Productive vs. Pathological:
The Contested Space of Video Games in Post-Reform China
(1980s–2012)

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This article analyzes the discourses of video games in post-reform China, explicating gaming technology as a contested space coproduced by various social players struggling for power and cultural legitimacy in the context of post-socialist transition. As an imported foreign technology, video games are often identified by various social forces as either a solution to or a cause of the contradictions and crises generated by reform, which produces a recurring dialectical representation of the medium as both productive and pathological. The contrasting fates of arcade and console games in the 1980s and the interplay between promotion and regulation of PC games in the 1990s led to the contemporary battle over Internet addiction and new definitions of pathology and productivity. Those seemingly contradictory cultural discourses constitute and reflect power struggles among different stakeholders over the meaning, form, and use of new technologies as China transitions from a socialist to a post-socialist society.

Before he become SKY, he was a juvenile delinquent, a shameful son, addicted to games and living on instant noodles in a netbar. After he became SKY, he transformed into a world champion and a pop idol. He is an excellent exemplar of the Chinese generation born in the 1980s! (Li, 2012)[1]

About 14.1%, or nearly 2.5 million of urban young Internet users are addicts . . . online games rely on elements of attack, fight and competition, which can lead gamers to irrationality and immorality, sanctioning the behavior of achieving one's goal by harming others—some violent and pornographic games are often considered "Electronic Heroin." (Xu, 2012)

These two seemingly contradictory media representations of video gamers, which both appeared in the summer of 2012, explicitly illustrate how video game culture is simultaneously celebrated and demonized, promoted and controlled in contemporary Chinese society. Why is the young gamer lauded as a rebellious hero, celebrated athletic champion, and youth idol in one account, but condemned in the other as an irrational, pathetic addict and victim of mediated violence and pornography? A close reading of the

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1 SKY is a top Chinese e-sport player.

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media discourse of video games since their introduction in China in the mid-1980s reveals the ubiquity of this "pathological" versus "productive" dichotomy over the past three decades. Indeed, the notion of new technology as a double-edged sword—a tug-of-war between techno-utopia and dystopia—is neither new nor unique to China or video games,[2] as Pingree and Gitelman (2003) observed: "Not yet fully defined, a new medium offers possibilities both positive . . . and negative . . . emergent media may be seen as instances of both risk and potential" (p. xiv).

However, the dialectic of techno-utopia and dystopia is intriguing not only for its ubiquity across geographic and temporal sites, but also for the culturally specific and historically contingent social tensions and negotiations it reveals and constitutes via competing social forces' contestation over new technologies. From the early arcade and console to PC and online games, the video game as a cultural form has always been a contested space in China, one coproduced through a complex orchestration of various social actors (the party-state, the industry, or the gamer and non-gamer public). Echoing Williams' (2003) observation that "new technology of social communication" is "at once a response to the development of an extended social, economic and political system and a response to crisis within that system," the evolution of video games in the past three decades parallels China's transformation from a socialist society of centralized control, Spartan uniformity, collective ownership, and economic equality to a post-socialist society where socialist residues rest uneasily alongside capitalist logics of private accumulation, consumerism, individualization, and liberalization.

As old and emerging values compete for prominence, video games are variously designated as a solution to and a cause of the tensions resulting from the contradictions between socialist and capitalist ideals and the crises generated by rapid social transformations in times of post-socialist reconstruction. Often the power struggle plays out in the realm of discourse and representation, as various stakeholders appropriate and exploit the shifting rhetoric of productivity and pathology to legitimize or dispute the meaning, form, and use of gaming technologies. Other media technologies, such as television and film, might have played similar roles in China since the reform, yet the relative newness of the video game medium—with its unique characteristics such as interactivity, rapid technological updates, and bridging of virtual and physical space, as well as linkages to TV, software, the Internet, and other technologies and industries—has rendered it a particularly contentious site.

Following post-Mao China's late-1970s economic reform and its opening to the global market after decades of isolation, the video game industry took off with imported Japanese and Euro-American game consoles and arcade machines. The first decade of video game development in China was as much about localizing technologies as reconstructing leisure culture and consumer society, and building a

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[2] Likewise, at the turn of the last century in the United States, the coming of telephone to the Amish community was depicted as both a "divine service" and a "sinful network" (Umble, 2003). Writing about the introduction of television to postwar U.S. society, Spigel (1992) noted the metaphor of "trouble in paradise," commenting, "Contradictions between unity and division were central to representations of television during the period of its installation." In the Chinese context, Liu (2010) underlined how the rhetoric of "recreational vs. instrumental" and "good vs. bad" played out in Chinese youth's narratives about the Internet in their construction of the "proper wired self."

different set of cultural values around digital technologies and entertainment. Whereas technocratic leadership viewed science and technology as key to modernizing China, digital entertainment bore the brunt of reform's negative social consequences. Thus the reform-minded celebrated video games as productively educating the young post-socialist subject about modern values and high-tech knowledge and skills, even as more conservative voices scapegoated them for degrading public space, promoting rampant hedonistic consumerism, and distracting young minds from "constructive" leisure.

The consumer and information revolutions intensified after Deng's 1992 Southern Excursion (Davis, 2005; Qiu, 2003), as China further integrated into global capitalism (Zhao & Schiller, 2001). After PC games emerged in the mid-1990s alongside an unprecedentedly large influx of foreign capital, the government more proactively promoted and regulated the industry, cultivating a digital-entertainment-based leisure culture. This warming official attitude, coupled with nationwide anxiety about the competition and opportunities presented by China's impending entry into the WTO, led to an upsurge of consumer and techno-nationalism. Although the productivity of video games was redefined in terms of growing a commodity-based capitalist economy and a national high-tech industry to rival China's East Asian and Euro-American competitors, pathological representations persisted and were even reinforced by discourses about netbar[3] regulation. The maturation of state capitalism gave rise to a post-socialist subjectivity of consumer citizenship that challenged socialist control via an emerging discourse endorsing legal and economic rationality set against political authoritarianism.

Upon entering the new millennium within two decades of its debut, the video game industry quickly became a multibillion-dollar sector straddling the highly profitable information and creative-cultural industries (Cao & Downing, 2008).[4] In the past decade, a moral panic arose over youth Internet addiction in view of the rapid growth of the online games industry and the dazzling expansion of China's Internet population. A strong reaction from the Internet-based gamer community drew on neoliberal rhetoric of digital empowerment to reconceptualize the productivity of video games as facilitating cultural pluralism, political participation, and economic entrepreneurship. Whereas the recent moral panic over Internet addiction in China and the rapid global expansion of the Chinese online gaming industry have attracted significant media and scholarly attention (Cao & Downing, 2008; Golub & Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010), little effort has been made to historicize these contentious developments beyond the latest technology of online games and its decade-long history.

This article moves beyond online games to unpack the cultural work performed through this fraught dialectical representation of video games as control and development unfolding in different stages of the technology's three-decade trajectory in China. It reads the discursive construction of fears and hopes about video games against the broad context of post-Tiananmen Chinese society, in which economic progress and unprecedented globalization have not been matched by political reform. Fading

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[3] Netbar, also known as Internet café, is a place that provides Internet service to the public, often for a fee.

[4] By 2012, the industry boasted semiannual sales revenue of US$3.73 billion, 71.6% of which came from domestically designed and produced games by International Data Corporation (IDC) and China Game Publisher's Association (CGPA), 2012.

socialist tradition and rising neoliberalism make odd bedfellows, demanding constant negotiation not only among competing social forces but also on the individual subjective level over conflicting values and ideals. Notwithstanding these tensions, narratives about video games reveal the general transition from a relatively monolithic socialist power to a more plural, diversified, open, and contentious Chinese society.

I have taken up this historical, multifaceted approach to digital games in direct response to the ahistorical and techno-determinist tendencies in the existing literature on networked technologies in China, as well as the inclination to examine cyberculture and digital entertainment as solely a domain of youth subculture. Whereas the former tendencies often depict an oversimplified image of digital technologies in China as a force of democratization or control, regardless of "social, political and cultural contents and contexts" (Yang, 2011, p. 8), the latter interpretation tends to neglect or misrepresent the relationship between capital and Internet culture. Oftentimes, these views reinforce the youth–state dichotomy, explicating consumption and production only through an empowerment-or-exploitation binary. In contrast, I treat technology and culture as mutually constitutive, and the boundary between consumption and production as unstable. The historical evolution of video games in China shows that new technologies are neither inherently democratic nor constraining, nor are they external to capital or state control. While new technology always opens up space for change and negotiation as society deliberates and debates its form, meaning, and use, it also "makes a room" for the technology, incorporating it into the existing social formation (Spigel, 1992).

The challenge of determining which actor (government, industry, society, or gamers) invented or "owns" a particular discourse about video games is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the complex web of motives, interests, and contingent ideological alliances behind the ongoing cultural debate over the medium (Taylor, 2012). Thus, instead of creating false categories and separations to arrive at a lucid description at the expense of complexity, I will try to reflect the story as told by a diverse collection of materials.[5] These media and archival sources present diverse narratives about video games but always speak in conversation with, rather than in isolation from, each other. The thematics of a transitioning post-socialist society replete with tensions between development and control, consumerism and regulated demand, nationalist and collective voice and individual expression, run through the cultural debates that anchor my discussion.

The article covers three chronological periods from the mid-1980s to 2012. With the interplay between the pathological and productive representation of games undergirding the evolving discourse, I will highlight several key debates in each period, focusing on continuities, ruptures, and patterns in discourse. Aware of the dichotomous and reductionist nature of the pathological-versus-productive framework, I nonetheless adopted this analytical frame not only because of its ubiquity, but also—and

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[5] The materials, which date back to the mid-1980s, include government policies, industry trade journals, popular and party-state magazines and newspapers, biographies of industry entrepreneurs and professional gamers, television programs on game addiction, and game advertising and commercials. These materials are compared to in-depth interviews I conducted with gamers and industry practitioners during multiple research trips to Mainland China from 2010 to 2012, as well as online user-generated content.

more importantly—to demonstrate the inherent instability of a binary that often betrays the contradictions in contemporary discourse about technologies. By no means will I attempt to cover the history of Chinese video games in a single article. Given how little has been said on Chinese video game culture in Western academic literature, I aim to set up the conversation and context, painting in broad strokes the historically changing meanings of video games as they have co-evolved with transitional Chinese society.

Mid-1980s to Early 1990s: Street Arcade Versus Game Console

The first decade following the arrival of video games in China in the mid-1990s was dominated by street arcades and home consoles. Local business entrepreneurs, the first batch of post-socialist private business owners and employees who "jumped into the sea" (*Xiahai*) to brave reform, embraced the golden opportunities and helped localize the imported culture and technology. Enterprises were set up, mainly in Southeast Coastal special economic zones, to manufacture game cartridges and software (Pan, 1993), and game arcades sprang up in cities of all sizes. As if overnight, pirated Nintendo games disguised as "education software" found their way into the bedrooms of young consumers-in-the-making: the "little emperors or princesses" of the so-called post-1980s single-child generation. Arcades crammed with coin-operated machines mushroomed across the nation, drawing crowds of boys on their way home from school. The rapid influx of Western and consumerist culture and technologies brought both excitement and challenges for Chinese families and society, where socialist values of collectivism, egalitarianism, and frugality—and distaste for capitalist consumerism and Western "imperialist" culture—were still too prevalent to be ignored. The discourse of productivity and pathology reflected society's effort to come to grips with the consequences of rapid commercialization and privatization, such as a declining public culture caused by weakening centralized state planning, and the growing importance of private family life to a post-socialist populace governed by the market, consumption, and modern science and technology.

The emergence of game arcades paralleled the gradual commoditization of public space as the socialist era's centers for after-school youth cultural activities—state-owned "children's palaces" and "youth cultural palaces"—yielded to underground, privately operated video halls, pool rooms, bars, and video game arcades, entertainment venues often clustered in emerging urban commercial centers (Clark, 2012). In Guangzhou, one of the first cities to open up to foreign trade after 1978, the number of game arcades surged in the fall of 1985, taking over parks, residential neighborhoods, shops, and theaters. Game arcades rapidly expanded to the hinterland, and by late 1993, Xi'an had 843 commercial arcades with almost 100,000 machines (Wu & Sun, 1986). For young people with few places to go for entertainment outside of school, game arcades were "cool" places to hang out together and stave off boredom. A 1992 survey of 200 young people in a small town in Southern China reported that 49% of the youth found city life "barren and hollow with too few cultural and entertainment activities" (Zheng, 1994).When asked what took them to arcades, 81% selected "Life is boring, I play games to seek stimulation" as the top choice (ibid.).

The media nonetheless characterized game arcades as dens of evil, comparing them to "aliens" who "captured and took our kids from us" (Wu & Sun, 1986). Arcades were even accused of turning youth into "electronic slaves" (Lv, 1994). Distraction from study, work, and "healthy" leisure was frequently singled out as damaging and worrisome. Throughout the media, arcade horror stories described how

games had turned a model student into a juvenile delinquent, or an innocent and carefree child into a liar, thief, or school dropout (Liu, 1994). Consequently, arcade games were labeled "unproductive" leisure, and the arcade a potentially "pathological" space to be regulated and policed.

Game consoles fared relatively better—once they were marketed to parents as education tools. Initially, however, Chinese consumers encountered consoles in the 1980s as "gray-market products" imported mostly from Japan. Factories were immediately set up, mainly in South China, to produce knockoff cartridges and pirated game software. As of 1990, more than 10 factories established nationwide were specializing in assembling and manufacturing game consoles, and more than 100 distributors were operating in the city of Guangzhou alone (Yue, 1990). Fierce competition brought prices down and boosted consoles' popularity, prompting discussion of the ill effects of playing games at home. But public opinion was temporarily swayed by the clever marketing tricks of the Guangdong-based game company Xiaobawang.

Said to be one of the first Chinese businesses that truly understood the power of consumer research and commercial advertising, Xiaobawang launched its first-generation "computer study machine" in 1993. It was nothing more than a game console upgraded with a keyboard, allowing kids to both play games and learn how to type or use educational software. Nevertheless, the design targeted parents who wanted their children to learn computer technologies but were unable to afford a home PC. Deng had famously stipulated in 1984 that "computer literacy is to start with children," and now eager parents worried about their kids "being left behind" jumped on the commercial bandwagon in response. A late 1993 survey of secondary-school students in Beijing showed that more than 60.7% of the students surveyed owned a game console (Yu, 1994). In 1994, Xiaobawang became the first electronic game company to run TV commercials on China's Central Television. Targeting parents and the burgeoning youth market, this advertising featured the martial arts movie star Jackie Chan, whose Chinese screen name (*Cheng long*) happens to correspond to the idiom "wangzichenglong" or "to have great ambitions for one's child." In one such ad, Jackie Chan recited: "In the past, I struck out for myself with my fists. Nowadays in the era of computer, my child has to strike out for himself with Xiaobawang!"

Xiaobawang reformed the "pathological" image of video games, recasting them as "productive" leisure by merging education and play, and combining computers and games in one device for easy assimilation into Chinese culture. Indeed, the educational potential of video games was a discussion topic even before the commercial success of Xiaobawang. One parenting magazine wrote that "children who were trained by video games have better spatial cognitive ability, enhanced attention span, and improved decision-making capacity" (Gu, 1993). The article recommended that parents let their kids "adapt to" and learn how to use "high-tech toys," as they would likely confront more and more digitalized machinery in a "high-tech" era. Complementing such advice were real-life stories demonstrating how computer games piqued young people's curiosity about computer technology and opened doors to learning about programming and other new high-tech skills (Yue, 1990). Xiaobawang appropriated values already incubating and circulating in the cultural discourse and manifested them through technological devices, amply illustrating the mutual shaping of technology and culture. However, parents soon discovered that the device's teaching function was subordinate to its entertainment allure, which quickly recalibrated popular attitudes toward game consoles.

What explains the contrary receptions of arcade and console games? One interpretation derives from the varied ways of discursively framing video game technology in relation to the dialectic of productivity and pathology, which reflects larger cultural debates about shifting meanings of leisure, education, and consumption. The socialist party-state had always denigrated consumerism and Western digital entertainment culture as a "malicious bourgeois tumor." Mainstream culture tolerated video games upon their introduction in China mainly because boosting telecommunication development and commoditization served the state's aim of modernizing the country. While video-gaming technologies were instrumental in educating young people about modern technologies and Western culture—knowledge essential to improving the general quality, or *sushi*, of China's labor force—they also distracted youth from studying, working, or participating in other socially endorsed leisure activities and exposed them to the corruptions of Western consumerism and hedonism.

The stakes became higher when the first, post-1980 generation of singletons born under the one-child policy entered the picture. Often depicted in the media as individualistic, cosseted, and consumerist, they were both spoiled and burdened by the hopes and attention of their extended family, especially parents who had been deprived of fair education opportunities in the decade-long turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (Cockain, 2012). Thus "pathological" leisure activities, such as hanging out and playing games in arcades, had to be distinguished from "productive" ones like learning computer skills and English with a Xiaobawang computer study machine. As post-socialist reform deepened, another reason for the arcade's decline and Xiaobawang's success was the increasing separation of domestic from public space—the former often depicted as a haven from crime-infested public entertainment venues housing rampant gambling, prostitution, and violence. While arcades were being scapegoated as the cause of rising consumerism, the collapse of public space, moral decay, and growing family crises, consoles could, for a brief moment, claim a certain cultural legitimacy in the family room.

Mid-1990s to Early 2000: PC Games and Wangba

The brutal events that unfolded under the international spotlight at Tiananmen Square in the summer of 1989 marked a decisive moment for authoritarian state capitalism in post-socialist China. Deng's Southern Excursion in 1992 deepened the reform. His catchphrase, "To get rich is glorious," acquired proverbial currency, unleashing a national wave of personal entrepreneurship (Wang, 2001). Thus, the PC games industry emerged in China when foreign capital and technological expertise were seeding entrepreneurship in the high-tech and entertainment culture sectors. The period from 1995 to 2001 witnessed the formation of the Chinese PC games industry along with a surge in home computer ownership in urban China (Wei, 1994). Unlike arcade and console gamers, early adopters of PC games were urban elites: young white-collar workers in the IT or education sectors, college students, and teenagers from relatively well-off households. This new consumer segment quickly allied itself with the burgeoning PC games industry, from which emerged the first generation of Chinese programmers, web designers, IT entrepreneurs, and digital technology enthusiasts. Those "digital utopists" became ardent champions of the local video games industry in the face of fierce foreign competition, reappropriating the rhetoric of productivity in alignment with prevailing nationalist sentiments. Nevertheless, the early techno-nationalist discourses about PC games soon found a formidable opponent in Wangba regulators and their supporters, whose logic and rhetoric rehearsed arcade bashers' arguments for labeling video games

pathological. As a result, the PC gaming period was marked by a tug-of-war between the utopian thinking of promotion and the dystopian call for control and regulation.

China-Made, Made for China

Despite the growing popularity of Chinese PC games after 1995, Japanese, Euro-American, and later Taiwanese imports—legitimate or pirated—dominated the Chinese game market. Niche media covering the high-tech industry talked fervently of game "cheats and tips" as ways to reclaim production power from foreign companies in promoting domestic electronic software innovation. Nationalism was mobilized as a unifying ideology, not only to legitimize "China-made" game software, solicit support for it (Diannaobao, 1998a), and combat a perceived Western invasion of young minds (Jiang, 1998), but also to counter cultural stigma and policy constraints by calling for games "made for China," that is, games that both suited Chinese tastes and preserved indigenous cultural traditions. This discourse did not posit video games as inherently pathological, but rather claimed that their foreign origin and content made them so. Thus localization became essential to unleashing their cultural and economic productivity. An article in a 1998 issue of *Computer Newspaper* reveals this strategic coupling of nationalism with the dystopian-versus-utopian dialectic:

> From *Red Alert*'s distortion of the Communist image, *Civilization*'s disparagement of the Shang dynasty culture, to *People's General*'s propagation of "Yellow Peril," it is time for us to wake up to the reality! To strengthen our spiritual civilization, we have to value video games as the "Ninth Art." After all, our fate, especially that of our children, should not be controlled by foreigners! (Diannaobao, 1998b)

This nationalist surge in the video game industry reflects the prevailing cultural sentiments of the time. That same year, following right-wing Japanese claims on the Diaoyu Islands, a strong wave of anti-Japan protests swept the nation. The 1997 Asian financial crisis and China's impending entry into the World Trade Organization (TWO) only exacerbated anxiety over foreign competition (Zhao, 2007), marking a radical departure from the pre-1989 enchantment with Western culture.

In such a context, the video-game industry's "Diaoyu Islands Incident" hit China in the summer of 1996, when 11 "patriotic young employees" quit their jobs at a Tianjin-based Japanese-owned software company to protest the video game *The Prefect's Decision III* (Diannaobao, 1998b). Set in World War II, the game was accused of "seriously distorting history by glorifying the Japanese invaders," which "severely offended of the Chinese people" (Diannaobao, 1998b). Impressed by their patriotism, the Zhuhai-based IT entrepreneur Qiu Bojun invited them to produce the anti-Japanese video game *Anti-Japan I: Mine Warfare*. A take on the communist propaganda movie *Mine Warfare*, the game fed on widespread nationalist sentiment, and its marketing hype exploited the incident. The game was launched in 1998 at Nanjing Massacre Memorial Hall on the 61st anniversary of the Nanjing Massacre in a gesture that, according to the producer, cautioned Chinese people "never to forget history and national humiliation" (ibid.). It was one of many games manufactured at the time that either took an anti-imperialist theme or appropriated Chinese traditional culture to create games that would appeal to Chinese gamers.

How did the discourse of productivity become embedded in a bizarre union of nationalism, consumerism, entrepreneurism, and socialism? The revolution launched in the mid-1980s to boost informationization and domestic consumption was in full swing by the turn of the new millennium (Davis, 2005; Qiu, 2003. The double forces of globalization and commercialization facilitated importation and consumption of Western entertainment culture, simultaneously threatening and stimulating domestic production of cultural commodities. Following the example of Korea, which had boosted its digital games industry in the wake of the 1997 crisis (Jin, 2010), the Chinese party-state shook off its ideological straitjacket to embrace culture and technology as both capital and tools of statecraft for regime legitimization. Like purchasing home computers and surfing online, playing PC games was marketed as a hip, modern leisure activity (Qiu, 2002). Meanwhile, digital consumption was associated with promoting the domestic high-tech and cultural industries, and consumer shrewdness and tech savvy were connected to the post-socialist ideal of consumer citizenship (Keane, 2001; Wang, 2001). Playing computer games, especially Chinese-made games, translated into a productive practice of patriotism and self-cultivation of an ideal post-socialist subjectivity.

However, video game critics persistently identified a range of negative effects of gaming—exposure to violent and pornographic content, excessive hours of play, unrestrained consumerism, the erosion of young minds by Western culture—all counterproductive and threatening to nationalist and socialist goals. Echoing Jing Wang's (2001) argument that "the new subjectivity in the ideal citizen" of post-socialist China is "ultimately a subject that is subjugated to market reasoning at the state's command" (pp. 42–43), these critics concluded that the games industry and gamers must be constantly guided, controlled, policed, and disciplined. This "pathological" side of game culture justified monitoring, censorship, and regulation of Wangba, the primary site for game consumption in the late 1990s.

The Debate Over Wangba

Wangba (Internet cafés) hit major Chinese metropolises in late 1996 (Lv, 1998) and soon flourished across the country. By early 2001, Beijing boasted Wangba by the thousands, and their precise number might be underreported, given that many existed within the underground informal. Paralleling the story of PC bangs in Korea (Jin, 2010), gaming's growing popularity explained the instantaneous nationwide boom in Wangba between 1997 and 2001 (Su, 1999). As of 1999, 90% of Internet cafés in Beijing were "computer-game rooms" in disguise, providing no Internet but only LAN connection service (ibid.). Playing LAN games like Warcraft III and Counterstrike became such a fad among young people that many younger adults today speak nostalgically about their early Wangba gaming experiences (Szablewicz, 2011).

Although the Wangba boom stimulated video game production and facilitated the diffusion of computer technologies at a time when the national home computer penetration rate was only 0.89%, it created problems and concerns for cities and urban families, just as street arcades had ("Geren diannao pujilv," 2000). Familiar debates about the productive and pathological sides of video games reemerged with a vengeance. The government issued a series of regulations from 1996 to 2002, prohibiting Wangba

from carrying video games or admitting minors, tightening the issuance of operating licenses, and requiring periodical inspections of existing businesses (Li, 1999).

Whereas the discourse around Wangba largely followed from that of the arcade, close examination uncovers more heterogeneous voices, with growing emphasis on economic consequences and the construction of more efficient and rational legal and regulatory systems (Wan & Li, 2000). A Wangba owner in Hangzhou, taking advantage of a constitutional amendment that granted the ordinary citizen the right to file complaints against government regulation, sued the local culture bureau on the grounds that "the government failed to take into consideration the economic direction pursued by the state towards greater liberalization" (ibid, p. 8). Appropriating the official language of the central government, the plaintiff called for reform of the current legal and regulatory system: "Allowing healthy computer games to flourish will boost the telecom industry, promote economic development, and raise the citizens' cultural quality," and it was unscientific for the bureau to "ban the computer games industry because it is hard to control and regulate" (ibid). The media often cited economic productivity as a major argument against the Wangba crackdown and control of the games industry. By the late 1990s, neoliberal economic development was widely accepted; indeed, calling the market the "best barometer," the *Cultural Monthly* cited several economic reasons to endorse the video games industry:

> Given the fact that many Wangba and game arcades are run by laid-off workers, this would ease the pressure of unemployment and create more job opportunities. Finally, this will help universalize computer knowledge, enhance youth suzhi, and encourage cultural and entertainment consumption, combating the current recession of the cultural and entertainment market. (Li, 1999)

The transformation in state governance paralleled further "dismantling of the planned economy" and, as of the mid-1990s, the growing "capacity of ordinary people to own commodities." This led to the "economic person"—the consumer-citizen with rising legal awareness who is often distinguished from the "collective national subject" of the socialist era by his ability to appropriate official rhetoric and navigate murky legal and political waters to legitimize and advance his economic pursuits or consumer rights (Keane, 2001, p. 92). However, limited political freedom and weakening civic culture have reduced the expression of such liberalization to a curious combination of nationalism, neoliberalism, and social Darwinism. The precarious relationship between capital and state produced a dual logic of promotion and control in the video games industry from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. Although this dialectic endures, the transition to online games represented both continuity and rupture in the logic, and the voices of gamers and the industry have grown louder with the ascendency of the Internet.

Early 2000 to 2012: The Contested Space of Online Games

The Chinese online games industry took off in 2001. Unconstrained by software piracy prohibitions and propelled by the remarkable expansion of broadband Internet and a marked increase in home computer ownership, online games, especially MMOGs,[6] quickly dominated the market, "dwarfing

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6 Massive Multiplayer Online Games

other forms of video games" (Cao & Downing, 2008, p. 518). Today, although the productive-versus-pathological duality persists, online games present a much bigger dilemma and challenge to society. On the one hand, the now economically productive industry has grown from marginal player in the early 1990s and an emerging industry in the mid-1990s into a key component and engine of China's booming digital entertainment economy (Figures 1 and 2 show the growth in annual sales volume and the number of gamers from 2002 to 2012).
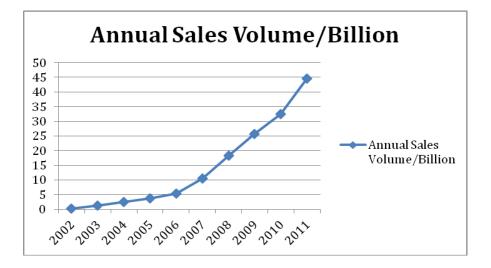

Figure 1. Increase in Annual Sales Volume of the Digital Games Industry, 2002−2011.
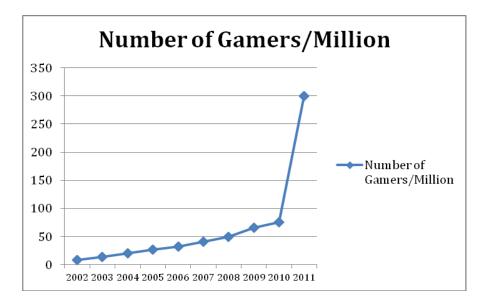
Figure 2. Increase in Number of Gamers, 2002–2012.[7]

What has made online gaming a jewel in the crown of the "new economy" is its huge contribution to related sectors.[8] The Chinese online games industry initially followed in the footsteps of Korea, emulating strategies the Korean developmental government had deployed in championing digital entertainment culture and industry. However, the size and sales volume of China's market exceeded Korea's after only a decade's growth (Jin, 2010). The sheer economic force of the online games industry has rendered any focus on its negative effects commercially irrational and counterproductive—not to mention that the industry boasts a much louder media voice, now that its pockets are deep.

On the other hand, as an integral part of the larger ecology of a dynamic Internet culture, the online gaming community of the past decade has grown into a complex network of sociality and materiality invested with emotion, time, and money. Echoing Taylor's observation of the "mainstreaming" of the gaming community in the Euro-American context, as the Chinese-language game world expands, the early generations that grew up with video games and the Internet have come of age and gradually moved from the periphery to the centre of the society, rendering the label "youth subculture" increasingly inaccurate in characterizing the gaming community (Taylor, 2012). Video games were never just about play and entertainment, but the expansion of the industry has increasingly blurred the boundaries

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[7] Figures 1 and 2 are compiled from IDC & CGPA annual reports, 2002–2012. A leap in the number of users occurred in 2001 because of the new market opened up by mobile online and webpage games.

[8] In 2004, with sales revenue of US$0.40 billion, online games' "direct contribution" to the telecom, IT, and traditional media and publishing industries stood at an astounding US$4.01 billion (IDC & CGPA, 2004).

between materiality and virtuality, play and labor (Zhang & Fung, 2013). No longer merely an alternative world in which to indulge in fantasy and entertainment, the online gaming community might be better represented as a space in which cultural policies are tested alongside commercial experiments, where new cultural identities are pursued in collaboration with entrepreneurial endeavors, and where nationalist outcries merge with demands for freedom and protests against virtual property infringement (Chan, 2009; Chew, 2011).

The Battle over Internet Addiction (IA)

In early 2010, the user-generated machinima video *War of Internet Addiction* (*War*) sparked a huge controversy in China. With 100 volunteer gamers, a young games enthusiast and amateur video-maker named "Corndog" shot and edited the 64-minute video entirely within the virtual setting of *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*). Peppered with allusions to contemporary social and political controversies and pop cultural references, the video vented gamers' mounting anger at their victimization by the so-called Internet addiction treatment experts, and the belated censorship drag over *WoW*. The video presented the fictional story of the Skeleton Party, a Chinese *WoW* gamers' resistance organization that fights against a villain sent by the Green Overlord to defend their "spiritual homeland" of *WoW*. The villain is a psychiatrist specializing in game addiction treatment, and "Green Overlord" alluded to the government-enforced Green Dam (*lvba*) web-filtering software. Through humor and satire, the video exposed behind-the-scenes government bureaucratic skirmishes between the Ministry of Culture and the General Administration of Press and Publication, as well as a commercial war over the licensing rights to *WoW* fought between the U.S. game corporation *Blizzard* and two domestic Chinese game companies, *Netease* and *The9*.

Released at the height of the battle over Internet addiction, the video dramatized the Chinese online games industry, in which three major contenders—government, industry, and the public—competed for power. Unlikely alliances were based on contingency, rendering the gamer-government or the industry-government binary ineffectual for understanding the struggle for cultural legitimacy. Thus, the discourses of pathology and productivity adopted new meanings as different players appropriated them for their own purposes.

Earlier, the summer of 2002 had seen a sudden upswing in pathological representations of the burgeoning online gaming industry following what Jenkins (2002) has described as the "Chinese Columbine"—two disgruntled teenage boys burned down a Wangba in Beijing after a minor dispute with its owner, killing 24 people. Online games once again became the target, as the Chinese media made Wangba synonymous with online gaming. The incident triggered a media frenzy that in turn provoked nationwide moral panic over "Internet addiction," a label hatched in the Chinese psychiatric lexicon around 2000 to refer to excessive Internet use, especially with regard to youth and online games.

In mid-2008, CCTV ran an exposé titled *Who Turned Talents into Warcraft?* that presented an Internet addiction treatment hospital in North China. Condemning the games industry—especially *WoW*—the program narrated sensational stories, such as one about a college-age patient chopping his little finger off to keep himself from playing *WoW*, rumored murders and suicides committed by players under the influence of in-game violence, or a desperate mother smashing a local Wangba in a fit of anger.

Describing online games in a discourse resembling that used for drug abuse and opium, the documentary featured confessions from young "addicts" and testimonies from their parents. The program closed with a young patient kneeling down in front of the psychiatrist in tears, begging him to "save the hundreds of thousands of youth and aching families out there that are poisoned by the Internet." Not unexpectedly, the same psychiatrist was thrown off his pedestal in 2009, when the media exposed his use of electroshock therapy on children. To redress these "unscientific" treatment methods, another psychiatrist affiliated with a Beijing military hospital officially labeled IA a "mental illness" by coming up with a five-item criterion for diagnosis (Jiang, 2011).

Yet another approach was advocated by a self-designated businessman-educator Professor Tao, who claimed to have spent most of his life in the United States as an "educator." Author of a dozen books on IA treatment, he rejected the interpretation of IA as a disease, arguing that the problem of addiction reflects contemporary China's deep-rooted moral, educational, and social crises (Zhang, 2009). Tao toured the nation to deliver lectures and therapy sessions, and the government awarded him numerous prizes, including the State Council's "friendship award," conferred by Premier Wen Jiabo in 2005 (Tao Hongkai Received the "Friendship Award,,2005).

A range of expert responses addresses the challenges presented by the new technology of online games and the Internet, and addiction treatment itself has turned into a billion-dollar, employment-creating industry (Ma & Hu, 2009), blatantly illustrating the unstable boundary between pathology and productivity. Reminiscent of what Spigel (1992) described as "the corrective cycle of commodity purchase," the problems caused by overproduction and consumption seem only temporarily eased by further production and consumption, thus perpetuating and expanding capitalist growth.

The Chinese government soon took an active role in reconstructing the meaning of productivity and combating the "pathological" effects of gaming, attempting to reconcile tensions between capitalist accumulation and socialist morality and control. A government-sponsored "fatigue system" was implemented in cybercafes in 2007 to curb overtime gaming and prevent addiction (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009).[9] In 2010, a new regulation enforced "real-name registration" in games, linking players' game accounts to their ID cards. Many perceived these strategies as part of government efforts to exploit social fear about IA and thus gain "broad consensus for censoring and controlling Internet content as a whole" (Rolandsen, 2011, p. 123). In addition, the government endorsed "healthy" alternative games to promote "spiritual civilization," promulgate laws, teach Chinese history, and encourage the indigenous production that gives expression to Chinese culture—all to recapture some of its propaganda authority from the commercial force.[10]

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[9] Easily circumvented by gamers, the system was ridiculed by the public as creating more problems than solutions.

[10] For instance, in 2005 the Chinese Communist Youth League collaborated with a commercial studio to create the patriotic game *Anti-Japan War Online*, in which gamers defend their motherland from invaders. In another case, the party-state collaborated with China's biggest game corporation, Shengda, to produce the 3-D MMOG game *Learning from Leifeng Online*. However, the growing popularity of mobile games such as *Happy Farm* has made maintaining ideological control through games more difficult. For instance,

Instead of being silenced by the government-expert-industry axis, gamers fought back by actively appropriating the discourse of pathology and productivity to voice an alternative to the mainstream representation of gamers. The online gaming community has become a crucial platform for such alternative conversations, which are assisted by gamer-oriented niche magazines and newspapers that introduce the discourse into reform-minded mainstream media outlets.[11] The video *War* presents an excellent example of the politically productive potential of games. But despite the bold criticism expressed via the video, gamers demanded neither social reform nor political revolution, but rather the right to play freely and gain society's respect. This consumer-citizen blend and consumer-rights-based discourse of protest echoed earlier dissenting arguments regarding Wangba regulation, presenting a direct result of the decade-long cultivation of consumer citizenship by the regulatory state. The video campaign should also be interpreted in connection with the rising incidence of in-game or game-related protests frequently staged in recent years. These virtual protests mostly confine their demands to issues related to urban middle-class life—"fixated on game-specific concerns"—and are largely carried out within the political boundaries of the party-state under the banners of, for instance, patriotism, virtual property rights protection, and public morality (Chan, 2009). But like *War*, they allow a disenfranchised middle class to voice concerns of greater social and political significance: corruption, censorship, social injustice. Oftentimes, direct confrontation with authority is avoided through creative appropriations of pop cultural sources and tactical uses of social media, which are usually less politically risky and more effectively reach a broader public. Seen in this light, online gaming communities cultivate collective identities and a "fledgling sociopolitical consciousness" that both reflects and constitutes the "changing political, social, and technological environment" in China (Yang, 2003).

Compared to political productivity, the economic productivity of gamers is a more recent development and thus has received less attention from scholars (Jin, 2010; Taylor, 2012). Often taking the form of the professionalization of play and the commoditization of communities, gamer entrepreneurship turns gaming skills into professional expertise, and sociocultural capital accumulated in the virtual world into real-world financial capital. Gamers can monetize game labor in myriad ways: as professional competitive game players representing the country in world tournaments, guild leaders serving as brokers and liaisons between corporations and gamers, freelance game commentators and commercial game video makers, or "gold farmers" who sell in-game currencies, items, and avatars for money in domestic and international markets (Zhang & Fung, 2013). The scale of gamer-entrepreneur business has expanded at such a rapid pace in China that elsewhere I have described this fast-growing sector as a "secondary industry" of digital games. In response to Taylor's (2012) and Jin's (2010) studies of "professional gamers," I argued that the commodification and professionalization of play simultaneously opens up new possibilities for both empowerment and exploitation or alienation.

New gamer-generated definitions of political, cultural, and economic productivities warrant a lengthier treatment than the confines of this article permit. But, briefly, they illustrate how gamers and

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the politics of Happy Farm invokes nostalgia about rural times, as peasants migrate into large cities for factory work. That stealing is rewarded bespeaks the tension between capital and communist ideology.
11 E.g., *Nanfang Weekend* or the *China Youth Daily.*

the gaming community appropriate, redefine, and mobilize the meanings of productivity, not only to counter pathological representation but also to seek political and economic empowerment. Such subversion points to a rupture with the pre-Internet era, as video games' newfound cultural and economic significance results from, and finds a conduit in, new spaces uncovered by networked digital technologies for personal expression and commerce. However, because those gamer-generated practices and discourses often do not contradict but rather complement those of the party-state or the industry, any label of resistance is problematic. After all, society and culture coevolve with technology, and the techno-savvy consumer-citizen and the gamer turned cultural and economic entrepreneur are as much agents as products of the complex sociopolitical changes taking place in China. Liu (2011) observed that "the ideal form of subjecthood" proposed by Chinese social engineers is "supposed to incorporate both the qualities of the autonomous neoliberal subject in the free market and the communist-collectivist values of a socialist subject combined with Confucian self-cultivation and traditional Chinese virtues" (p. 30). My analysis shows that whereas gamers' perceptions of themselves might not conform seamlessly with, or depart too far from, this ideal image of modern Chinese citizenry, easy access to digital technologies has certainly expanded the means for acting out, contesting, and appropriating officially designated subjectivities.

Conclusions

Tracing the three distinct periods of video game development since their arrival in China in the mid-1980s, I have provided a sociohistorical account of technology as a cultural form collaboratively shaped by the party-state, the industry, and the gamer and non-gamer public. In contrast to the techno-determinist approach to digital technologies in China, I regard video games as enmeshed in the cultural fabric of a period of rapid, dramatic socioeconomic changes, and their three-decade history as driven "not by an abstract process of innovation, but by such human things as intention, interest, purpose and value" (Williams, 2003, p. ix). Capturing some key snapshots of the cultural representations of video games in the past three decades, I have revealed both the historical genealogy of the coexisting contemporary moral panic over game addiction and promotional rhetoric of the online gaming industry, and the persistent "pathological versus productive" frame rooted in power struggles among different stakeholders over the meaning, form, and use of new technologies as China transitions from a socialist to a post-socialist society. The narrative traces deepening economic reform and globalization, which have led to increasing social fragmentation and growing cultural diversity and pluralism.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, arcades and consoles both facilitated and reflected changing perceptions of consumption and production. Although leisure and digital entertainment were linked to education and modernization, society struggled to cope with the negative effects of commodification and the deterioration of public space. In the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the introduction of PC games coincided with the Chinese state's discovery and promotion of leisure and digital technology as capital. The dual high-tech and consumer revolutions creatively fused techno consumption and production through nationalism, even as neoliberal subjectivity emerged in response to the negotiation between control and regulation. In the past decade, characterized by online gaming, networked technologies and intensifying neoliberal globalization have led to a power shift in favor of the industry and the largely urban middle-class gaming community, generating new meanings for productivity and pathology that both

empower gamers and delimit that empowerment through terms tolerated by the party-state and endorsed by the market.

Where the battle over Internet addiction will lead is still an open-ended question. Clearly, the state, the industry, and the general public have coevolved to adapt to technological and socioeconomic changes, rendering the socialism–capitalism, state–gamers, and empowerment–exploitation dichotomies less effective for conceptualizing the creative mosaic of ideologies and the flexible regime of accumulation. The state has transformed itself from coercive socialist-era dictator to post-socialist "benevolent regulator" and protector of national interests through "a creative blending of neoliberal rationalities and revitalized forms of socialist rationalities" (Liu, 2011, p. 29; Wang, 2001). The games industry now plays as important a social role as ever, appropriating various cultural currents—whether nationalism, socialism, or neoliberalism—to form contingent alliances with both the party-state and consumers in pursuit of profits. Gamers, faced with an uncertain reality of no single "overriding and robust ideological crutch," have become the ultimate bricolagers, making use of conflicting cultural messages and "harmoniz[ing] competing moralities" to create patchwork narratives that are meaningful to them (Cockain, 2012, p. 166).

Are video games pathological or productive? There is no definitive answer, and any temporary solution will always be cultural, historical, and case specific (Zhao, 2007). Video games are a contested space in China, serving as both agents and products of social change, as well as—to borrow a description from Qiu (2002)—"a conduit through which existing propensities of the Chinese society itself are set free" (p. 18).

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