From Addicts to Athletes:  
Youth Mobilities and the Politics of Digital Gaming in Urban China

By

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A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major Subject: Communication and Rhetoric

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June 2012
(For Graduation August 2012)
Abstract

According to recent statistics released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), over three hundred million Chinese play Internet games. But while many young people argue that digital games provide free space in which to achieve necessary release from the pressures of society, the government and media often depict them as a kind of “opium for the spirit” that adversely affects Chinese youth. With few notable exceptions (eg. Liu, 2010; Qiu, 2009; Yang, 2009), academic literature about Chinese Internet culture has been confined to studies that focus on issues of censorship and the Internet’s democratizing potential. Scholarship on digital games has by contrast tended to focus on in-game sociality, often under-emphasizing the extent to which issues of politics, class and economics infuse gaming discourse and practice from the outside-in.

This dissertation addresses this gap in literature and intervenes in these two fields by tracing the shifting discourses and practices of digital gaming in urban China and showing the various ways that digital games are socially shaped — both how young Chinese describe and remember the importance of games in their social lives and how gaming is portrayed in government and media discourse.

In particular, I examine the ways in which certain gamers establish for themselves a “subculture” of gaming, while others attempt to rationalize their activities along the lines of dominant discourse. Along the way, I offer individual narratives that demonstrate the diversity of gaming as it is incorporated into individual lives. Digital games play a particularly important role in many young people’s coming of age, as they are taken up in the stressful years leading to the college entrance exam. However, young
people’s understandings of games diverge later in life and in relation to shifting social positions.

Through extended analysis of government policy and media representations, this dissertation also uncovers the mechanisms by which different games are constructed as either “healthy” or “unhealthy” and the corresponding processes by which the gamers who play them are portrayed as either “addicts” or “athletes.” Such constructions are rooted in larger cultural debates about patriotism and productivity, class and the crafting of the “ideal citizen.” I argue that the government is cultivating a sense of what may be called “patriotic leisure,” a concept that is modeled upon a late socialist neoliberal ethos that emphasizes the skill-building and self-enterprising young citizen. As such, it becomes clear that even realms of leisure often assumed to be “free” are assigned their proper place in the narrative of upward mobility in which China’s young middle class urbanites are ensconced, coming to reflect concepts about what constitutes productive play and proper behavior in the quest to better the self.

By contrast, those games and gamers that do not fit this developmental trajectory are cast aside as wasteful and addictive. Not surprisingly, it is these gamers who exhibit the greatest sense of disillusionment with the “real world.” As such, the movement to the game world comes to be an expression of their alienation from the city and the failure of the neoliberal agenda to deliver on its promise of wealth. The game is the site of alternate imaginings, a space of nostalgic longing whose referent is not the past or the future but something else altogether; rejected as spaces of upward mobility, these games offer a space of what I will call “sideways mobility.”