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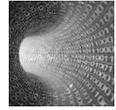
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Abstract

China has become one of the biggest consumers and producers of online games in the world; however, little is known about a burgeoning secondary industry emerging out of the socioeconomic interaction between gamers and the online gaming industry. Through the lens of online gaming guilds—the intermediary institutions between the industry and gamers—this article discusses how the Chinese information economy's dependence on consumer labor and the gamers' entrepreneurial resourcefulness have produced a secondary industry. As the secondary industry has evolved, the gaming industry has come to depend on the productive play of consumers. This changing regime of value has given rise to bio-political control of consumer labor and, along with state control, is drawing gamers into the tug-of-war between entrepreneurial invention and labor exploitation. By depicting the complex negotiations between capital and labor, and community and commerce, on both subjective and institutional levels, this article re-examines and explicates the Western debate over consumer digital cultural production and its social, economic, and political implications.

Keywords

China, consumer labor, cultural and digital economy, online gaming, secondary industry

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Introduction

More than a decade has passed since the Chinese online gaming industry took off. It has since evolved into one of the largest and most profitable markets in the world, rivaling its Western and East Asian competitors in both scale and potential.¹ Much has been said regarding the Chinese government's policies toward the industry (Ernkvist and Strom, 2008), its market structures and prospects (Cao and Downing, 2008), and the social construction of gaming addiction (Golub and Lingley, 2008), but little is known about the burgeoning secondary industry that has grown out of the interaction between the gaming industry and gamers within China's unique sociopolitical context. The secondary industry comprises gamer-initiated businesses and services that emerged to fill the gaps in the chain of game production and consumption, which occupy a gray area that often merges consumption with production, and play with profits. A widely known practice is "gold farming", or the mining and selling of in-game currency and goods for cash. Online gaming guilds, organizations that serve as the intermediary between the corporations and the community of gamers, have become a key player in the secondary industry and a focal point for the negotiation between commerce and community.

The online gaming industry's metamorphosis in the past decade has paralleled the spectacular growth of the Chinese internet and the rapid commercialization of the Chinese web,² which has transformed from an elite sphere to a kaleidoscopic mixture of entertainment, information and interaction available to the masses. While discussions of the blurring between consumer and labor, play and work, in the West are not particularly new given the interactive and participatory nature of online gaming (Banks and Potts, 2010), the secondary gaming industry in China, largely consisting of amateurs and gamers, is a novel area of study. It is not uncommon for avid gamers in the West to turn a casual leisure into a serious hobby; as Kücklich (2005) has remarked, "the relationship between work and play is changing, leading, as it were, to a hybrid form of 'playbour'". He adds:

And while the digital game industry increasingly acknowledges the contribution of modders [gamers who perform computer game modification], they have no incentive to contest this view: the perception of modding as play is the basis of the exploitative relationship between modders and the games industry.

In China, the spectrum of businesses—and the range of new professions—that have resulted from community-based play is simply staggering: from gold-farming factories and virtual brokerage firms, to guild-turned game media sites and game-developing start-ups; from professional gamers and online game literature writers, to game curators and guild-war commentators. And the list is growing. While Western cultural reformers wage war on games for violent content and graphic representations, these concerns belie the often-egregious circumstances of game production itself: the unpaid work of guild laborers who drive innovation and absorb commercial risk—to the enormous benefit of the gaming industry. By appropriating gamer-created content, the industry effectively "close[s] the loop' between corporation and customer [by] reinscribing the consumer into the production process" (Kline et al., 2003: 57).

Gaming guilds and the secondary industry

Guilds first appeared in China in the late 1990s as voluntary organizations of gamers in MMO (Massively Multiplayer Online) games, serving as a collective for facilitating progress and participating in community-based socialization. However, recently guilds have undergone rapid commercialization, becoming mediators in the relationship between the industry and gamer communities. The guild's key role in the secondary industry of online gaming—coupled with the sheer number of guilds and guild members in China³—makes it an ideal site in which to explore complex negotiations between commerce and community, and capital and labor, on the micro level, and the shifting dynamics and impetus behind the rise of the secondary industry in China on the macro level.

Based on extensive online and offline fieldwork and in-depth interviews with gamers, guilders and industry practitioners, this article considers the phenomenon at hand through the lenses of political economy and cultural studies.⁴ In doing so, it challenges assumptions about a mutually beneficial link between new media and political democratization in China, and examines the Chinese internet beyond mere entertainment and commerce as a multi-faceted site that both constitutes and is shaped by the swiftly transforming Chinese society.

The significance of the Chinese secondary industry resides in its potential to move us past the dichotomy between “empowerment or exploitation”—a critical impasse in both Western scholarship on digital labor (Ross, 2009; Terranova, 2004) and discussions of consumer digital production (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). The scale and sophistication of consumer labor production in the secondary industry raises questions about the value of the consumer labor, and the resultant rise of bio-political measures to facilitate, measure and regulate the gamer's unique hybrid of work and play. The phenomenon of the player-producer also generates questions about how the politics of information capitalism and China's regulatory power over divisions of labor intersect with the neo-liberal culture of the gaming industry and the realities of state control in shaping new industries, professions and subjectivities. As it re-energizes and reinvents itself by appropriating the “use value of labor-power” that otherwise resides “outside of capital” (Negri and Hardt, 1999), information capitalism generates new opportunities for both creativity and digital experimentation, even as it subsumes the innovations of the player-producer into the games industry itself.

Consumer labor and the internet: Beyond “empowerment or exploitation” dichotomy

The idea that consumers, in their everyday interaction with cultural products, also serve as labor for various industries is nothing new (Mosco, 1998). As early as in the late 1970s, Smythe (1977) identified communication as a “blindspot in Western Marxism”, suggesting that “readers and audience members of advertising-supported mass media are commodities produced and sold to advertisers because they perform a valuable service for the advertisers” (Smythe, 1981: 8). However, the information economy has expanded and deepened consumer labor practices, with the spheres of work and leisure, production and consumption, becoming increasingly overlapped. This transformation is

embodied in the concept of “immaterial labor” (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996). On one hand, immaterial labor denotes expanding notions of work by including productive activities never before considered forms of labor (Lazzarato, 1996). Immaterial labor is characterized by its affective nature, relying on communicative actions and intangible emotions (pleasure, excitement, feeling of ease or security, or sense of community and companionship, etc.) as its basis of production and reproduction (Hardt and Negri, 2000; Lazzarato, 1996). Specifically, Hardt and Negri (2000) have defined immaterial labor as “the production of services [that] results in no material and durable good...—that is, labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication” (pp.290–292). Not only are consumption and leisure increasingly becoming forms of “productive”, “non-guaranteed labor”—such as freelance, part-time work and piece work—but they have also turned into sites of capitalist reproduction (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 298).

The social, cultural and political consequences of the convergence of consumption and labor, leisure and work, and commerce and community on the internet have justifiably attracted scholarly attention. The debate has largely revolved around the “exploitation or empowerment” dilemma. The labor perspective has rightly underlined the often-contradictory interests of the industry and of consumers/fans/hobbyists (Andrejevic, 2008; Terranova, 2004). Critics often point to the persuasive neo-liberal discourse of digital utopia, which celebrates the democratic potential of “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006) and “prosumerism” (Benkler, 2006) without critical reflection on the connections to the lucrative dot.com economy. However, the labor perspective has bifurcated in recent years, with the critical camp emphasizing the exploitative aspect of the consumer laborer, whose innovations are being sold back to them by business corporations (Andrejevic, 2002; Terranova, 2004), and the competing camp, which downplays the inherent power inequality in the consumer–corporate relationship, framing consumption–production relations in terms of a “moral economy”, a “gift economy” (Green and Jenkins, 2009), a “co-evolution” between market and non-market, and the emergence of the “social network market” (Banks and Potts, 2010).

A nuanced understanding of power presents a formidable counterargument to the dominant neo-liberal discourse and is essential to achieving a realistic understanding of digital consumer labor. However, simply crying exploitation will not afford a better grasp of the institutional and subjective transformations resulting from the shifting capital–labor/consumer relationship. In fact, the “exploitation or empowerment” duality may be thwarting deeper insight into the “complex situatedness and embeddedness” of the mediation of technology and its often-paradoxical role in creating new possibilities and new problems (Hay and Coudry, 2011: 482). Eurocentrism further prohibits understanding of this phenomenon; with only a few exceptions (Dyer-Witheford and De Peuter, 2009), most studies have been conducted in the context of a Western “post-Fordist” economy, assuming either a universalistic argument in which human beings share common needs and motivational structures, or that the rest of the world is too busy engaging in outsourced “material labor” and building basic telecommunication infrastructure to concern itself with “immaterial production” and consumer labor. In reality, with the outsourcing of material manufacturing from the developed to the developing regions, high-tech immaterial and consumer production have also been expanding on a global scale, as more and more of the world’s population is getting “wired”.

The Chinese phenomenon of guilds presents the opportunity to complicate the dualistic and universalistic argument, and to understand the emergence of the secondary industry, not simply as a business revolution or gruesome exploitation, but as an ongoing negotiation between capital and labor/consumer, and a locally contingent process determined by the historical conjuncture of competing cultural, social and economic forces. The negotiations and conflicts both constitute and are constituted by changing notions of value in the secondary industry, which thrives on the monetization of engagement and the instrumentalization of social relations. However, this re-imagination of value in terms of affect and social relations has led to the rise of bio-power in the information society, a practice that controls and regulates through “the production and reproduction of life itself” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 24). In the industry of online gaming, the bio-power of capital merges with the disciplinary power of the party-state and the dominant ideology of neo-liberalism, shaping the entrepreneurial subjectivities of consumer labor (Foucault, 1976; Rose, 1992). Ironically, changing notions of value and shifting configurations of power are a result of the “under-developed”—rather than “developed”—reality of China’s information economy and society, which further disputes the assumed “Western” origin of consumer labor (Lazzarato, 1996; Terranova, 2004).

Guild, consumer labor, and the secondary industry of online gaming in China

From online support group to brokerage firm

The online gaming guild, a key agent in the secondary industry, exemplifies the transforming power dynamics and definitions of value, and functions as a significant player in the complicated negotiations between capital and labor, commerce and community. In the past decade, the commodification of guilds has been driven, in part, by the industry’s over-reliance on consumer labor to cut costs and attract consumers in a fiercely competitive market. However, the trend has also been propelled by some gamers themselves, who want to seize emerging business opportunities and to translate the playing skills and social capital they have accrued in gaming communities into professional expertise and material reward. To understand the impetus behind the formation of this secondary industry, and why the commodification of guild and consumer labor has been so prevalent in China, we have to understand the dilemma that currently plagues the Chinese creative and information economy in general, and the online gaming sector in particular.

China’s video game sector emerged amid the worldwide turn to neo-liberalism under the dual forces of Post-Mao party-state reform and increasing endeavors concerning global expansion of Western and Japanese video game corporations in the early 1980s. Following the success of Korea and Taiwan’s online gaming industry in the wake of the Asian Economic crisis, online games began to take root and flourish in China at the turn of the new millennium. At about the same time, guilds first showed up in China when MUDs (Multi-user Dungeons) and the first Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Game (MMORPG) *Ultima Online* were introduced to Chinese gamers. During the first few years of development, guilds were relatively small voluntary groups organized by a few gamers with no clear hierarchy of mutual support during player-versus-player combat.⁵

Starting in 2005, competition in the Chinese online gaming industry became fierce, as more Chinese households became wired for broadband internet.⁶ Although the government's protective and preferential policies have largely shielded it from the direct competition of international corporations (Cao and Downing, 2008), the industry has been bottlenecked by a lack of innovation and creative dedicated talent, and has been hobbled by its own voracious pursuit of quick profit and instant success at the expense of product quality (Chew, 2011; Personal Interview, May 2009). These thorny circumstances both reflect and are determined by China's position in the international division of labor. Despite technology's pivotal role in China's extraordinary economic growth since the late 1970s, the Chinese high-tech sector is constrained by the very advantages that propelled its development in the early years—namely an over-dependence on cheap labor, state monopoly and foreign investment (Harvey, 2007; Hong, 2008), all factors that have prevented China from establishing a robust innovation mechanism and climbing up the value-added chain.

Therefore, unlike in a mature market, where innovation and quality drive growth, the Chinese online gaming industry relies heavily on cheap labor, its vast consumer market and large but capricious domestic and international investments that demand swift and sizable returns. Whereas in the West, developing a MMORPG game usually takes four years or more, Chinese developers churn out low-quality titles with short production cycles and even shorter shelf lives. Many of the new titles published every year are merely low-quality knock-offs of a handful of successful titles (Cao and Downing, 2008; Cui, 2009).⁷

Consequently, a disproportionate amount of labor has been farmed out to gamers in China, who have inadvertently taken on the dual-role of consumer and laborer. The sheer number of new titles produced every year requires gamers to spend more time and money in the virtual world to keep it running and profitable. To cut costs, the industry has developed creative strategies, such as outsourcing advertising and sales labor to gamers who serve as hucksters for the companies in online communities in exchange for virtual or monetary rewards. When they first hit the market, most Chinese games are often incomplete, with highly unstable systems and technical/design flaws. These defects draw gamers further into the production phase, enlisting them as free or under-paid laborers who often have to search bugs, test systems and figure out how to navigate and improve the games for the companies. Prioritizing consumer labor over professional production spawned the "free model" in 2006,⁸ which meant recruiting more younger and low-income gamers for the virtual world, thus furthering over-production and malignant competition in the industry.

The collapsing distinction between consumers and labor has caused the guild, a mediating site between the industry and gamers, to depart from its earlier role as a virtual support group and become a hybrid institution of commerce and community. Some guilds have turned into brokerage firms, selling gamers to game companies and providing free or low-cost customer service support; others have metamorphosed into gold-farming workshops, virtual currency trading platforms, game marketing firms and even game-developing and operating start-ups. Professional gamers, game-based online literature writers, game curators and guild-war commentators have also emerged out of the division of labor inside the guild, as companies started to outsource work and hire gamers on both full- and part-time bases.

By 2012, Chinese guilds developed distinctive characteristics in response to increasing commercialization of gamer involvement. For instance, major gaming guilds in China are often comprised of thousands—or even tens of thousands—of players, far outnumbering their counterparts in the West (Shen, 2010). Guilds have ballooned in size not only because of the growing player population, but also due to companies' preference to collaborate with larger guilds, which are often more successful at filling the contracted quota of "Average Current Users on-line" (APU) and "Peak Current Users on-line" (PCU) (Personal Interview, January, 2011). Chinese guilds are hierarchical and regimentally organized, with a clear division of labor to ensure effective mobilization and coordination. Unlike their Western counterparts, Chinese guilds are usually not attached to a particular game, but rather enter different games based on game company demand. Most large guilds maintain their own bulletin board sites (BBSs) for announcements, recruitment, advertisement and outside-game communication, and also serve as online portfolios when negotiating deals with companies. The advertising revenue gained from operating the BBS has also become an important source of income.⁹

Operating a guild has become a profitable business. Interviews indicated that some of the most popular ways for guild masters (GMs) and their core leadership to accrue quick profits included, for instance, the "reward points system" (RPS), which involves selling game testing accounts and gift packages, and generating soft advertising for new releases.¹⁰ One interviewee recalled that 2006 saw a dramatic increase in the number of new guilds because "people saw profits in guilds". Some guild members were not content with "being sold out by their GM to game companies" as commodities, so they established their own guilds. Thus the number of active guilds proliferated from fewer than 30 to hundreds within a year, with many of them serving as profit-oriented entities from the get-go rather than starting out as online support groups (Personal Interview, January 2011). Many interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the commercial encroachment into the community, with GMs attributing increasing intrusions to "irresponsible companies" that "undermine the pureness of the guild community with their relentless hunt for profit", and guild members blaming their leaders for their own insatiable appetites for money (Personal Interview, January 2011).

The transformation of guilds from virtual support groups to hybrid institutions of online communities and brokerage units corresponded with the rise of the secondary industry of online gaming, itself a result of interactions between the industry's expansion and outsourcing strategies and guild entrepreneurism. As mentioned above, the commercialization of guilds is certainly not neutral and unproblematic; however, exploitation is too crude and imprecise a term to describe the particular relationship between consumer labor and capital. Guilds present a new regime of value, a different form of power that has thrown various forces into intense negotiation and even conflict, rendering the "empowerment or exploitation" dichotomy increasingly ineffective in conceptualizing the ongoing transformation.

Affect as value and bio-power

Guild-based consumer labor embodies the affective value and flexible accumulation of "immaterial labor". Guilds have the capacity to attract, organize, and retain gamers

inside the virtual world through both affinity of community and enmity of competition. Via the mediating site of the guild, the industry capitalizes on gamers' affective productivity and social relations, turning them into measurable and manageable labor. This shifting emphasis from product/service quality to gamers' emotional investment and community-based interpersonal relationship is a fundamental characteristic of the secondary industry that also signals the growing significance of consumer labor to the information economy. However, the emotional labor of gamers cannot be easily brought under rational control and calculative monetization (Hardt and Negri, 2002: 85); instead of harmonious coexistence, the clash between commercial interests and guild cultural values is glaring.

Guilds bring in a large number of gamers who are easy to organize and manage. Guild leaders usually handpick three or more games to join each year. Game selection used to be based totally on merit, but commercial incentive has come to dominate as companies often offer leaders generous commissions for bringing in customers. The RPS serves as a central mechanism for effective instrumentalization and control:

As early as in the pre-Alpha or Beta testing stage, guild relations managers in game companies will approach guild masters or the core leadership through personal or business connections to negotiate a deal. For instance, they will offer a certain percentage of cash rewards to the GMs based on the number of players they bring in as well as the amount of money those players spent inside the game in real-time currency trade. How do they measure the input? It's easy! They will give each guild player a guild card to enter the game, and when activated, companies can keep track of all their in-game spending and activities. (Personal Interview, January 2011).

Not only do guilds help companies attract and recruit players, but they are also the most effective mechanism for retaining gamers in an online game. This relationship has to do with the affective labor of guilders, which makes the gaming environment about more than just power leveling and looting; it is also a virtual world of community and competition that both reflects and transcends the real world:

The people network that I established in my guild is the only reason for me to stay in the game after I have hit the top level. If I were to play by myself, there would be nothing to do by now. But playing with a guild, I can still busy myself with leading group raids, guiding and helping newbies, or simply chatting with fellow guilders about past gaming experience. (Personal Interview, January 2011).

Apart from the community factor, inter-guild competition bolsters player commitment and boosts in-game trade. It is common for two or more guilds that start feuds in one game to seek revenge and engage in a series of wars in other games. "Guild wars are very compelling and costly", a guild leader commented in our interview: "Nobody wants to fail. And when other things being equal in a battle, the only thing you can do to enhance combat power is by purchasing goods—weapons and medicines mostly" (Personal Interview, December 2010). To capitalize on guild wars, companies often invite rival guilds to compete in sponsored "guild tournaments", while generating buzz by publishing "inside stories" or "battle reports" on game forums or major game portals in an effort to "catch eyeballs".

The various marketing strategies companies have adopted to capitalize on the guild community have transformed the early guild culture of mutual support and collaboration into one of antagonism and contradiction, in which pleasure and excitement coexist with discontentment and disappointment. Instead of equally distributing rewards to guild members, GMs—or the core leadership—usually keep most of the RPS earnings in their own pockets, giving rise to inequality in guild communities. While many guilders resent the GMs’ monetization of guilds, the GMs themselves see their behavior as unavoidable, if not justifiable. As guilds get larger and their “business” grows more diverse, managing a guild becomes a full-time job requiring substantial emotional, temporal, and financial investment. A guild leader often has to keep his computer on 24/7 to deal with emergencies—such as a sudden strike by rival forces or a quarrel between two members over a piece of loot. To a certain extent, guild leaders assume the responsibilities of customer service when, for instance, they teach fellow guilders how to play a game or resolve inter-player conflicts. As a result, guild leaders often find the growing trend of commercialization difficult to resist:

This is how guild is run these days. It’s almost impossible to reverse the trend of commercialization. The bigger the guild gets, the harder it is to run it. We need people and media exposure to attract more people. And only by participating in company-organized game events can we stay in the limelight, which inevitably involves money and profits. At the end of the day, the work just gets so intense that it becomes full-time. Don’t forget, I also have a family to attend to, and I need to make a living too. It is not the money that I am after, but do I have a choice when I become a full-time guild leader? (Personal Interview, January 2011).

As more members join for the material rewards provided by guilds—such as free game testing accounts and bonus virtual goods packages—existing guilders face a dilemma. On one hand, a strong and powerful guild benefits them, providing incentives to strengthen their guilds by volunteering their labor—recruiting friends and family, writing emotionally charged battle reports and recruitment advertisements, and so forth. On the other hand, guild members are frustrated about their labor being monetized behind their backs, as one interviewee complained: “Guild members are no longer fellow comrades; we become tools for leaders to profit and get rich”. Generally, as guilders grow older, they age out of online games and leave the community. Those who choose to stay after 25 (roughly the cut-off age for active gamers) either gradually become inactive or find a way to profit by playing online. As one interviewee put it, “New gamers join the guild every year and China will never run out of young and ‘naïve’ youngsters who prefer virtual thrills to quotidian real life” (Personal Interview, December 2010).

As the emotional labor of the gamers and the social relations established by guilders become central to the industry’s new regime of value, guilds have metamorphosed into mediating sites that negotiate and form new labor relations. Guilds have not only made it possible for the industry to quantify and measure the immaterial labor of dispersed gamers, but they have also become loci for generating, reproducing and sustaining affective labor. Re-imagining the value of gamers’ affective labor in the secondary industry has prompted the ascendancy of bio-power that “regulates social life from its interior, following it, interpreting it, and rearticulating it” (Hardt and Negri, 2002: 23). In contrast to traditional forms of “sovereign power” that are often “negating, legislative, prohibitive, censoring

and homogenous” (Foucault, 1976: 83–85), bio-power is always “productive, immanent, exercised, capillary and resisted” (Foucault, 1976: 94–95). Information capitalism expands and regenerates itself through bio-political control over consumer labor, which is “becoming integrated into every aspect of social life by increasingly interconnected networks” (Munro, 2002: 176). So as communities go through natural cycles of decay and regeneration, bio-power is always replenished, thus forcing the cultural values of community and the commercial logic of the industry into continuous negotiation.

Entrepreneurship and neo-liberal subjectivities

The growing trend of guild commercialization has been both driven by and further facilitated consumer labor’s entrepreneurship, giving rise to a battalion of new part-time and full-time professions, and establishing guilds as hubs of the secondary industry. Consumer labor entrepreneurs may be GMs who make a living by running a guild, former guilders who get employed by game companies as community relation or marketing managers, or experienced guilders who are hired part time to participate in game testing or consumer surveying. Guild-based entrepreneurship may also involve more ambitious endeavors, such as turning a guild into a “gold-farming” factory, starting a game-developing or publishing company with fellow guild members, or transforming a well-managed guild BBS into a commercial media website. Simply put, entrepreneurs are gamers who have successfully translated skills and experience from playing games into professional self-enhancement.

However, the rise of “affective value” and the ascendancy of bio-power in the secondary industry promotes a neo-liberal ideology of the “enterprising self”—reconstituting consumers as “economically productive” laborers through the “normalizing of individual entrepreneurialism and the branding of the neo-liberal self” (Banet-Weiser, 2011: 343). On one hand, guild gamers are becoming increasingly shrewd and resourceful in negotiating the interests of community and industry, and in branding the self (or organization) as a desirable commodity for the industry. On the other hand, they have gradually adopted the industry perspective, aligning—though not without struggle—their interests with those of the dominant power (Andrejevic, 2008).

Three dominant categories of entrepreneurship emerged out of interviews with guilders; namely, freelance gamer labor, gamer turned employee, and gamer turned industrialist. Freelancers work for the industry but are still actively involved in the guild community (as GMs or experienced members), and are thus not officially employed by game companies on a full-time basis. The most common way for freelancers to make money is to participate in game testing or “bug-hunting.” Such part-time jobs are often sporadic and poorly paid, especially when compared to the RPS jobs secured by GMs. A major theme throughout interviews with freelancers was being one’s own boss, improvising and being flexible. None of the jobs offers stability and security, and most are short-term and contract-based jobs. Unlike formal employees, freelancers can be fired at anytime if their performance is not up to standards. So freelancers are under constant pressure to cultivate a good relationship with the industry and to prove their value by reaping immediate profits. One of the GMs we interviewed ran an internet-based business selling traditional Chinese medicine as his “main profession”, but spent more time

building up his “secondary career” as a game freelancer. He described his work as “precarious” but “fun”, “involving a lot of negotiation” and often “demand[ing] quick action and adaptation” (Personal Interview, January 2011).

Gamer turned employees are former guild members who have found a way to turn a hobby into full-time formal employment. Most interviewees who fell into this category served as guild relation managers or worked in the marketing team because the “people network” they had established as guild gamers could then be fully utilized. Only a couple had joined the technical side as developers or designers. Hailan was a female guild relations manager in her late 20s who worked for a mid-sized game company in Shanghai. Her daily job responsibilities involved designing and implementing marketing campaigns targeted at guilds, and offering a user’s perspective to the designing team. She confided that it had taken her a while to transition psychologically from a “gamer” to a “company employee”:

During my first few months here, I really cannot put up with the company’s attitude towards gamers. All that they care about is the profit of the company! I often argue with my colleagues to protect the interests of gamers in weekly meetings. But gradually, I’ve learnt to look at things from the company’s perspective and found a way to convey my experience and perspective as a guild gamer to my colleagues. (Personal Interview, January 2011)

Instead of changing her company’s perspective, Hailan had to adjust her outlook to fit her new role as an employee and industry practitioner. Hailan was certainly not alone in her experience. Many gamer-interviewees working for the industry discussed how they had to constantly “deal with” and “adapt to” the industry’s expectations and viewpoints. As they adopted the insider’s viewpoint, they cultivated new subjectivities that often conflicted with the fundamental values of the gamers’ community. Most of the time, they simply had to prioritize their employers’ needs. Like freelancers—if not more so—employees are adept at converting their guild and gaming capital into the marketable skills and expertise that appeal to the industry. However, the industry’s monetary valuation of employees is determined by their capacity to convert the cultural and affective value of the community into commercial and monetary value for the industry, which has led entrepreneurs to internalize the values of the “enterprise”.

Like freelancers and employees, gamer turned industrialists have transitioned from gamers to industry practitioners, but are faced with the more formidable challenge of convincing the whole industry—not just their employers—of the unique value of their gaming and guild capital and how it can lead to business success. That shift is perhaps why Langman, the 23-year-old guild turned owner of an online gaming start-up, insisted that we understand what made his company distinct from the hundreds of others in China:

The friends that I made in the guild community in the past five years will support my game unconditionally. Just yesterday, I had a dinner with a bunch of old pals who told me that they couldn’t wait to fight and consume in my new game. Also, the experience of leading numerous guild wars in different games is the best training I can get in game development. Unlike those CEOs of big game corporations who are not even gamers themselves, I know it like the back of my hand how to design a game that will hook my fellow gamers. (Personal Interview, January 2011)

The businesses of industrialists like Langman are fueled by the social relations and experiences they have accumulated as guilders. Guilders who formerly fought side by side in the virtual world have decided to battle in the business world together. When we visited his company in Beijing in early 2011, Langman was busy negotiating a fundraising deal with a major investor from Taiwan, and was hoping to expand his small firm into a mid-sized company in the coming year. "This job is as busy as hell, and the risk is so high that you can turn from a millionaire to a poor wretch overnight," Langman complained, "Trust me, it's not as fun as it seems. I don't even have time to enjoy the game now!"

The blurry boundaries between play and work, virtuality and reality, personal relations and the professional/business world in the secondary industry have brought real consequences to both the guild community and the gamers. Simply labeling the change as a deepening of "exploitation" precludes a clear view of the opportunities for upward mobility, and the negotiations and struggles at play. However, concepts such as "moral economy" (Green and Jenkins, 2009) or "social network market" (Banks and Potts, 2009) suggest that the commercialization of community and commodification of affect, human relations and human labor are irreversible trends to be embraced and celebrated. However, such perspectives risk siding with the commercial discourses that normalize neo-liberal "enterprising" and branding the self as a desirable commodity.

The more realistic counter story to the success stories of a few individuals is that self-amelioration is often achieved at the expense of the community, capitalizing as it does on human relations and on other gamers' free labor, rendering the community even more unequal and hierarchical. Getting a job with playing skills and gaming experience empowers entrepreneurs, presenting exemplary stories that encourage followers. However, the jobs that entrepreneurs secure by no means put them in a secure position. Precariousness is part and parcel of consumer labor entrepreneurship.

Following the emergence of the secondary industry, gamers began to mutate into business entrepreneurs, and commercial interests began to encroach on community values. The commercial viability of gamer laborers is conditioned by the vacillating conditions of the gaming industry, the Chinese economy and the prevailing neo-liberal-authoritarian culture in Chinese society at large. This paradigm recalls the predicament of the Western neo-liberal subject, as described by Gordon (as cited in Rose, 1999), whose "relation to all his or her activities, and indeed to his or her self, is to be given the ethos and structure of the enterprise form" as "the whole ensemble of individual life is to be structured as the pursuit of a range of different enterprises" (p.138). In addition, the marriage of bio-political control and neo-liberal ideology in an authoritarian state capitalism renders the commodification of community and the unabashed pursuit for economic interests even more rampant and unrestrained.

Declining power of the authoritarian party-state?

The hyper-commercialized and individualistic culture of online gaming contrasts with the harmonious and socialist ideologies that the Chinese state claims to champion. In spite of the fact that online gaming—unlike many other media and cultural sectors in China—has been operated primarily by private capital, the "disciplinary power" of the party-state has by no means retreated from online gaming. To maintain control of the industry, the state has devised a series of regulatory and censorship policies, such as

issuing operation licenses and endorsing a campaign against game addiction (Cao and Downing, 2008; Golub and Lingley, 2008; Szablewicz, 2010).

Although it maintains the socialist impulse to combat excessive commercialism, the state functions neither as benevolent protector nor neutral regulator; it is neither anti-capital nor external to capital. Many of the regulatory policies are no more than administrative skirmishes among different government agencies. The so-called campaign against internet addiction has turned into a multi-billion dollar industry, which ended up aiding the expansion of capital into new territories (Wang, 2010). The coexistence of state disciplinary power and the commercial deployment of neo-liberal ideology and bio-power leave little room for political resistance or opposition in any real sense (Dyer-Witford and De Peuter, 2009). On one hand, the productive labor of gamers is encouraged, as it gainfully serves the expanding digital and creative industry; on the other hand, government control and regulation have largely kept the subversive potential of gaming and gaming's decentered networked in check (Chew, 2011)

The gaming community is fully aware of its predicament in facing the dual forces of neo-liberal bio-power and party-state disciplinary power. Released in 2009, a user-generated machimina entitled *War of Internet Addiction* became a big hit and went viral overnight, striking a chord with many Chinese gamers. More than 100 online gamers, many of them guild-based, contributed to the making of this 64-minute video, which sought to expose the back story of business disputes over—and belated censorship of—the *World of Warcraft*. The video critiques the deterioration of guild communities under the dual force of political and commercial control, targeting the Chinese government and domestic game companies, the American-based game corporation *Blizzard*, and the so-called medical experts of “internet addiction” as victimizers of Chinese gamers. Ironically, toward the end of the highly critical video, the gamers demand not a revolution of the system, but rather “the right to play freely” as the protagonist of the story called for a “collective migration to the Taiwanese game server”. However, for consumer-laborers and entrepreneurs, no matter how degraded the virtual world becomes, they make the best of labor opportunities, because exiting means farewell to games and to community—or even unemployment and return to a more arduous job that is not only undesirable but also not financially sustaining.

Conclusion

The social implications of user-generated digital production and the blurred boundaries between consumer and labor have sparked intense debate in recent years, with scholars of diverse positions and disciplines claiming a stake in the debate between “exploitation or empowerment”. This article has attempted to explicate the argument by considering the spectrum of issues impacting online gaming guilds, including the re-configuration of value and power relationships in the secondary industry of online gaming in China, and the changing practices and subject positions of Chinese consumer-laborers. Guild-based consumer labor in China is the quintessential “immaterial labor”, occupying a gray area between work and leisure, production and consumption, professionalism and amateurism. However, unlike in the West, where it is less intense and organized, consumer labor qualifies as a secondary industry in China—given the sheer number of people/amount of labor involved, the volume of profits generated and the sophisticated divisions of labor and organization mechanisms.

The secondary industry of online gaming in China is a unique and significant phenomenon not only because of its scale and key role in the digital economy, but also—and more importantly—because of the deep insight it affords into the complex ongoing negotiations between capital and labor on both institutional and subjective levels. The negotiations both result from and constitute a re-imagining of the value of the affective labor of consumers in the digital economy, and the ensuing rise of bio-power of the capital—the latter of which aims to encourage, measure and manage affective consumer labor while regulating its excess. This article has problematized the assumed link between digital production and sociopolitical empowerment, and the tendency in scholarship on Chinese internet to embellish the association between user content generation and political democratization. Consumers are certainly not cultural dupes, but neither are they social activists. This article sympathizes with the perspective that is critical of the democratic potential of digital production, but is also wary of its Euro-centric focus, and thus argues for the importance of historicization and sensitivity to the “contingencies of culture” (Wallis, 2011).

Therefore, the article has situated the secondary industry and consumer labor in the political-economic context of Chinese society, considering them a local, bottom-up response to the global expansion of information capitalism and a result of the growing flexibility of the industry’s regime of accumulation. The coalescence of these diverse conditions—the Chinese economy’s over-dependence on cheap labor and vast consumption, the party-state’s disciplinary power and the digital capital’s “biopolitical mode of governing”—has engendered and shaped the entrepreneurial and neo-liberal subjectivities of consumer-laborers (Ong, 2006: 6). Accompanying the new professions, opportunities and flexibilities created by the secondary industry are the rise of individuality, self-engineering and self-reliant mentalities—and a growing sense of competition, insecurity and precariousness. As such, gamers at once denounce and avidly pursue the commodification of community and consumer labor. This paradoxical identification of gamers—like the gamer-generated machimina demanding “the right to play”—epitomizes neo-liberal ideology’s promotion of “interactive technologies”, in which “the goal of self-reflexive knowledge is not so much to reshape the media—to imagine how things might be done differently—as it is to take pleasure in identifying with the insider” (Andrejevic, 2008).

By highlighting the commercialization of online communities and the muddled boundary between practices of consumption and labor, this article by no means suggests that a wholesale takeover of commercial interests in the world of games has occurred—nor that Chinese gamers derive little pleasure from playing online. The stories of the guilds and entrepreneurs serve as a reminder of the contradictions and predicaments behind the façade of economic prosperity in China. Harvey (2007) captures this predicament in commenting that China’s competitive edge is mainly achieved by “taking capital out of the production process and reintroducing a greater role for labor”—an advantage made possible by the authoritarian state’s suppression of labor wage and potential unrest (p.138). I would append this statement by positing that the new dimensions of affective labor and bio-power have made unrest less likely and suppression less visible.

The predicament of Chinese consumer-labor is like that of the crowd of migrant workers who forced its way into a Foxconn factory seeking employment only a few weeks after the 17th suicide of its workers. This grim scene elucidates the kind of

dilemma faced by China after three decades of neo-liberal globalization and reform. Returning to the past is not the answer, but what is the way to resolve this dilemma? Part of the answer goes back to the promises of a digital utopia, and resides in how consumer labor can profitably utilize its technological network and channel its own technological savvy and productivity, not just to seek employment or to indulge in collective venting and cynicism, but also to preserve and strengthen community values and collective bargaining power. Resistance should not disappear, but it must be re-imagined for an era of information capitalism, in which the distinctions between labor and consumption, work and play, community and commerce are increasingly inscrutable.

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Notes

1. The industry had a market size of 7.4 billion USD by end of 2011 (IDC and CGPA, 2012), with more than 160 million gamers in 2011, a 33% increase from 2010 (IDC and CGPA, 2012).
2. The Chinese internet population has increased from 0.63 million in 1997 to 530 million in 2012 (CNNIC, 2012).
3. As of 2012, there are more than 16,000 guilds of varying sizes registered with the game media portal 17173.com, one of the largest and most popular media outlets of video games and online games. Our fieldwork indicated that most experienced Chinese online gamers were also guild members.
4. Regarding method, we spent nine months between 2010 and 2011 with one of the largest and most well-known guilds in China, playing and socializing with guild members inside and outside games on a weekly basis. For three months in the summer of 2010 and the winter of 2011, we conducted in-depth interviews with about 40 people in Beijing who were guilders, employees and managers of game companies and game media. The interviews ran from two to five hours. The fieldwork was supplemented with news collected from game portal sites, newspapers and research reports, as well as from comments posted on major guild forums and online gamer communities since we embarked on the study in early 2010.
5. They grew in size and number as the genre of MMORPG gained popularity worldwide and started to incorporate more interactive and organizational features in its design, rendering participation in guilds more desirable—or even a necessity—for “power gamers” who wanted to level up quickly and efficiently. By 2005, when *World of Warcraft* opened service in Mainland China, playing alone for high-level gamers became almost impossible in a competitive gaming environment designed for sociality.
6. The sales revenue of MMORPG market reached 5.31 billion RMB (0.85 billion USD) in 2006, a 69.1% increase from the previous year. The year also saw the release of 111 new online games and another 218 being incubated (IDC and CGPA, 2008). Notably, compared to the early years, when most of the online games in China were imported from Korea and the West, the developing capacities of domestic companies have been greatly enhanced, with products accounting for 65% of the total revenue in 2006 (IDC and CGPA, 2008).

7. For instance, 66 new game-developing companies were registered and more than 150 new titles hit the market in the year 2011 alone (IDC and CGPA, 2012).
8. The new model introduced a new market phase in which subscription fees were replaced by item-based charges for in-game virtual goods to attract more low-income gamers.
9. Many early guilds even succeeded in turning their BBS into commercial game media sites; for instance, the most popular game media site 17173.com originated from a game BBS and was bought by *Sohu* in 2003.
10. There are also other more “public” ways to attract guilds, such as organizing “guild wars”, in which the winning guild will be awarded a cash prize and virtual in-game goods, or offering guild members gift packages of in-game goods, virtual currencies and limited Alpha and Beta testing accounts.

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