Amateur Gold Farming in China: “Chinese Ingenuity,” Independence and Critique

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In the mid-2000s, a new “third-party gaming services industry . . . grew rapidly . . . as MMO [Massively Multiplayer Online] games grew in popularity, led by the hit title *World of Warcraft*” (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014, p. 141). The two primary parties are MMO players and game operators. The third party industry is made up of companies that provide players with virtual currencies and items (gold coins, magic swords etc.) and services such as the levelling up of avatars. According to a 2008 estimate, “China has around 80-85% of employment and output in this sub-sector” (Heeks, 2008, p. 12). The production of MMO game (MMOG) 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 (Wirman, forthcoming), spearheaded by an article in *Wired* by Julian Dibbell (2003). Dibbell’s use of the term “virtual sweatshop” “probably helped to cement or at least crystallise the view that gold farming was an exploitative and oppressive activity” (Heeks, 2008, p. 54). Bonnie Nardi and Yong Ming Kow (2010) thus criticise Western media coverage of Chinese gold farming for relying on general Third World stereotypes of poor living conditions, low class and low culture. They highlight how relatively sophisticated gold farming techniques that did not fit with the general Third World picture—such as “the deployment of software programs that obviate the need for a human worker to interact directly through the game’s user interface” (n. pag)—were omitted from news stories.

Western players of online games did, and do, not only learn about gold farming through the media but also from each other and through in-game encounters with gold farmers. There are at least four reasons why such encounters can lead to conflict. First, gold farmers might be seen as “responsible in producing a service that many players regard as cheating” (Lehdonvirta and Ernkvist, 2011, p. 40). Second, English-speaking players can be provoked by the uncommunicativeness of players with few or no English skills (Taylor, 2006, p. 20). Third, players might find “spam advertising in in-game chat channels” disruptive (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014, p. 148). Fourth, the most manifest and least sophisticated kind of gold farming consists of harvesting ~~the~~ resources (for example, minerals, herbs or monsters) in a limited area of the virtual world in a highly efficient way for extended periods of time. This behaviour can cause conflict if it blocks other players’ access to resources (Yee, 2006). Since many types of MMO players engage in play that is highly repetitive and utilitarian, it can be hard to tell professional gold farmers apart from other players. Thus English skills—or rather the lack thereof— becomes a distinguishing feature, and “normal” players might subject suspected gold farmers to improvised language tests in order to determine their status (Yee, 2014, p. 87). Resentment towards players perceived to be gold farmers can lead to harassment and has led to organised and systematic in-game killings of gold farmers, which have subsequently been widely publicised via social media (Steinkuehler, 2006). Nick Yee (2006) draws eerie parallels between racist “tropes of pestilence and eradication” (n. pag.) employed against Chinese gold farmers by some Western MMO players and 19th century discourse around Chinese immigration to the U.S.A.

Informed by a mix of theoretical sources and interviews with middle-class Chinese amateur gold farmers, this article suggests that the figure of the Chinese gold farmer might play a very different role within China, as a focus for reflection on Chineseness and China’s

role in an increasingly interconnected world. My interviewees valorise the ingenuity of gold farmers in a non-judgemental way that embraces all aspects of that ingenuity—from clever tinkering to skilful cheating—as essentially "Chinese." To better understand this somewhat ambiguous position I rely on *shanzhai*, a term that has become very popular in China since 2008 (Chubb, 2015, p. 260). Shanzhai is often associated with cheap, sometimes comical, sometimes innovative Chinese pirating of consumer electronics but also suggests a rebellious or at least independent attitude that corresponds somewhat to the attitude of amateur gold farmers.

The section following immediately below introduce the six amateur gold farmers whose views have informed this article, followed by a section—*Chinese Servers and Chinese MMOGs*—that provide a bit of background and motivates the analytical focus on Chineseness. Shanzhai is then introduced in general terms, followed by three sections —*"Chinese Ingenuity"*, *Marginality and Independence*, and *Critique?*—that each take a closer look at various aspects of amateur gold farmer identity; this tripartite structure owes a heavy debt to Chubb's (2015) recent work on shanzhai. The conclusion suggests that as a practice, amateur gold farming offers players a very committed although temporary way of playing their games, which might actually be of benefit to game operators. It is also suggested that as a stereotype, the Chinese gold farmer can be undermined productively by looking at alternative, "indigenous" ways of employing the stereotype; this strategy supplements attempts at undermining stereotypes by testing their factual relationship with social reality.

Six Amateur Gold Farmers

Access to interviewees, and the initial idea of doing this project, grew out of teaching Chinese undergraduate and postgraduate students at a UK university in China. During

seminars on the blurring of work and play, students were shown excerpts from a documentary that included a visit to a Shanghai gold farm (Beuvain & Chabalier, 2006). Some students commented that they had been doing something similar to what they saw on screen, which surprised me since I assumed participation in gold farming to be driven by economic necessity. It seemed like some of my comfortably middle-class students had been engaged in amateur gold farming for reasons not immediately obvious. Having obtained ethics clearance following standard university procedure, I approached those students. Two of them agreed to be interviewed and helped me get in touch with additional current and former students with relevant experience.

In April and May 2014, I conducted semi-structured interviews with six former amateur gold farmers (five male, one female) born between 1982 and 1992. The interviews lasted between 25 and 60 minutes; one interview was done via e-mail. I will be referring to the interviewees by the roman numerals I to VI. An interviewee's gender and year of birth is given on first mention and repeated where that information is ~~seems~~ particularly relevant.

It seemed obvious from first contact that the interviewees did not fit two of the most basic dichotomies underlying the stereotype of the Chinese gold farmer.

First, the dichotomy between First World and Third World. China is a developing country yet has a significant and growing middle class (for rigorous treatment of the development and size of the Chinese middle class, see Goodman, 2014). As one might perhaps expect, Chinese players of sufficient means are about as likely to be gold farm customers as are players of similar means elsewhere, an assumption supported by Lehdonvirta and Ernkvist's (2011) estimate that "around one in four" MMO players worldwide "are buying secondary market gaming services each year, with slightly higher percentages in Korea and China than in the Western market" (p. 13; services are bought from

a “secondary market” if they are bought from someone other than the game operator). Gold farms are, to make a similar point from the perspective of production, “both domestic- and export-market oriented” (Heeks, 2008, p. 41), a fact that does not fit an overarching story of oppressed Third World-Chinese workers drudging away for First World-foreign customers.

Second, the dichotomy between buyers and sellers. Although Richard Heeks (2008) draws attention to news stories from Malaysia and the Philippines about gold farming that is “informal, with earnings being small (a few or a few tens of US dollars), irregular and used either to cover the costs of game play, or to provide a bit of extra ‘pocket-money’” (p. 37), and Dal Yong Jin and Florence Chee (2008) have interviewed Korean “amateur players” (p. 51) who make “extra pocket money” (p. 53) in a similar way, players are generally thought to be either buyers or sellers (unless, of course, they are neither). Gold farmers are generally expected to be professionals who “play games for a living” (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014, p. 140) and buyers are not expected to dabble in sales themselves.

Perhaps influenced by the Chinese gold farmer stereotype myself, I went into the interviews thinking that my middle-class interviewees would reproduce class distinctions found offline by distancing themselves from their less fortunate countrymen and talking about their own practices as if they were distinct from those of professional gold farmers. I found instead that the interviewees thought of what they did as ~~a~~ something that differed from professional gold farming in degree rather than kind, an amateur version of “professional” (II, male, born 1992) gold farming, something similar but “not exactly the same” (I, male, born 1992). Interviewees have “learned from them” (I)—that is, the professional gold farmers—for example when it comes to providing levelling-up services to other players: “[I now] do the service that people offer me before, like from [level] 1 to 40, use a bug, know the rules . . . I’m now the one who leads” (II). Professional gold farmers were generally referred

to with words such as “people”, “guys” (II), “some player” (I) that did not suggest significant distance between buyer and seller.

An important difference between amateur and professional gold farmers is, however, the relative value of gold farming earnings. Professionals might count on full-time gold farming for their livelihoods, amateurs have a very different perspective. One interviewee would, for example, make 30 RMB (30 Chinese Yuan; slightly less than 5 USD) by playing *World of Warcraft* for 2-3 hours. He did so during a period in 2011 when he engaged in amateur gold farming as a teenaged student. To get a sense of how much 30 RMB was for him back then, I asked him how much he would “spend on clothes and cinema and drinks or whatever”: “Per month I would spend nearly 2,000 or more than 2,000 RMB. 30 RMB is really nothing for me but it is something that I get by myself from the game so I’m still proud of it” (I, male, born 1992). In the strict dictionary definition of the word, an amateur is someone who is unpaid. By dismissing his earnings as “really nothing,” this player makes the amateur gold farmer label fit him a bit better.

Not only money but also time is valued differently by amateur and professional. The value of the professional’s time is by definition smaller than the money that can be earned by spending that time gold farming. Things are more ambiguous when it comes to the amateur whose time is appraised in constantly evolving ways. A player stating that “in 2011, I totally sold (virtual goods/services) for 300 RMB. I had nothing to do anyways. Games helped me killing time” (V, male, born 1989) does not seem to value his time very highly but the value of time changes with the amateur’s circumstances and outlook. This is illustrated by an interviewee explaining why some players end their amateur gold farming: “[they] get tired of it and they have to work in their real life and they don’t have much time to do it so they just withdraw [from] it” (I). External circumstances and internal motivation are intertwined in the

quote. Determining whether someone “has time” for amateur gold farming is not just a question of counting the minutes spent on all other activities and measuring the time remaining, the player’s motivation for engaging in such a time-consuming activity must also be taken into account.

Chinese servers and Chinese MMOGs

A basic understanding of the Chinese context soon proved indispensable, no matter if the conversations turned to U.S. *World of Warcraft*, Korean *Legend of Mir II,* Chinese *Wulin 2* or any of the other games interviewees had played. During each conversation I would at some point test the contamination argument: the notion that gold farming and real-money trading (RMT) do not belong in MMOGs because they contaminate a fantasy world with something mundane, for example by filling up “in-game chat channels” with the already mentioned “spam advertising” (Lehdonvirta & Castronova, 2014, p. 148; cf.-Taylor [2006] on “the frustration some feel with real-money trade” [p. 321]). One player, who answered with reference to *World of Warcraft,* replied that “the Chinese server is different from the Western one” (I). While he himself felt that players who used levelling-up services were missing out on the “history” and “fantastic story” *World of Warcraft* had to offer, the use of such a service is “normalised in Chinese WoW” (I). He also stated that “it is normal to hear . . . somebody would shout in the game, ‘it is time for us to make money’” (I) when forming so-called goldteams, that is, temporary teams of amateur gold farmers who complete instances together for financial gain. Selling gold for real money would be a simple matter of “[shouting] in the game, ‘I have gold and I would like to get some cash in reality, and if you want to buy the gold you can contact with me’” (I).

The other interviewees discussed RMT in similarly relaxed ways, going against universal claims such as “advertising in in-game chat channels is a typical technique [for

retailers to reach their target group], but as it significantly detracts from the gaming experience, both gamers and operators detest it" (Lehdonvirta & Ernkvist, 2011, p. 16). I obviously cannot extrapolate from six interviewees to the entire Chinese gaming population but I find it significant that I found no evidence of players detesting advertising or any other aspects of gold farming. I suggest paying attention to specific server cultures, for example along the lines of nations and regions, rather than making general claims about players and their gaming experiences.

One reason why attitudes towards RMT, advertising and gold farming on a Chinese *World of Warcraft* server might differ from attitudes found on a Western server is probably to be found in the prevalence of certain business models in the Chinese MMOG market. The early, successful MMO games in China were Korean (Jin, 2010, p. 39) and followed the subscription-based business model also known from *World of Warcraft* in Europe and North America. MMO games operated in China now follow a freemium business modes pioneered by the rapidly growing Chinese gaming industry (Yu, 2014). In a freemium model, the game in its most basic version is provided for free and game operators then make a profit by selling various kinds of "premium" upgrades to players through micro-payments. *World of Warcraft* is now the only exception to the freemium rule: players of *World of Warcraft* in China must enter codes from game cards that give them access to the game for a given number of minutes. The prevalence of the freemium/micro-payment model makes it difficult for some players to even consider the argument that RMT contaminates the atmosphere of a fantasy world: "My concepts are so different. . . . the companies sell things themselves. I know for certain games you even have to pay for hours, that's real money, so you can't really separate this from real world" (IV, male, born 1982).

Another player based his rejection of the contamination argument on a very general

idea about the difference between China and the West: “the westerners’ life is too easy. They don’t have any material demand. However in China . . . our material demand is higher than mental/spiritual demand” (VI, male, born 1983). Apparently only someone from a place where all “material demands” are met would make the “spiritual demand” that an MMO game is kept free of RMT. This assumption obviously rests on very simplistic ideas about Western life but it gives a sense of how prominent the Chinese context and “Chineseness”—here understood as a set of character traits that interviewees identify as essentially Chinese—became for me when asking questions of the interview material. As I kept writing memos and trying out various codes, it became clear that the main analytical challenge was to establish concepts that would capture two interrelated phenomena. First, that interviewees valorised (professional and amateur) gold farming even when it included or was closely related to activities that might seem morally dubious—such as exploitation of design bugs, trading of goods and services without the knowledge and consent of game providers, and cheating other players out of real money. Second, that interviewees understood proficient engagement in such activities to be underpinned by attitudes and capabilities that were essentially Chinese. For a while, I considered using the potentially controversial term “Chinese cunning” but settled on a set of terms—“Chinese ingenuity,”,–independence and marginality, and critique—already clustered around shanzhai in the work of Andrew Chubb (2015).

Shanzhai

The word shanzhai, literally “the hideout of mountain bandits” (Keane, 2013, p. 118), “has been present in Chinese language since ancient times in reference to mountain villages or stockades” (Chubb, 2015, p. 264). The ancient sense of rebelliousness still lingers, as does connotations of the uncouth; in China, civilisation has historically been tied to the cities of the plains, along the great rivers and the eastern seaboard, whereas mountainous regions have

been considered culturally and technologically inferior. According to Laikwan Pang (2012), shanzhai was first used in something approaching the contemporary sense “in Hong Kong in the 1960s as *shanzhai chang* (山寨廠) to refer to small or family-owned factories sprouting up in the peripheral urban areas producing light industry products like watches, toys, and garments” (p. 222).

Shanzhai became a hugely popular term in China “over the course of a few months in 2008” (Chubb, 2015, p. 260). Core examples come from the domain of consumer electronics but not all cheap Chinese phone knock-offs are considered shanzhai. The shanzhai Nokia phone does not pretend to be a Nokia but draws attention to the difference between original and fake, for example with the addition of a built-in cigarette lighter. A less comical example would be a shanzhai iPad featuring the USB port missing from the Apple original. Since 2008, phenomena as diverse as a “a dog with its fur dyed to look like a panda” and “a case in which criminals posed as policemen” (Chubb, 2015, p. 260) have been labelled shanzhai, leading Laikwan Pang (2012) to conclude that “the term has been widely used in China to refer not only to copycat designs and knockoffs . . . but also to a uniquely grassroots culture which is adaptive, creative, and unashamed” (p. 222). As an illustration of the latter, Keane (2013) notes that “in China’s cities, shanzhai phones have found favour with ‘cool’ youth, keen to show off their rebellious spirit” (p. 120).

With a formulation that, perhaps unknowingly, evokes shanzhai’s etymological roots in untamed mountain areas, Chris Anderson (2012) connects shanzhai with the open source movement: “Once ideas and technology get into the wild, whether dragged there by piracy or placed there by developers who believe in open source, they tend to stimulate the same sort of collaborative imagination” (p. 211). It must be remembered, however, that shanzhai is understood—in China—to denote attitudes and capabilities that are not universal but

specifically Chinese. Chubb (2015) thus quotes Zhu Dake, “one of China’s most respected cultural commentators” (p. 273), for calling “shanzhai the expression of a ‘rogue spirit’ that has existed under various names throughout the aeons of Chinese history” (pp. 273f).

In short, Shanzhai is not only a term for innovative pirating but also a site for debate of a rebellious grassroots aspect of Chineseness and its role in contemporary China under globalisation. Shanzhai is, in Chubb’s (2015) words, an “identity,” and he notices three “major sites of shared interpretation on the value and appeal of *shanzhai* identity: ingenious Chineseness, marginality and independence, and playfulness and critique” (p. 272). I will, with a metaphor from Mieke Bal (2002), be using Chubb’s work as a “rough guide” (p. 3) for exploration of amateur gold farming. “Rough because partial” and “like those rough guides for cheap and handy travel” (Bal, 2002, p. 3) because it might “guide the traveller . . . away from the hasty highway . . . that leads . . . to knowledge-as-possession” (p. 185). Shanzhai is evoked as the borderlines of three sites for the production of knowledge-as-interpretation, not as a concept that allows us to capture (and “possess”) the phenomenon of amateur gold farming. In practical terms, this means that the next three sections—*“Chinese ingenuity,”*, *Marginality and Independence*, and *Critique?*—will be loosely structured around Chubb’s three sites.

“Chinese Ingenuity”

Across the interviews, gold farming was seen as an expression of a specifically Chinese kind of ingenuity that showed itself both in the production and the trading of MMOG currencies, items and services. Customers have easy access to such goods and services in China. Taobao—by far the world’s largest online shopping website—offers plenty of MMOG goods and services, which can also be found on specialised websites such as 5173.com. It is clear to the interviewees, however, that buying MMOG currencies, items or services involves

risk. The perceived risk of being cheated is countered by the seller's reputation: "they just don't trust the people that don't have any reputation" (I), "I have already [bought] the service from him and he's the one who I can trust" (II).

Sites such as Taobao and 5173.com function as shopping portals where buyers and sellers meet. The finer details of a transaction are then discussed through other channels, for example Tencent's popular QQ instant messaging service, before goods and services are delivered, typically inside the virtual world of the MMOG itself. The online shopping portals have mechanisms for collecting user feedback in the shape of numerical scores and comments from former customers—similar to a site such as Airbnb—which are displayed very prominently. Reputation can, however, also stem partly from the seller's performance as a gamer: "he is the best [alchemist on a *World of Warcraft* server] . . . and some people get that information know that OK he is in high reputation and he won't cheat me so I just give the cash first and then he will pay me" (I).

The sense of risk was particularly high when it came to levelling-up services. The most efficient way of buying such a service is to hand over one's avatar to the service provider and then get the avatar back when it has reached an agreed upon level. Some interviewees avoided this kind of service entirely, one (II) used it only after successfully buying other services—that involved less risk—from the same provider, gradually building up trust. A less efficient but safer mode of buying levelling-up services consists of staying in control of your avatar and then following the service provider into a bugged part of the virtual world: "Chinese people are very smart, they find some bugs" (II), and these bugs allow gold farmers and their clients to remain within an instance indefinitely and quickly accumulate large amounts of experience points.

Generalisations about "Chinese people" were also made by an interviewee who had a

sword worth approximately 500 RMB stolen from him: “Because Chinese people, they will cheat others. They will [steal] your equipment” (V). The victim did not express anger but a certain respect for the ingenuity with which the thief had managed to fake their reputation score, leading the victim to trust the thief and hand over the valuable virtual item. In the same vein, Chubb (2015) mentions how members of the Chinese public “expressed wonders at the imposters’ guile, likening it to the ingenuity of shanzhai mobile phones” (p. 272) upon learning that criminals had managed to build a fake police station. Based on his analysis of “Chinese elite and popular commentary from the 2008-2009 period” (Chubb, 2015, p. 262), Chubb concludes that “the perception of Chinese ingenuity seems to have been one element of the popularity of the shanzhai identity among consumers” (p. 273).

The same kind of tinkering, pragmatic and “Chinese” ingenuity appears to be celebrated across the gold farming-related examples, from exploitation of bugs over highly efficient playing styles to cunning theft. A parallel can be drawn to Lisa Raphals’ (1992) argument that two modes of thought described in ancient literature, Greek *mētis* and Chinese *zhi*, have so much in common that they are in fact the same kind of “metic intelligence” (p. 4). Metic intelligence avoids the linkage of virtue and knowledge that entered the Western tradition with Socrates (p. 3): “Metic intelligence does not fit into this moralizing tendency, because it presents us with a continuum of wisdom and cunning” (p. 4). Greek mētis is a practical kind of intelligence, which “it is tempting, but misleading, to reduce . . . to ‘know-how knowledge’,” (Raphals, 1992, p. 5) just as Chinese zhi is a kind of “knowing” defined by Confucius “as dynamic and performative,” a kind of knowing that seeks “authentication in action” (Hall & Ames, 1995, pp. 205, n. 87).[1]

Amateur gold farmers’ use of software known as *waigua* (literally plug) can be used to illustrate this pragmatic side of “Chinese ingenuity.” From a user perspective, a waigua

functions as a simple plug-in and is typically paid for via subscription (for example monthly). Waiguas not only relieve players of tedious tasks through automatisation, some enable players to cheat outright, for example by reducing the cooldown time of a magic spell. Stressing the difference between such "cheater" waiguas and the "mainstream" ones that merely allow automatisation, one interviewee says about the latter: "I don't think it's a cheater . . . I think it's just an assistant programme to help you" (V). In this player's estimation, widespread use of waiguas is gradually replacing Chinese customers' reliance on traditional gold farmers.[2]

The perceived irrelevance of morality in matters such as the exploitation of bugs and the use of waiguas is underpinned by an attitude of tinkering performance-maximisation that creates associations to hacking. In his authoritative account, Steven Levy (1994) describes a "Hacker Ethic" (p. 40) in ways that resonate with metic intelligence. The first tenet of the Hacker Ethic is thus the "Hands-On Imperative": "Hackers believe that essential lessons can be learned about systems—about the world—from taking things apart, seeing how they work, and using this knowledge to create new and even more interesting things" (p. 40). Knowledge is tied to action and valorised to the extent that is has practical application, not according to its place in an abstract system of belief. The Hands-On iImperative entails a rebellious stance towards authorities who attempt to restrict the flow of information or the access to computers; the latter was of major concern to the first hackers at MIT in the late 1950s since the university computers were rare and extremely expensive. Hacker participants in the 1984 "The Future of the Hacker Ethic" forum led by Levy, later "agreed . . . that they would regard people who impeded their computing as bureaucrats rather than legitimate authorities" (Turner, 2006, p. 137). Also shanzhai and gold farmers tend to value inventiveness and efficiency in ways that are at odds with authority. In shanzhai's case

authority could for example take the shape of copyright law whereas gold farmers might be at odds with game operators.

Over time, the word "hacking" took on a meaning beyond Levy's original, idealistic account of a practice underpinned by a Hacker Ethic. Through invention of a new word, "cracker," attempts were made to delineate "the good hackers who bring us the wonders of technological advancement" from "the evil hackers who steal our credit card numbers" (Erickson, 2008, p. 3). Noting that these attempts at redefinition failed and hacking thus remained the catch-all term, Jon Erickson (2008) comments that he "[believes] that anyone who has the hacker spirit is a hacker, despite any laws he or she may break" (p. 3). As with metic intelligence and shanzhai's rogue spirit, hacking is neither intrinsically good nor bad. Hacking denotes a capacity that cannot meaningfully be morally assessed in itself. But whereas the terms metic intelligence and Hacker Ethic aim at capturing something universal to the human being, shanzhai is intimately linked to Chineseness, and shanzhai identity contains an element of pride in "Chinese ingenuity" that can also be traced in amateur gold farming.

Independence and Marginality

By discussing strained relationships with authority, I have already moved from Chubb's first site of interpretation of shanzhai—ingenuity and Chineseness—to the second, independence and marginality. Shanzhai has an ambiguous relationship with authority. An innovative copycat version of a Nokia phone is, for example, simultaneously a celebration of Nokia and a "jeering" (Chubb, 2015, p. 263) at Nokia. Returning for a moment to shanzhai's perceived historical roots, "popular discourses surrounding the origin and spirit behind shanzhai things are rich in historical referents, and may be more important to the shanzhai identity than the actual spaces and processes themselves" (Chubb, 2015, p. 27). One of the

key historical referents is the classic Chinese novel, "Outlaws of the March," or "The Water Margin," as it is also known. Its heroes are independent-minded Robin Hood-like outlaws who embody shanzhai spirit by taking up a position that is marginal in both geographical and societal terms, in a sense prefiguring the small shanzhai factories and workshops in "the peripheral urban areas" (Pang, 2012, p. 222) of 1960s Hong Kong mentioned earlier. Gold farms share the same marginal position, if not in geographical then at least in societal and legal terms: "such enterprises are unlikely to require much external intervention; instead, their main concern is that government and other agencies should 'stay out of the way'" (Heeks, 2008, p. 40).

Independence and marginality are productive themes for investigating the practices and attitudes of the six amateur gold farmers. A key reason why those who have played *World of Warcraft* engage in amateur gold farming is that they want to earn "the gold to pay the game" (I), that is, become financially independent of the game operator by ceasing to pay them. Instead of using real currency to buy the game cards that give temporary access to a Chinese *World of Warcraft* server, amateur gold farmers will sometimes buy such cards from other players with virtual gold coins.

The monetary value of game cards is relatively insignificant for the interviewees; one talks about "my psychological demand of 'earning easy money'" (VI): the demand is psychological, not material or practical. Interviewees talk instead of the "pride" and "pleasure" (I), and also the social status (II, III, V), derived from playing MMO games without paying real money. These benefits are sometimes framed within a narrative of personal maturation. According to ancient tradition, Chinese children receive red envelopes containing money from elder relatives during Spring Festival (Chinese New Year). One interviewee recalls that

> I can only get money from that festival. And I give all this money to buy new weapons . . . And one day, definitely people they have a date to grow up, so one day I remember it was too suck, so . . . I changed the role of myself, I want to sell. (II)

The player eventually made about 2,000 of the 10,000 RMB he had spent on a Chinese MMO game back. He later switched to *World of Warcraft,* which he found to be much cheaper. Despite the lack of economic incentive, he wanted to achieve financial independence in this game and when looking back, he is again framing his story as a sort of maturation process. He almost seems to be relying on a folk version of Maslow's (1943) pyramid of needs when he explains how his motivation for playing the game evolves over time:

> In the game, it seem like I already have everything I want, not everything but the important thing I want like weapons or the something like that in the game . . . weapons, levels or . . . you have all your own team, and to that time you seem like in the game you play games for what? . . . you do not for level up, you do just for fun. And~~...~~ . . . meanwhile you can earn some money because . . . you can also offer service to others, so suddenly I realise it's time to earn some. (II)

First, basic needs ("weapons, levels") are met, then social needs ("you have all your own team") and then, "suddenly," a question presents itself: "you play games for what?" Feeling independent by not having to pay the game operator directly becomes an answer shared by another player who describes this mode of play as "getting something from the game" (I) as opposed to paying for the game.

For some, seeking independence from game operators dovetails with seeking

independence from family, resonating with Jin and Chee's (2008) suggestion that Korean amateur gold farmers are partly motivated to "[sell] online items" because it triggers "an increased sense of independence from one's family" (p. 53). Three of my interviewees told me stories of intense gaming featuring their families and the *Gaokao*, the dreaded entrance exams to Chinese institutions of higher education. The Gaokao lasts several days and consists of written exams that determine to which HEIs students can apply.[3] They are seen as hugely important for a young person's future because a diploma from a HEI with a good reputation is thought of as guarantee for decent employment. This creates a very strong focus on the Gaokao with families supporting and pressurising young people to do their very best. Some parents think of gaming as a potentially disastrous distraction from Gaokao preparation, and one interviewee tells the story of how her father "just grabbed something and threw it through the screen, and it's broken" (IV) to stop her from playing a game. On the other hand, parents might also allow their children to vent by playing games after the high-pressure Gaokao period: "[I played] 16 hours [per day] . . . in 2011, . . . the summer after I finished my exam of Gaokao. Lots of students, when they finish that exam, they play a lot of game or do anything they like" (II, male, born 1992). One way for players to do "anything they like," rather than what their parents tell them to, is to play an MMOG in a way that feels independent of the game's operator, giving a young person a double sense of independence.

Critique?

It is paradoxical that players would seek independence by playing in a way that is extremely socially constraining. Those who managed to play *World of Warcraft* without paying the game operator gave up after a while because they found the style of play too taxing:

> after a semester I get tired because I think I spend too much time, too much

> spare time, and I can't play with my friends, go lunch with them and enjoy activities in the [student] societies, so I just withdraw [from] it, I think it's too [tiring] for me, I just come back to paying money to Blizzard. (I)[4]

Wanting to play for free or to earn one's money back suggests a certain sense of rebelliousness against the game but such rebellion is short-lived. "I know I have already [put] too much money at the game. So I want to earn something back" (II) can be said to express an independent or self-marginalising stance but it hardly suggests a critical position because it does not aim at fundamental change in the relationship between game and player. Players ultimately return to more mainstream modes of engagement with the games. Saying that "I have already [put] too much money at the game" is actually more of a critical reflection on the player's own gaming history than on the design and business models of the games in which he has invested so much time and money.

There is a parallel here to shanzhai's "paradoxical relationship with the concept of resistance" (Chubb, 2015, p. 279), with "shanzhai culture's simultaneous worship of and jeering at authority" (p. 263). A brand might lose value if customers and media ignore it, not by a shanzhai parody drawing attention to the difference between fake and original. In its way, the parody recognises the inherent value of the original. Amateur gold farmers are not challenging subscription-based business models as much as they are defining and embracing their own mode of engagement with the subscription-based MMOG.

Conclusion

If it is true that the social dynamics emerging on a Chinese *World of Warcraft* server differ from those found on a Western server inasmuch as gold farming does not lead to tensions between players, amateur gold farming might have a positive effect seen from the game operator's perspective. An amateur gold farmer who successfully plays *World of*

Warcraft without paying the operator directly is still generating income, as other players will need to purchase game cards and use them as payment to the amateur gold farmer. Also, amateur gold farmers might leave the game earlier than they might otherwise do without the opportunity to play in their own, very dedicated way. Blizzard's April 2015 introduction of the *WoW token* can be read as an attempt to accommodate this mode of play on the game operator's conditions. Players can buy WoW tokens with either real or in-game currency (a transaction between two primary parties, blocking out the third party gaming industry). Players can then sell WoW tokens for either game time or in-game currency. This mechanism allows for a tamed version of amateur gold farming where players can produce game time but cannot extract real currency from the game, a kind of "amateur production" (Kerr, 2011, p. 36) that ultimately benefits the game operator.

The stereotype of the Chinese gold farmer has been criticised for overshadowing a social reality in which gold farmers are much more tech-savvy than the stereotype allows them to appear (Nardi & Kow, 2010) and for feeding off racist, anti-immigration discourses (Yee, 2006). This work has been done very proficiently, and I share the unease with stereotype that motivates it, but I have tried here to demonstrate a different way of working against stereotype. Rather than questioning and testing the relationship between Western stereotype and empirical reality I have tried to show that the figure of the Chinese gold farmer might play a very different discursive role in its native setting. In China, at least amongst the admittedly very limited number of amateur gold farmers I have interviewed, the figure is associated with a sense of pride in "Chinese ingenuity," a tinkering kind of practical intelligence that ranges from wisdom to cunning with all the both negative and positive connotations that entails. This makes it attractive for amateurs to use gold farming techniques —to become a bit like the professional gold farmer—in their attempts at experiencing a

somewhat paradoxical kind of temporary independence from game operators and perhaps also, simultaneously, from parents.

Notes

1. The Confucian linkage of knowledge and practical application can be framed negatively as a lack of "interest in knowledge for its own sake in China" (Nisbett, p. 40), hence a lack of scientific tradition in the Western sense.

2. Rather than the spread of waiguas for personal use, Lehdonvirta and Castronova (2014) point to increased labour costs as a reason why there has been a sharp decline in the number of Chinese gold farms (p. 141).

3. At the time of writing (June 2015), the Gaokao system is being reformed. The HEI intake of students for the academic year 2015-2016 will, for example, be partly based on interviews with students rather than solely on their scores from written exams.

4. The player did not "[pay] money to Blizzard" directly but to a Chinese operator.

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