. Sandvoss expanded the definition of fandom to include "the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music, as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sport teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors". [12]

Here, we can see that there are different levels of participation and productivity in fan practices. Comparing mere emotional consumption to political resistance the range differs widely. Thus, the purposes of this study are to understand: How far it is from mere emotional consumption to political resistance? How many different levels of participation and productivity are there? How active is the audience in the game fandom world? This study will focus on the game fandom practices in China. Through game fandom practices, we hope to answer the question "How active can the audience be"?

Another useful tool to answer the aforementioned topics is Wirman's five dimensions of player productivity. Wirman proposed five dimensions of player productivity (1) game play as productivity; (2) productivity for play: instrumental productivity; (3) productivity beyond play: expressive productivity; (4) games as tools; and (5) productivity as a part of game play. [13] She provided a tool to evaluate different levels of game fandom participation and productivity. An interesting topic for discussion is if these five dimensions are all "meaningful participation" according to Henry Jenkins's definitions? Furthermore, these five dimensions were discussed in a western context but this study aims to study game fandom in Chinese culture. We look at different participatory and productive practices of game fan players and try to categorize them into these five dimensions. If the dimensions do not fit, we will propose different ones.

We plan to study two different popular games in China. One is the international commercial game "League of Legends" (LOL) and the other one "Full mental Alchemist" is the Doujin game made by fans. Ethnography will be employed in this study to observe

the different practices of game fandom. Besides, we plan to interview several key reporters to get deeper insights of the practices of Chinese game fandom. We expect that there exists different game fandom practices related to both commercial and non-commercial practices. Therefore, the spectrum of game fandom practices can be broadened and widened. Hopefully, this study can contribute to the notion of “active audiences” in communication studies and categorize the different practices of the Chinese gaming culture.

Bjarke LIBORIUSSEN: After the Gold Rush: Gold Farming in China—and in Western Academia, Journalism, and Fiction

In the mid-2000s, a new “third-party gaming services industry . . . grew rapidly . . . as MMO games grew in popularity”. [14] According to a 2008 estimate, “China has around 80-85% of employment and output in this sub-sector”. [15] The production of MMO currencies, items and services is commonly known as “gold farming”, and stories about gold farming in China proliferated in western news media from 2006 to 2009. [16] Meanwhile, scholars commented on Chinese gold farming and its reception by western players by analytically linking it to Third World stereotypes, [17] anti-immigration discourse, [18] and social aspects virtual world ownership. [19] The figure of the Chinese gold farmer also found its way into western novels. [20, 21] The size of the gold farming industry in China is assumed to have peaked. Although empirical basis for this assumption is weak, the literature tentatively suggests determining factors such as rising wages, [22] and the spread of subscription-based software, which allow private users to automate gameplay for financial gain. [23]

This paper draws together existing western scholarship, journalism and fiction dealing with the Chinese gold farming phenomenon and frames coverage in these distinct yet interconnected fields as a case study of how discourses around video game economics resonate with broader discourses, in this case western perceptions of China and its role in the global economy.

The primary theoretical framework is Vukovich’s update of Said’s orientalism thesis for a world in which China is seen to play increasingly important and diverse roles in the global economy. [24, 25] Dissatisfied with its status as the world’s factory, China seeks a broad shift from “made in China” to “created in China”, [26] as seen in the Chinese leadership’s importation of “creative industries” policy. [27, 28] The notion of China as a creative country jars with a western sense of China as an industrial and economic superpower, which due to a deep-seated lack of scientific curiosity, a “lack of wonder”, [29] has to rely on hacking and shanzhai copying for innovation. [30, 31] At first glance, gold farming would seem to fit this pattern. I argue, however, that the fictional trope of the gold farmer found in novels by Doctorow and Stephenson, [32, 33] in contrast to the

journalistic stereotype, embodies the character trait of cleverness (*conning* in Chinese), or “practical cunning”. [34] Such “Chinese” cleverness disregards the theory-application binary so fundamental in western thinking, [35] and by extension also the related science-technology binary. Taken as a whole, then, western discourses around the Chinese gold farmer bring together a range of divergent *techno-orientalist* imaginings, [36] from Third World proletariat over parasitic copycat to the embodiment of an alternative to western thinking about science and technology.

References

1. Fan Yang. “Development Report on the Animation and Games Industry (2011-2012).” In *China Cultural and Creative Industries Reports 2013*, edited by Hardy Yong Xiang, and Patricia Ann Walker, 61–78, Heidelberg: Springer, 2014. The figures are originally from GPC, a Chinese industry group composed of game publishers. Original report available at http://games.cntv.cn/2013/news_01_0109/128750.shtml.
2. Larissa Hjorth. “Games@neo-Regionalism: Locating Gaming in the Asia-Pacific.” *Games and Culture* 3, no. 1 (2008): 3–12.
3. Nina B. Huntemann and Ben Aslinger, eds. *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
4. Larissa Hjorth and Dean Chan, eds. *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific*. Oxon: Routledge, 2009.
5. Aarseth, Espen. “Meta-Game Studies.” *Game Studies* 15, no. 1 (2015): n. pag.
6. Cao, Y. & Downing, J. (2008). “The Realities of Virtual Play: Video Game and Their Industry in China.” *Journal of Media, Culture and Society* 30(4): 515-529.
7. Chung, P. & Fung, A. (2013). “Internet Development and the Commercialization of Online Gaming in China.” In N.B. Huntemann & B. Aslinger (Eds.) *Gaming Globally: Production, Play, and Place*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
8. Telecompaper. 2015. China To Become the World’s Largest Online Gamer Market by 2016. Viewed on 12 December 2015. <<http://www.telecompaper.com/news/china-to-become-worlds-largest-online-gaming-market-by-2016--1058632>>
9. John Sulivan, “Media Fandom and Audience Subcultures,” in John Sulivan (2012), (New York: SAGE Publications, 2012), 189-212.
10. John Fiske, “The Cultural Economy of Fandom,” in Lisa A. Lewis (1992), (New York: Routledge, 1992), 30-49. . . .
11. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, “What constitutes meaningful participation (2013),” in Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 153-194.
12. Cornel Sandvoss. *Fans: The mirror of consumption*. Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2005.
13. Hanna Wirman, “On productivity and game fandom,” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 3, accessed December 11, 2015, <http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/145/115>
14. Vili Lehdonvirta and Edward Castronova, *Virtual Economics: Design and Analysis*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press, 2014, 141.
15. Richard Heeks, “Current Analysis and Future Research Agenda on ‘Gold Farming’: Real-World Production in Developing Countries for the Virtual Economies of Online Games.” (2008), 12. Available at

http://www.sed.manchester.ac.uk/idpm/research/publications/wp/di/documents/di_wp32.pdf

16. Hanna Wirman, "Sinological-Orientalism in Western News Media: Caricatures of Games Culture and Business." *Games and Culture OnlineFirst* (2015): 1–8.
17. Bonnie Nardi and Yong Ming Kow. "Digital Imaginaries: How We Know What We (Think We) Know About Chinese Gold Farming." *First Monday* 15, no. 6 (2010), n. pag.
18. Nicholas Yee. "Yi-Shan-guan." *The Daedalus Project: The Psychology of MMORPGs* (2006): <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001493.php>.
19. T. L. Taylor, "Does Wow Change Everything?: How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause." *Games and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2006): 318–37.
20. Cory Doctorow, *For the Win*. New York: Tor Teen, 2010.
21. Neal Stephenson. *Reamde*. New York: William Morrow, 2011.
22. Vili Lehdonvirta and Edward Castronova, *Virtual Economics*, 141.
23. Bjarke Liboriussen, "Amateur Gold Farming in China: 'Chinese Ingenuity,' Independence, and Critique." *Games and Culture OnlineFirst* (2015): 1–16, 9.
24. Daniel F. Vukovich, *China and Orientalism: Western Knowledge Production and the P.R.C.*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2012.
25. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1978.
26. Li Wuwei, *How Creativity is Changing China*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.
27. David Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries*, London: Sage, 2013.
28. Michael Keane, *Creative Industries in China: Art, Design and Media*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
29. Richard E. Nisbet, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently. And Why*. New York: Free Press, 2003, 7.
30. Andrew Chubb, "China's Shanzhai Culture: 'Grabism' and the Politics of Hybridity." *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 92 (2015): 260–79.
31. Laikwan Pang, *Creativity and Its Discontents: China's Creative Industries and Intellectual Property Rights Offenses*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012, 222-3.
32. Cory Doctorow, *For the Win*.
33. Neal Stephenson, *Reamde*.
34. Susan D. Blum, *Lies That Bind: Chinese Truth, Other Truths*, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007, 30.
35. Lisa Raphals. *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
36. Morley, David, and Kevin Robins. *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries*, London: Routledge, 1995, 147-173.