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From Monkey King to Mao: Cultivating Online Games with “Chinese Characteristics”

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By Marcella Szablewicz

“Unhealthy” Games

With 300 million people playing Internet games in China, the question of how these games affect youth has captured the attention of the public and researchers alike. I first became interested in studying online gaming in 2002 when, as a language student in Harbin, China, I discovered the extent to which playing online games in Internet cafés had become a central part of social life for many urban youth. However, like any new technology, the growing popularity of games has also sparked growing fears about their potential to negatively impact society. In recent years the Chinese media has been full of horror stories: adults committing crimes of passion over in-game items and affairs, young boys dropping dead from sitting in front of computer screens for 72 hours straight, high school students blowing off the college entrance exam (高考) to spend time in local Internet cafés, the list goes on. Elsewhere, I have analyzed the root causes and possible effects of this media moral panic (find the youtube video and article [here](#)).

However, moral panic aside, it is important to recognize that not all games are created equal. As with many aspects of contemporary Chinese society, digital games are increasingly separated into “healthy” and “unhealthy” categories. To be facetious, we might say that there are bad games and then there are games with “Chinese characteristics.”

It should come as no surprise that the game that faces the most criticism from the government and addiction experts is one created by an American company, Blizzard Entertainment. With over 12 million subscribers worldwide, World of Warcraft (WoW) is one of the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) in the world (for an early China Beat look at WoW, see [here](#)). But, according to Chinese addiction specialists, World of Warcraft is also one of the most addictive and harmful games on the Chinese market.

In a purported effort to ensure that WoW meets the standards of a “harmonious society,” the Ministry of Culture (MoC) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) have imposed various restrictions on game content and battled furiously over the details of the game’s licensing and oversight. These regulatory issues have been well documented in the online press (see, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* blog [here](#) and Caixin Online [here](#)).

From Dungeons and Dragons to the “Descendants of the Dragon”

But government concerns about violence and inappropriate content in foreign games likely mask more pressing economic and ideological concerns. On one hand, with 300 million players the government is well aware of the economic power of the online games market. As such, MoC and GAPP restrictions that require foreign companies to sell their operating rights to domestic companies amount to thinly disguised protectionism and resemble tactics taken by the government with regard to other types of foreign investment.

On the other hand, the government is increasingly focused on the “soft” power of games and the cultural values and narratives imparted by them. Indeed, many popular MMORPGs, WoW included, are based on Norse mythology. As noted by [Eddo Stern \(2002\)](#), “The range of historical and cultural influences on the fantasy game mise-en-scene includes a wild amalgam of Celtic, Gothic, Medieval and Renaissance combined with a deep commitment to a Wagnerian, Tolkienesque, Camelotian, and D&D’ish verisimilitude.”

Given that western narratives often dominate MMORPGs, it seems only reasonable that the country with the largest number of online gamers in the world would want to see its own cultural heritage represented. One Chinese cultural critic talked to the [Beijing Morning](#)

Post about this very issue [*Ed. note: the article is no longer on the Beijing Morning Post website, but can still be read at the QQ page linked to here*]. Here is an excerpt from the discussion:

"Values can be attached to games and spread throughout the world. To a child that has played World of Warcraft since he was small, the "dragon" he sees in his mind's eye will be a dragon modeled after a western understanding of "dragon," it will take the shape of a monster. Will this same child still identify with the notion that he is a "descendant of the dragon"? Online games are important parts of culture; they are the manifestations of a country's soft power. As such, they deserve our sufficient attention..."

From Monkey King to Mao

Providing the Chinese answer to western game narratives, there are a growing number of online games with "Chinese characteristics." Such games can be divided into two main genres. The first genre tends to be based upon classical Chinese novels and folklore such as Journey to the West and Romance of the Three Kingdoms. With over 20 million reported registrants, the most successful example of this genre is Fantasy Westward Journey (梦幻西游), a game based upon the mystical travels of the Monkey King.

A second group goes by the moniker "red net games" (红色网游). These games usually focus on China's recent communist history and legacy. As noted by Chinese Wikipedia sites, such as Baidu Baike and Hudong, the company almost always associated with "red games" is Shenzhen-based ZQ Game (中青宝). Since 2008, ZQ has reportedly enjoyed the backing and investment of the Communist Youth League Central Committee and other major government players. A spokesperson for the company noted that the target audience for these games is the 60s and 70s generation, stating, "Our gamers are mostly white collar, very nationalistic..." There have also been reports that ZQ is in the process of creating a game known as "Long March Online" (长征OL).

But lest we get ahead of ourselves in thinking that games about Chinese history are "healthier" than their Western counterparts, there is a particular experience I feel compelled to share. Last summer I visited the ZQ game pavilion at ChinaJoy, China's largest games expo. There, amidst games that reenacted the war of resistance against the Japanese and the civil war between the nationalists and communists, scantily clad young women paraded around with ZQ stickers on their arms. Below is a photo of this very scene:



My point here is not to suggest that these Chinese narratives are any more violent or sexual than Western ones (online games about Desert Storm and crime scenarios such as Grand Theft Auto come to mind). But perhaps we should maintain a healthy skepticism about the government's motives for criticizing the "unharmonious" elements in WoW when Chinese game companies such as ZQ are pushing bloody battle narratives and trussing up their salesgirls in French bustiers.*

Gamers Just Want to Have Fun

What is more, while "red net games" enjoy the backing of the Chinese government, they do not always gain the support of the gamers for whom they are intended. ZQ, in particular, has enjoyed limited success on the market, attracting far fewer gamers than World of Warcraft or its Chinese counterpart, Fantasy Westward Journey.

So, why is it that Monkey King has been more successful than Mao? Based upon my fieldwork with young gamers in Shanghai I can speculate as to some possible reasons. First, we must realize that many of the young people who play online games are in search of fantasy, not reality. I'll put the question to you, the reader: If you had to choose between a game in which you embarked on a magical westward adventure and one in which you were taught about the grim historical realities of the Long March or the Nanjing massacre, which game do you suppose you would choose to play? Second, we should remember that the post-80s and post-90s youth never experienced the Mao years or, for that matter, much of his legacy. To them, even the events of the summer of 1989 and Tiananmen are distant, the concerns of a generation prior to their own. There is a China of economic growth and capitalist competition and, as such, games that recreate the hardships of Maoist era have little resonance.

But there is yet a more fundamental issue at stake. Sometimes the best games are those that, simply put, are the most fun. And what makes a "fun" game? This is certainly a question for the ages, but one of the contributing factors is undeniably that of careful and creative design, and here's the rub. The issue is that, like many products on the fledgling Chinese market,

game companies are under such pressure to churn out games a rapid pace that game designers do not have the time to create interesting ones. It is a classic case of quantity over quality.

I will leave you with a final observation. Over the course of my fieldwork, I discovered a curious trend among many young gamers. Those I met who played World of Warcraft tended to stick steadfastly to that one game, but many of the young gamers who play domestically produced Chinese games tended to hop from game to game in a short span of time. Admittedly, I never once encountered anyone who enjoyed playing “red net games,” but two of the gamers I worked with actively played Fantasy Westward Journey. Both admitted that, in comparison to other games such as WoW, Fantasy Westward Journey was relatively “relaxed” and could at times get tedious. One World of Warcraft player put it bluntly:

“...Chinese games are a drag, even though there are many people playing them, most young gamers feel they are very slow, very boring. The characters are boring, the graphics are bad, and the games don’t require any skill to play, all you have to do is spend money and you can become awesome at the game.”

Given testimony such as this, it becomes clear that domestic games companies still have their work cut out for them before they will be able to fully capture the hearts (and wallets) of the gamer community. But many Chinese gamers, while critical of the current quality of domestic games, also expressed that playing them was a matter of national pride. With 300 million Chinese eagerly supporting the development of the industry, it is likely only a matter of time before the glut of fantasy games bearing hallmarks of western mythology gives way to a new tide of games “with Chinese characteristics.” The question remains, what flavor of Chinese culture will triumph? Will it be Monkey King, Mao, or some as of yet emergent aspect of China’s diverse and ever-changing culture?

* Since this piece was written, media reports have indicated that the Chinese government made efforts to tone down the sexy outfits at this year’s ChinaJoy. See, for example, Tania Branigan’s report over at [The Guardian](#). But, while the headlines may be slightly longer, the ChinaJoy girls are still present en masse, and sex is still a main attraction.

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