New Frontier of Guanxi: Online Gaming Practices in China

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ABSTRACT

Economic activities in and around online gaming in China are often associated in the West with images of gold farming, or selling in-game currency to players for real money in online games. What can we learn about online gaming in China and about online gaming and online sociality more broadly when we look at economic and other "pragmatic" practices through which online gaming becomes meaningful for leisure players? In this paper, we present findings from an ethnographic study of online gaming in China to discuss implications for game design, and HCI design more broadly. Considering the ties between socio-economic practices, development of trust and culturally situated imaginings of self-hood and otherness, brings to the fore how online games in and of themselves constitute the means for practical achievements in day-to-day management of guanxi (social connection).

Author Keywords

Online gaming, hybrid, guanxi, face, trust, China.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years the wider HCI community has seen an increase in online gaming research. These research efforts have drawn our attention to the affordances of online gaming technology for complex social dynamics such as the formation of stable groups over longer periods of time, management of and collaboration within large collectives of people, and facilitating social action and flexible game play [4, 11, 12, 20, 22]. More broadly, it has also been acknowledged that online sociality and play can have quite serious meanings for players and often impact players' lives and decision-making processes outside of the game [5, 10, 20, 21, 25] – especially in disruptive situations such as cheating [25], shut down of game servers [21], break up of groups [12], or when in-game activities take on the shape of work-like performances [26].

What happens, however, when playing the game is not just productive based on value generated within the game, but in fact fulfills pragmatic concerns beyond game play? Nowhere is this more evident, perhaps, than in the domain of online gaming in China. Though it is possible to approach this domain as a growing market, a cultural phenomenon, a state- and corporate-regulated infrastructure of hardware and software services, an online community, or even a challenging opportunity for user interface/experience design, it is more usefully considered a combination of all of these (and more). We argue in this paper for the efficacy of an approach that considers these entanglements by applying it to an important theme that emerged from a 6-week long ethnographic investigation of Chinese online gamers in the summer of 2007: how *guanxi* (social connections) is shaping and being shaped by these gamers' perceptions, motivations, and behavior.

Guanxi is a Chinese construct of social relations and reciprocal exchange [15, 27]. It is an important but complex frame in which certain social practices of material and emotional exchange are understood in China. Often, *guanxi* is practiced and experienced through both the flow of material gifts (or capital-as-gift) and favors and the build-up of emotional and moral values such as trust or resentment within a network of dyadic relationships [7]. At its best, *guanxi* mobilizes genuine human feeling to achieve virtuous goals despite uncaring bureaucratic obstructions; at its worst, *guanxi* enforces feudal obligations to maintain and extend corrupt pathways beneath the rule of law.

How and to what extent *guanxi* in Chinese societies differs from more general and culturally widespread processes of social networking and social capitalism remains a contentious issue [13]. From the perspective of HCI, however, even if *guanxi* is no more than an exemplar of a more generic phenomenon, it provides a particularly useful

and culturally specific vantage point from which to consider how the design of online games (and online social spaces more generally) can become implicated within larger practices of currying favor, building networks, managing reputation, and leveraging social capital.

What we found in China were aspects of gaming that render game play in and of itself a means for practical achievement, even when the game is understood as exactly that: a game. We encountered gaming practices that were driven by pragmatic and socio-economic concerns such as maintaining and extending one's *guanxi* network, navigation around governmental restrictions of game play, and how to gain and/or maintain status and reputation in as well as outside of the game.

Anthropologist Thomas Malaby insightfully points out that *"…[games] are certainly, at times, productive of pleasure, but they can also be productive of many other emotional states"*[17]. Similar to Malaby's observations, an important aspect of understanding the complexities of online gaming in China required understanding the game's entanglements with its wider material, social, and economic contexts.

The starting point of our analysis in this paper thus is to think through what "seriously" playing an online game such as World of Warcraft means not just in terms of instrumental activities *in* the game (that certainly also do have "serious" meanings beyond the game space), but also how the instrumental and serious are achieved and maintained *through* and *around* playing the game.

Guanxi and serious gaming

Guanxi and its related socio-cultural constructs have been widely studied in anthropology, sociology, and business [1, 7, 13, 14, 15, 27]. For purposes of this paper, we schematize the key concepts as follows.

- *Guanxi*, in its most basic form, is a social connection between two individuals over which gifts and favors (and, conversely, obligations for future reciprocation) can and do flow [7, 15, 27]. Quite complex and far-flung *guanxiwang* (*guanxi* networks) are assembled out of these dyadic links. A *guanxi* link may be strong or "quality" (trustworthy, mutual, or genuine) or weak (unreliable, coercive, or perfunctory).

- *Guanxi* is built upon a mutually recognized "*guanxi* base" or common ground. In common practice, a *guanxi* base may take the form of a kinship relation (a family tie), a shared birthplace, a shared school or workplace, a shared acquaintance with whom both people have *guanxi*, or shared playing of the same game [7].

- *Guanxi* must be cultivated and maintained. Without active attention, *guanxi* may decay over time; preventing such decay requires token or substantive gift-giving and -receiving over extended periods of time, ranging from timely birthday cards to political patronage appointments.

What underlies these general features is a diverse range of *guanxi*: in addition to good or bad, or strong or weak, it can be commodified, political, or friendly [15]. In each of these cases, however, *guanxi* is understood in distinction from a particular way of acting in the world, a way based on subsuming one's interests to institutions and their rules and ideologies. Indeed, a line of scholarly research has interpreted *guanxi* in light of Maoist attempts at modernization, reform, and nation-building as a "reaction-formation in the social body" [27], or a form of "navigation around the system" [1] against universalistic narratives and ethics of national identity and self-sacrifice.

Seen as an opposition to the universal or ideological, the art of doing *guanxi* resembles a kind of game play, a skilled activity that is marked as social, not work, amateur not professional, personal not official. And so, a-priori, one might expect *guanxi* to be quite compatible with online gaming: a place in which to make social connections, feel human closeness, and maintain friendships over time, with a distinct feeling of being apart from the "non-game" "official" "real life" world, however, deeply intertwined with one's functioning life.

While some researchers speculated that economic reform might cause a decline of *guanxi*, recent research also shows that *guanxi*, instead of diminishing, has found new territory in which to evolve [27]. Online gaming, with its analogies to artful practice of *guanxi*, in this light, is a particularly fertile ground for *guanxi*'s colonization and evolution. In this paper, then, we analyze how online gaming and the urban spaces with which it hybridizes can provide exactly such a new territory for *guanxi* to be built and maintained. We will also discuss the role of online and offline resources for practices of reciprocal exchange around World of Warcraft and expression of trust.

METHOD

In the summer of 2007, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in and around Beijing, Chengdu, Hangzhou, and Shanghai. Our main focus was the online game World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the most successful online games in China. We also encountered players of other popular games including QQ Games, the Legend of Miracle 2 (Mir 2), With Your Destiny (WYD), Fantasy Westward Journey, Audition, Maplestory, and ZT. Most fieldwork took place in physical sites of game play, some interviews were conducted online over QQ, China's most popular instant messaging (IM) service. We collected our data from observation, informal conversations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Sometimes we asked our study participants to think aloud while they were playing or interviewed them during a game session. We conducted interviews in low- to high-end Internet cafés, in restaurants, and in workplaces, dorms, and homes. Usually, we

interviewed players at their preferred game location or at a place nearby.

About half of our interviewees were acquired through our own social networks, and those of our research assistants, and others were contacted through serendipitous encounters in Internet cafes or places where game-related merchandises such as game magazines were sold, e.g., shopping malls or small street vendors. We interviewed 80 players with diverse backgrounds including students, young professionals, a factory worker, a middle school teacher, senior players in their 50's, a marketing supervisor for a Chinese game company, a vice president of design for a Chinese game company, and owners of software stores, news kiosks and Internet cafes. We use pseudonyms for all study participants mentioned.

WAITING FOR TBC AND ITS IMPLICATIONS
As it happened, our fieldwork took place at a time of considerable turmoil, at least for players of WoW in China. "The Burning Crusade" (TBC), an attractive expansion to WoW that introduced among other features the increase in level cap to 70 (60 before), new zones and high-level dungeons, new professions and new playable races, was released on January 16 in Europe, the U.S., and Australia, and on April 20 in regions of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. In Mainland China, however, TBC was not released until September 2007.

Many players found work-arounds to be able to play the TBC. For example, some created new accounts on a server outside of Mainland China, e.g., in Taiwan or the U.S. Others accessed unlicensed game servers that provided access to TBC. These so-called "private servers" were set up by players themselves, using pirated versions of the American TBC. Players moving to private or foreign servers or temporarily leaving the game while waiting for the upgrade to be released changed several dynamics in the game. Guilds broke apart because of the decreased number of online members, less-experienced players lacked the educational and material resources that had previously been provided by the more advanced players and players developed wider *guanxi* networks across different servers and games to socialize and keep up with the game until the TBC would be released.

As a result, many WoW players we talked to engaged in single-player activities like simple quests or virtual character training. Many expressed having difficulty bonding with other online players, because of the increased instability in players' online patterns and the reduced number of players who left servers in Mainland China.

Previous HCI research has highlighted the importance of in-game infrastructures such as guilds and social action around virtual artifacts to support a stable social backdrop to many game activities [4, 12]. Consistent with this previous work, we found members of well-run and successful guilds often associated feelings of prestige and belonging. But we also came across a range of practices that emerged beyond built-in grouping mechanisms such as guilds, similar to findings in [20]. Social instabilities caused by, for example, differences in play style and in-game goals, or by conflicts over distribution of virtual goods and achievement of status are common in online games such as WoW [10, 11, 12, 25]. In China, however, we also found that regulations and local game policies can affect social dynamics and *guanxi*.

In what follows, we will look at some of the practices that emerged during this period of transition to TBC. While control mechanisms certainly structured the game space, we also found players building trustworthy relationships and quality *guanxi* in innovative ways, thus finding their own ways around certain restrictions. We will start off by explicating contexts in which online gaming took effect as a *guanxi* base.

ESTABLISHING & MAINTAINING *GUANXI*
We observed a wide range of opportunities where a shared gaming context was used to build *guanxi*. One of the techniques to establish *guanxi*, for example, was the reciprocal exchange of favors and gifts. Lian, a-50-year old player, told us about her experiences with a fellow player who helped her fix her computer problems: *I chat with people in QQ games… there was a time that my computer got real slow in accessing the Internet, so I asked a favor from a friend I got to know in QQ games… he is very nice and he told me he is a computer science major, so I asked him to remotely control my computer and he fixed the problem [QQ has a remote control functionality]…*

In asking another player for computer support, Lian requests a favor, a gesture that renders the relationship mutual and trustworthy. Even though the two players have never met offline, Lian allows the other player to remotely control her computer to help her find a solution to hardware problem. The other player does not expect an immediate return. Through the offer of support and the sequential development of expectation to receive future support from Lian if needed, however, a reciprocal exchange took place that strengthened the *guanxi* that had been based on the shared online gaming context.

Besides playing games together online, physical proximity and shared context outside of the game could provide context for a *guanxi* base. Many of our study participants felt closer to online friends who lived in the same neighborhood or to in-game friends whom they met regularly at the same physical location, like the Internet cafe or student dormitories. Chenguang, for example, expressed feelings of safety and familiarity to other players who were living in her neighborhood: *The ones I feel comfortable meeting offline are the ones that live close to me and we have played together for a long time… Just because we are good online friends doesn't mean we are good friends in real world as well. It's also sometimes difficult to meet up or I don't have interests meeting them. Part of it might also be personal safety.*

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Another option where the gaming context provided opportunity to build *guanxi* was to rely on the referral of other players to whom *guanxi* was already established and maintained, as one of our study participants describes: *you find out about who is trustworthy from a third party/recommendation by people you know. If you get ripped off, you only get ripped off once. You wouldn't fall for it again.*

Maintaining Pre-existing *Guanxi*

Online gaming in China also supported the maintenance of *guanxi* that had been developed prior to the game, as was the case for coworkers, couples, parents and children. Ming, for example, a 37 year-old veteran gamer, who had been playing computer games for more than a decade, and an employee at a publishing house in Chengdu, described that he would sometimes give his female colleagues QQ pets (an online casual game): *Sometimes, my QQ pets bore baby QQ pets. And, I already have too many QQ pets [he has 4 QQ pets], so I gave them to my female colleagues as gifts.*

Interviewer: *Why did you give it to them?*

Ming: *la [literally means to pull, figuratively means to actively build] guanxi [he smiled]…I might need to ask them for help in the future.*

Jun and Wei are a young couple in Chengdu (see Figure 1). WoW became increasingly important to their *guanxi*: *before WoW, Jun and I hardly had any interests in common. He has his friends and circle, and so do I. I wasn't interested in WoW when Jun first started playing the game. But, then I read some books about the stories behind the game and then started playing and fell in love with it. Now, we have this common hobby. I feel we are more connected.*

Figure 1 Wei and Jun playing WoW at home.

In this example, the online game provided a shared context that allowed the couple to connect in new ways through spending time together online, in the Internet cafe and in their home. Similar to Wei and Jun, we found it common practice that "real life" friends started playing the game together. Extending from their *guanxi* existent prior to the game, they often established in-game groups and/or guilds

that were highly successful and thus prestigious for others to join.

Leveraging Pre-existing *Guanxi*

At times, players who knew each other prior to the game leveraged their *guanxi* for in-game profit making. It was, then, not only challenging for outsiders to join their activities. Often they also found themselves taken advantage of by the powerful and closely knitted group of *guanxi* friends. Many players referred to these guild members or player friends as gold groups, because they would invite others outside the guild to join in-game activities and then take advantage of them. For example: *Some of the bad things about the guilds in general is that they are about "black gold". They recruit players from outside the guild to participate in gold raids. At the end of the gold raid, the people from the guild get offline and don't share the gold with the people from outside of the guild.*

Bing, a software engineer from Beijing commented similarly on his experiences of joining the most prestigious guild on his server: *My guild is the best one on the server. Other people might not be able to get some of the equipment, but they succeed at it… But the relationships in the guild are not very good… If you are an outsider looking at this guild, you want to be added, because you see how fast they advance. So a way to get added in the guild is to kiss ass. After you get into this guild, you regret it.*

This example illustrates that online gaming did not necessarily always support "good" *guanxi*. While it was often easy for a group of friends to extend from pre-established *guanxi* and leverage their *guanxi* for in-game success, for others these pre-existing networks could also lead to the feeling of disconnectedness and exclusion.

As evident in Bing's example, guild structures did not necessarily always provide the familiarity and continuity of interaction that players found so necessary for quality *guanxi* to develop. Building and maintaining "good" *guanxi*, then, usually meant more than just acquiring the right equipment or participating in a stable and prestigious guild. Fen, for example, explained that for *guanxi* socializing in the game could be more important than equipment: *The bad aspect of the guild is that many people join the guild for the equipment and seldom have opportunity for sitting and chatting together. This is a change to humanity.*

Interviewer: *What would have to change about the game to allow that to happen?*

Fen: *To have people sit down at one place in the game like in real life, chatting and drinking as in a party, no matter if you are a Horde or Alliance. To allow that Horde and Alliance can chat with each other although actually they are unable to understand the language of the opposite side.*

Most of the players we talked to, however, were able to build new *guanxi* networks, mainly through leveraging a

mix of online and offline resources and connections to others. They developed *guanxi* with other players in Internet cafes, to other Chinese players on foreign and private servers and when they met others while soloing in the game. Rui, for example, an employee at an Internet cafe in Beijing, told us that he considered some of the players he met in the Internet cafe as part of a trusted circle of friends. Rui was from Shenzhen and moved to Beijing two years ago after he finished his studies in engineering. For him, moving to Beijing meant leaving friends and family on the one hand and building a new social network on the other. The Internet cafe, a place where he works, sleeps and plays, provided social and economic infrastructure to gain ground in the new environment.

DEVELOPING QUALITY *GUANXI*
Thus far, we have illustrated how online gaming provided the context for shared *guanxi* base and have provided insights into the kinds of techniques players deployed to build and maintain *guanxi*. We will now focus on how dependable and trustworthy relationships were formed in and around online gaming in China, something that players often referred to as "quality" *guanxi*.

[7] observed that *"Chinese societies are described as high in particularistic trust, such as among family members, but low in general trust in larger collectives. To the extent that guanxi building represents efforts by individuals to deal with an environment lacking general trust, interpersonal trust is essential in building a quality guanxi."* Some of our study participants referred to online gaming environments as lacking general trust. In other words, some players expressed low trust in the environment if they were strangers. Others, however, were able to develop trustworthy relationships that often lasted beyond engagement with the game. We were, then, intrigued by the question of whether and how Chinese players of online games developed interpersonal trust and quality *guanxi* in and beyond virtual environments.

Ming, for example, told us that he didn't like to play with strangers in the game and that building trust takes time and resources outside of the game: *I usually only play with my work colleagues, but sometimes they have other things to do and cannot play, so I have to play with other people that I don't know. Right after quests, they just grab the loots and run away. I was enraged! Loot should be equally divided. And we usually explicitly agree on that. But, some of them just don't care…I hardly trust strangers in games.*

Lack of trust also occurred in transactions of game resources conducted online. He Peng, a 25 year-old IT consultant in Shanghai, reminisced about an incident of being cheated in WoW: *Once I didn't have much time left on my account, so I was in a rush. Somebody next to me [in the game] just happened to sell point cards [for WoW gold] and I bought it immediately. The person cheating me told me to wait for a minute to activate the card… Later, I learned that he gave the same number to everybody.*

In general, low trust in online games was exacerbated by the widespread use of spyware and viruses (such as Trojans and key-loggers). Several of our study participants had their game accounts stolen on a PC in an Internet cafe. Many players thus did not trust machines in the Internet cafe. Ming, who we introduced earlier, told us that he bought game objects through face-to-face cash transactions and sometimes both parties needed to log into the game to transfer game objects. Instead of using a computer in the Internet cafe where he did the transaction, he called his wife to log in the game for him using their home computer.

Building Trust
How did players generally tackle this trust issue and develop quality *guanxi*? Tao, a 27-year-old gamer in Hangzhou, had played the WYD game for 4 years and made close friends in the game. He commented: *People who seem nice in reality may not be nice online, but people who seem nice online are most likely to be nice in reality as well…[because] it's really hard for someone to pretend [to be nice online] for a long time.*

During long-term interactions many players started to exchange game accounts and phone numbers as an expression of trust in each other. Tao, for example, told us how he built strong trust and quality *guanxi* to other players: *I have few close friends purely in the game. We have very good guanxi… I trust him and he trusts me. We shared our game accounts with each other. When I had already started working, he was still in college. We called each other to talk about games as well as other things. I discussed with him how to prepare in school to find jobs…we played as a highly organized team… We all disclosed our phone numbers. We looked after each others' characters… the saddest thing that happened in the game was when one of our game accounts got stolen and our enemy bought it and used it to fight us… when my account got stolen, my friends immediately offered to buy me a premium account that was worth several thousand RMB at that time.*

The story of Tao and his close game friends is a telling example of how trust and quality *guanxi* were built through self-disclosure and external communication, long-term collaborations, exchange of favors, and a strong sense of comradeship and shared honor. We begin to see then that quality *guanxi* embodies both deeply emotional values, e.g. Tao's comment "the saddest thing in the game is to see when [our character] was stolen and our enemy bought it", and support in practical manners, e.g. "they offered to buy me a premium account that was worth several thousand RMB…"

From *Guanxi* Base to Quality *Guanxi*
Another example of quality *guanxi* that we found in the context of online gaming was the *guanxi* between a software shop owner who sells point cards for online games and a gamer who buys these point cards from this vendor.

These game point cards serve as an economic bridge between the real world and game worlds. They convert public currencies (e.g., RMB) into game values. Some of them are time-based, e.g., WoW point cards (30 RMB buys 66 hours of in-game time on servers in Mainland China). Others are in form of game points that can be used to purchase virtual objects and services in the game worlds (e.g., two Q coins can buy a stylish jacket for a QQ Show avatar).

One of our study participants, Lin, runs a software shop in Chengdu. Her shop sells game, anti-virus and enterprise software as well as game point cards. Customers have different options for purchasing game cards from Lin. The first option was to buy pre-paid scratch game cards. A typical game card comes with its sales price in RMB and the value of the corresponding in-game value printed on the front side of the card (see Figure 2). Once a customer buys such a game card, she can then redeem the value of the card into her game account using the card number and the password.

Figure 2 Game point cards, 10 RMB (left) and 30 RMB (right).

The second option to acquire game point cards from Lin was to buy so-called "virtual" [1] cards. Lin would log in as a vendor into a third party online game card sales system as a vendor and conduct the purchase for her customer. After the customer paid her back, Lin would often write down the card number and password on a piece of paper (see Figure 3) and give it to the customer. Lin told us that the online sales system covers most if not all of the games on the market, and indeed selling game points in this way usually gives her more margin than when pursuing the first option. The second option, however, is reserved for her quality *guanxi* customers: *Some of my old customers call me to buy game points. Usually, they transfer money directly to my bank account and I put the game money directly to their game accounts.*

Interviewer: *So, they knew your bank account and you knew their game accounts?*

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[1] It is "virtual" in the sense that it does not have a physical card.

Lin: Yes, *since they have been my customers for many years, we are very familiar with each other. I know their game accounts and they know my bank account. We have good guanxi. We are friends and help each other if needed. Sometimes, I put game money into their game accounts before they give me the money. Like this customer X, he leads a guild and they usually get together every other week in an Internet cafe to play. He called me to buy 2000-3000 RMB of game money for him. Later, I would come over to the Internet cafe to get the money and he invites me to hang out or have dinner with them. I also sometimes asked favors from these friends, old customers. Once, my shop fell short of cash for normal operations. I called them and asked them for help. They gave me several thousand RMB...*

Interviewer: How did you start the *guanxi*?

Lin: *They came to my shop, found what they were looking for and started buying things from me and kept coming back. They felt I'm a nice person. I frequently updated them with the latest games and sometimes reserved game software for them. You know, slowly we became familiar.*

Lin's example illustrates that online games can serve as a *guanxi* base for cultivating quality *guanxi*. If *guanxi* is to be maintained and turned into quality *guanxi* as in Lin's case, usually the game-related interactions extended beyond the game, connecting to real-life assets such as the bank account or face-to-face meetings for a transaction.
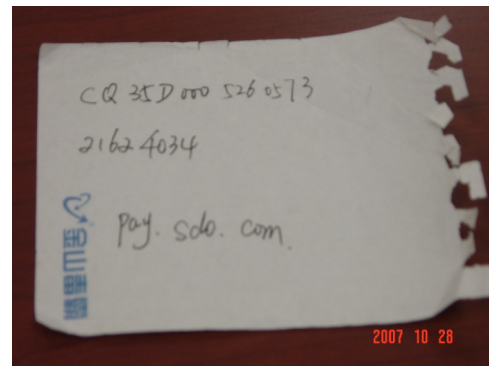

Figure 3 Card number & password

ASSESSING *GUANXI* AND INTERPRETING FACE

So far, we have looked at how players built *guanxi* to engage in trustworthy online and offline interactions and to develop mutual respect for each other. Another aspect that is commonly associated with *guanxi* in China is mianzi, or face in English. Face refers to one's social status in the eyes of others, which can be accumulated, lost or given to one another and is said to be a key principal guiding relations between Chinese people, rural or urban [14]. While some have speculated about the deterioration of *guanxi* practices in post-Mao China due to industrialization and market reform [15, 27] recent work has provided insight into how *guanxi* continues to evolve and might even counter-act feelings of anonymity or facelessness [1, 14]. Hertz, for example, argues that "*guanxi* locates its practitioners in

webs of communitarian contacts and distinguishes them as individuals from the faceless universalized monads who up the crowd" [14].

Players commented quite frequently on the importance of showing and receiving face through their relationships in and beyond the game. Ju, a student from Beijing, for example, explained how he gained face through his guild, when we asked him what he thought the advantages of being in a guild were: *After you enter the guild, you will belong to an organization. If you can join a strong guild on your server, that is very good.*

Interviewer: How good?

Ju: *You will feel more face brought by it.*

Interviewer: What can be counted as having face?

Ju: *For example, your guild is No1 on your server. It is always your guild who wins difficult raids, you will feel honored. When you chat with others, you can mention "I am from…" In the game, if players apply to join our guild, they may be refused by the guild, while I can join the top guild, because I have friends in it.*

Often, players took specific actions in order to find out about other players' moral attitude and face online. They would, for example, use their secondary characters in order to see others' "true faces", as one player phrased it. Most of the online game players we talked to had several characters distributed across different guilds, sometimes having two or more characters in one guild without revealing to their team members that they are all owned by one player. He Peng explained: *...why I have different characters in different guilds? Most players do that… If you have a secondary character, I wouldn't tell others in the guild that it is a secondary character – to protect myself. You use the secondary character to understand what else is going on or to find out about another player's personality and his intentions… sometimes people come up to me and talk to me and I wouldn't know who it is. Later I realize it is somebody I know. If you have really good equipment, people respect you. If you have bad equipment, people might ignore you. I use my secondary character to see who still is nice even though I don't have a lot of equipment.*

Quality *guanxi* is often associated with a moral and ethical attitude, as well as mutual reliance on each other, which converts into face/status for both *guanxi* partners when exposed to others [14, 15]. In confronting a trusted *guanxi* partner in the guise of a less-advanced character (e.g. lower level, low-level equipment), the general moral attitude of the other player could be evaluated. He Peng considered this action a strategy "to protect himself", because a loss of face for a *guanxi* partner might also mean loss of face for oneself or one's guild: *If people go and do something bad in the name of the guild… for example, they take stuff from the guild which is supposed to be distributed among the individual members. Others will critique the whole guild for having members like this. They will critique the whole guild*

instead of the member. The fame of the whole guild is destroyed.

Through *guanxi*, one has face to one's *guanxi* partners but also in general to others outside of one's network. What happens in such a context when there is a lack of opportunities to establish *guanxi* to others? We saw this in the ways Chinese players imagined what it means to be a "Western" player and how U.S. play style was different from the on Chinese game servers. Because of the delay of the WoW expansion TBC, which we discussed earlier, some players created accounts on servers abroad – most common were American and Taiwanese servers. Although Chinese players rarely interacted with American players on these servers, mostly – as they told us – because of language barriers, a certain image penetrated the overall perception of game style and attitude on the foreign servers. Jien, a middle school teacher from Beijing, for example, had played on American servers before we met him: *I have tried to play on American servers before. The most different thing is the quality of the player. It's more chaotic on the mainland server. When distributing the equipment, Chinese players have lots of quarrels, while the players on the American server do it in a more organized way.*

Shaoxiong, who worked at UPS in Shanghai, reminisced similar experiences on the foreign server: *On the net there are a lot of these instances (cheating). Especially in China right now with the quality of life, definitely more than in Europe or America. Because in those areas there are more net etiquettes. There are a lot of rip off things, where you perceive it a certain way, but it's not how it is. This is going on in China, because Chinese people find money something very important, because it's just becoming industrialized, it's a little bit more chaotic.*

Rui, who we introduced earlier, described how he could immediately distinguish Chinese players amongst others on a foreign server: *There were a lot of Chinese people playing on the American server at this time. I would ask some of the higher leveled Chinese players and asked them how to kill this and how to do that. Some of them came with me to kill monsters. If you are on an American server and you run into a Chinese person you know him... you are connected, you have something in common.*

For Rui not surprisingly, the shared cultural background resembled connectedness and closeness. What is remarkable in these accounts is how these foreign online spaces are imagined as displaying higher moral and ethical values in game play. Previous research on online gaming in America and Europe has reported cheating practices [25] and instabilities of guilds [11, 12] quite similar to the ways in which Chinese players rendered their own experiences on the Chinese servers. What, then, gave raise to this embellished image of the foreign player?

What came to the fore in these imaginings of a "proper" gaming style elsewhere, in making present a potential could be of sociality on Chinese game servers, was the rendering

of the collective perception of the "Chinese face" in contrast to an imagined Western elsewhere.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Foremost, we wish to highlight that the work presented here acknowledges Chinese cultural particularities in relation to online gaming practices, while refraining from explicating what about these practices might be described as intrinsically Chinese [13, 15]. Our goal was thus to entangle the ways in which instrumentalism and sentiment come together in *guanxi* networks that are developed and/or maintained *through* online gaming practices in China, and *not* how *guanxi* practices we observed in and around online gaming in China might be similar or different from social capital in online games in the U.S. Emotional aspects of the material and instrumental exchanges that come together in *guanxi* are not easily visible to outside observers, and the combination of instrumentalism and sentiment thus often appears contradictory [13] and leads to associations with corruption and bribing. We have thus refrained from a direct comparison between the "here" and "there" and rather focused on the complex entanglements of entertainment and its practical uses in the cultural context or urban China.

Reframing Productive Play and Serious Gaming

While *guanxi* practices around online gaming in China provide a telling example of the combination of the instrumental and emotional, it is not something unique to China or online gaming. Swan et al., for example, found in a study with 12 households in the UK that families deployed idiosyncratic organizing practices of keeping things in order and containing clutter in the home. Keeping things in order, however, did mean more than tidying things up and give clutter structure. Rather these pragmatic routines of organizing the home brought to the fore symbolic and emotional properties of artifacts and how their arrangements defined home as a social place.

In a quite different context, we thus found a similar line of reasoning: that through pragmatic means quite emotionally intense outcomes can be generated. In addition, our findings also illustrated how leisure and fun can affect instrumental accomplishment. Bing's case, for example, brought to the fore how the ability to establish connections to other players outside the in-game structure of the guild or even beyond the game in China's Internet cafes provided opportunity to develop quality *guanxi*. In contrast, the decision to join a prestigious guild was motivated by the desire to gain reputation and status.

Many players established just like Bing a myriad of *guanxi* connections, offline and online, and hybrids of both, varying in intensity and quality. While in some *guanxi* networks the emotional aspects prevailed, in others the instrumental aspect came to the fore. However, never did we find a sharp distinction between the instrumental and emotional aspects in these hybrid *guanxi* networks. Lian

built a trustworthy connection to a fellow player and could rely on him for technical support. Chenguang and many others shared game accounts to express trust and mutual reliance, but also to gain knowledge about unfamiliar player classes. Similarly, the exchange of QQ pets strengthened the *guanxi* at stake, while at the same time helping advance the gifted player.

What we take away for design from these intersections of reciprocal exchange, expression of trust and achievement of instrumental means through game play is an alternate framing of productive and serious gaming. Serious gaming is often associated with the usage of games for educational settings[2], where through "doing" things in the game, lessons are learned for one's "serious" aspects of life. Thus, serious gaming often implies that gaming can be used as a tool or test bed for the actual "real" that is happening outside of the game.

The concept of productive play, on the other hand, is usually used to describe work that gets done in the game or serious relationships that are formed online, which are impacting players' behavior and attitudes outside of the game. Productive play thus has often been used to describe how boundaries between play and work increasingly blur [5, 10, 21, 26]. Yee, for example, comments on the irony of online players paying money to game companies for working hard in the game and refers to companies such as IGE that make money from selling virtual currency [26].

What we have found in our research in China is a form of productive play where fun and entertainment are entangled with political and social contingencies, thus not only producing economic value, but accomplishments extrinsic to game play. Online gaming in China was not so much a test bed, as it was an integral part of people's functioning lives. Too often game design for education and work purposes stops with the online space or the assumption of a bounded game space. By expanding our scope and beginning to design entertainment services and online gaming that take into account how people cross and exploit these boundaries, or how they maintain them in order to make games fit their own needs, we begin to leverage the meaningful serious and productive usages of the entertainment space.

The Myth of Functioning

In a study of aircraft technical support teams, Lutters and Ackerman found that while aircraft repair processes may be standardized, their applications are unique and often result in unanticipated work-arounds [16]. In their examples, they illustrated how an aircraft maintenance team, in order to function, required creative and ever changing navigation around established structures and routines. What Lutters and Ackerman found in a work-related setting resembles what we found in the context of online gaming. *Guanxi*

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[2] See for example: http://www.seriousgames.org

around online gaming in China is about functioning social relations through exchange of trust, gift and favors. What we mean by functioning, however, is not so much the ability to support stable social groups over time or efficient in-game collaboration [11, 12, 20]. Rather what we refer to are practices of creatively navigating around managed infrastructures, exploiting messy socio-technical settings and leveraging functionalities of a technological system in innovative ways.

For example, despite governmental decisions such as the delay of the TBC that impinged on game play and the pervasive lack of trust in online spaces and Internet cafes, players were able to develop and sustain a myriad of *guanxi* networks. A pervasive aspect of making the game function for one's own social needs and material interests was to exploit both digital and physical resources. Building on previous work on hybrid technology spaces [9], we have argued elsewhere [omitted] that a crucial aspect of online gaming in China is the ability to act across an ecology of physical and digital infrastructures and artifacts entangled with wider social, political and economic contexts. The maintenance and development of *guanxi* flourished in this hybrid gaming space exactly because players were able to make use of a heterogeneous set of resources. This evidenced, for example, in the cases of Lin and Tao. Lin conducted online transactions, interacted face-to-face, and exchanged bank account information with her customers. Her customers displayed loyalty and trust lending her several thousand RMB when Lin's business underwent a moment of crisis. Similarly, Tao made use of both digital and physical resources to build *guanxi* to his fellow online game players. In exchanging game accounts and phone numbers, he and his online friends expressed trust in one another, eventually allowing for quality *guanxi* to emerge.

Practices of gold groups, on the other hand, evidenced that a functioning social infrastructure in the game is not necessarily always about fair play or mutual support. Rather these groups often functioned so well because of exactly that: demolition of the functioning of others through, for example, exploitation and cheating. Members of these groups leveraged their own pre-existing *guanxi* networks to form strong and highly collaborative groups in the game. Exploiting both digital interaction and *guanxi* established outside the game, these groups not only engaged in highly enjoyable and successful in-game practices, but also strengthened their pre-existing "real life" *guanxi*.

These examples illustrate that functioning in the game meant to artfully interweave online practices with contexts and physical artifacts that were valued beyond the game. We suggest that if we subscribe a myth of functioning of social groups in online gaming and online communities more broadly that is based on continuity, stability and structure within the online game, we might overlook these other much messier, hybrid, but quite productive ways of navigating and playing around a regulated game space.

Defamiliarization & cross-cultural understanding
What is often immediately associated with entertainment technology in China is the image of the Chinese gold farmer [10, 19]. In particular, gold farming, or selling in-game currency to players for real money in online games, has come to be understood as something inherently Chinese amongst U.S. game players [19]. Conflating Chinese with gold farmer has lead to "overt racist attitudes" [3] and to the perception of a gaming culture that divides players into classes of Chinese labor versus Western leisure players [19].

In contrast, a series of recently conducted national and foreign surveys portray a quite different image of online activities and gaming habits of the Chinese youth. [4, 8], for example, report in two 2008 surveys on Internet use and development in China that the majority of the Internet users access the web for *entertainment* purposes, communication purposes and for information access. McKinsey found that Chinese youth prefer online entertainment over TV watching and that they also want to save money with their technology purchases [18].

What this leaves us with, then, is to provide a more nuanced way of describing economic discrepancies, situated sociality and imaginings of national identity for technology design and engagement. The accounts of *guanxi* and face we have presented in this paper provide a step into that direction. While Chinese accessed foreign game servers, they rarely interacted with non-Chinese, however they created shared a pervasive image of what it meant to be a game player from the U.S. and how U.S. game servers were different from their Chinese counterparts. Often, to play a game like WoW was motivated by curiosity about "foreign" game graphics and "Western way of storytelling." How can future technology design leverage such curiosity to encourage exchange across national servers and different cultural contexts?

China scholar Ann Anagnost highlighted that "*the language of the gift and the study of guanxi must be placed within a larger field of play that is filled with legendary and historical reference... as a corpus of practices, it composes a situational ethics that not only counsels how to act but also how to interpret the actions of others.*" We suggest that a view on online gaming that takes into account its entanglements with situated socio-cultural practices and meanings such as *guanxi* and face allows us to defamiliarize [2] our own understandings of online gaming practices and design policies for online sociality.

CONCLUSION
In conclusion, we would like to offer a speculative and provocative outlook. U.S. and Chinese players both rendered Chinese game play at times to be dishonest and lower in status than what was supposedly the case for the West. One might infer that the use of *guanxi* in game play may be responsible for this, as *guanxi* might be interpreted as "backward" or "corrupt", something that can be stamped

out. One might also suggest that China, characterized as an emerging market, a nation often branded as being in "development", might eventually catch up with the U.S., causing the two game cultures to equalize.

The research we presented in this paper, however, casts doubt on such an analysis. Online gaming in China is embedded in a culture that greatly values *guanxi* and teaches the importance of artful *guanxi*. The vigorous culture of *guanxi* tends to strongly intertwine game activities with real life activities. It is here, that technology becomes truly hybridized. Considering the growth of social networking technologies in the U.S., China may, instead of lagging behind the U.S., also in certain cases illustrate a precursor of U.S. technology culture in the future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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