



Liboriussen, Bjarke and Martin, Paul (2016) Special issue: Games and gaming in China. *Games and Culture*, 11 (3). pp. 227-232. ISSN 1555-4139

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Special Issue: Games and Gaming in China

Bjarke Liboriussen and Paul Martin

The development of the Chinese game industry over the last 10 years is well reported (Custer, 2013; Handrahan, 2015; Jingli, 2011; Jou, 2013). According to Fan (2014), at the end of 2012, revenue from online and off-line PC and mobile games in China stood at just over 60 billion Renminbi (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. But play and gaming in this region have a much longer history, going far beyond the recent spike in the production and sale of digital games. Imperial China saw the development of a wide variety of card, domino, dice, and board games, most famously xiangqi (often known as “Chinese chess” in English) and weiqi (known in Japan and elsewhere as “Go”). These games are a part of Chinese culture and have been interconnected in various ways with the development of Chinese society. Lo (2000), for example, has speculated on the relationship between a game called yezi xi (Game of Leaves) and the development of printing technology in the Tang and Song periods. Games also figure in more recent Chinese history. Morris (2004) and Li and Hong (2015) have both demonstrated the way in which sport and national identity were interwoven in the Republican China of the first half of the 20th century. Most recently, this deployment of games in the performance of national identity and projection of soft power has been discussed widely in relation to the Beijing Olympics of 2008 (Giulianotti, 2015; Gong, 2012; Miles, 2014).

As the articles in this issue demonstrate, digital games are also an important part of Chinese culture. The history of digital games in China extends further back than the recent rise of the People’s Republic of China as a major gaming industry and market. The early establishment of digital game development in Japan in the 1980s, as Sara X.T. Liao’s article in this issue shows, led to a circulation of games around East Asia, including in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and mainland China. Liao’s article is an important contribution to the work (e.g., Ng, 2006) on these sometimes neglected circuits of gaming culture in East and South-East Asia.

This special issue has been put together to highlight some of the scholarship currently happening in and related to the Chinese-speaking world. We see this as part of an ongoing effort to broaden the geographical scope of game studies, an effort seen in volumes such as the special issue in this journal on gaming in the Asia-Pacific (Hjorth, 2008), the edited collections *Gaming Globally* (Huntemann & Aslinger, 2013) and *Gaming Cultures and Place in Asia-Pacific* (Hjorth & Chen,

2009) and the first Chinese Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference in 2014, from which some of the papers in this issue developed. An important element in the project of sharing scholarship globally is translation, both into and out of English, the de facto lingua franca of contemporary academia. While we do not have any translations in this issue, we have included a review by Ge Zhang of Mi and Chen's (2006) *Gaming East and West* from the early days of digital game scholarship in China. The review gives a sense for those of us familiar with English-language game scholarship but unable to read Chinese of a parallel development of game research in China. Such an insight allows us to look at the work we are familiar with from a new perspective.

Indeed, new perspectives is perhaps what is of most value in this special issue. By looking at China through the lens of the games played there, a different perspective on China is afforded. This is most clearly demonstrated in Marcella Szablewicz's article on the mediated spectacle in Chinese e-sports. The specific way in which the e-sports spectacle is constructed suggests new ways of thinking about the development of Chinese consumer culture. But we also get new perspectives on games and familiar concepts from game studies. Bjarke Liboriussen's contribution takes the figure of the gold farmer—a well-discussed topic in game studies—and injects it with new meaning by approaching it from the perspective of his informants—middle class, educated, Chinese “amateur gold farmers.”

What China?

What “China” do the articles comprising this special issue of *Games and Culture* deal with? Answers vary according to approach, and the articles have been arranged loosely “from the inside out”: from ethnography in search of an insider's perspective to critical analysis of Western discourses around Chinese gaming as seen from the outside.

The People's Republic of China of Trent Bax's article, “‘Internet Gaming Disorder in China': Biomedical Sickness or Sociological Badness?,” is an authoritarian society with an excessively competitive educational system. The pressures of that system are amplified by family expectations, creating stress-producing environments for children who turn to games as a means of escape. Bax can be said to paint a rather bleak picture, but the China of his ethnography is also a society where very lively debate takes place over how best to help children engaged in excessive Internet gaming. Military-style camps are set up to “cure” “internet addicts” but not without Chinese educators very publicly questioning the effectiveness of such camps.

Marcella Szablewicz' approach (“A Realm of Mere Representation? ‘Live’ e-Sports Spectacles and the Crafting of China's Digital Gaming Image”) is also ethnographic as she takes part in e-sports events as an academic observer. Where Bax remains steadfastly focused on contemporary reality, Szablewicz to some

extent contrasts the China she has been observing since 2010 with the Maoist China of the recent past: model consumers are contrasted with model workers. Situating China as an East Asian country in regional competition with Japan and South Korea for the soft power associated with popular culture, Szablewicz critiques the “official China” constructed through spectacular sporting events, including e-sports. But try as they might, it is difficult for officials to discursively separate “e-sports” from (online) gaming. The image of an antisocial shut-in obsessed with online games is not easily washed away by the image of a tech-savvy, healthy consumer. Here Bax’ article functions well as a reminder of the deep anxieties around gaming and the Internet in Chinese society, anxieties with which the very concept of “e-sports” jars.

Sara X. T. Liao’s “China” is the one remembered by the country’s early gamers (“Japanese Console Games Popularization in China: Governance, Copycats, and Gamers”). Liao’s interviewees are urbanites born in the 1980s. They thus belong to the “post-80s” (balinghou) generation who never experienced the much lower living standards before the “opening-up and reform” period (1978–present). Embodying the Chinese public’s desire for Japanese consumer technologies and audiovisual products, Liao’s interviewees took part in Chinese vernacularizing of Japanese games and gaming consoles during the 1990s. This process could in many instances be accurately labeled piracy, but Liao also connects it with the grassroots cultural creativity of shanzhai, a term often associated with comical reimaginations of foreign consumer goods. Vernacularization was hindered not only by the social pressures against gaming already covered in previously mentioned articles but also by state policies aimed at maintaining economic and cultural autonomy. Here gaming is not so much seen to represent potential soft power, as discussed by Szablewicz in her treatment of e-sports, but viewed as a foreign threat. Defensive attitudes can be found to underpin policy in other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea, but China certainly went further than her neighbors with the 2000–2013 “console ban,” a ban that arguably never prevented anyone in China from acquiring a gaming console but provides Liao with rich material for discussing how China attempts to navigate increasingly global popular cultures (see also Liboriussen, White, & Wang, 2015).

With Hanna Wirman’s “Sinological-orientalism in Western News Media: Caricatures of Games Culture and Business,” we turn to China as seen through the lens of Western news media. Wirman’s article is based on content analysis of several hundred Western news items published since 1999. She categorizes the articles according to three phases: a 1999–2005 period focused on China’s emerging games market, a 2006–2011 period focused on “extreme” play including “addicted” play and professional play (“gold farming”), and finally a period since 2012 focused on vast business opportunities for global media companies. This latest, contemporary period not only raises the question of “what China?” but also of “whose China?” Citing Vukovich’s (2012) China-centered update of Said’s (1978) foundational work on orientalism, Wirman sees the present discourse around games and China

very much as an expression of a “Sinological orientalism” that does not seek difference but sameness under global capitalism.

Bjarke Liboriussen’s “Amateur Gold Farming in China: ‘Chinese Ingenuity,’ Independence, and Critique” in a sense reverses the Western discourse around Chinese gold farming commented on by Wirman. Stereotypical Western notions of “the Chinese gold farmer” have been criticized for resonating eerily with racist and simplistic Third World imagery. Based on interviews with comfortably middle-class “amateur gold farmers,” Liboriussen suggests that the image of the gold farmer can be deployed very differently within China, by Chinese gamers themselves, as a site for negotiation of a specifically Chinese gamer identity. Liboriussen relates this identity to the shanzhai ethos already mentioned by Liao, an attitude toward cultural authority that is paradoxically both creatively subversive and submissive; creating not only “Vii” gaming consoles and “hiPads” but also uniquely Chinese ways of self-identifying as a gamer.

Finally, Ge Zhang’s review of Mi and Chen’s (2006) Chinese-language *Gaming East and West: A Study of Cultural Values of Computer Games* offers a glimpse into the discourse around games within Chinese academia. Noting several interesting points of contact between Mi and Chen’s book and Western games scholarship, Zhang presents *Gaming East and West* as exceptional in the Chinese context in as much as it deals with games as social and cultural objects in a nuanced way, avoiding both one-sided versions of the anxieties mentioned several times in the above-mentioned articles and celebratory attitudes that focus exclusively on the educational potential of games.

Note

1. The figures are originally from GPC, a Chinese industry group composed of game publishers. Original report at http://games.cntv.cn/2013/news_01_0109/128750.shtml

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