

**God is not in the Machine: Playerkilling as Indigenized Cultural Form**

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## Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction  
1

Chapter II. Literature Review  
9

Chapter III. Ethnographic Background  
28

Chapter IV. Levelling Up: Self-Cultivation in Playerkilling  
55

Chapter V. The Rallying Call: Ethics in Playerkilling  
66

Chapter VI. Ten Thousand Calamities of Hell: Skill, Capital and Conflict  
82

Chapter VII. Conclusion  
108

## I: Introduction

Every day, millions of people log in to online fantasy role-playing games where they play and socialize with hundreds of thousands of other players simultaneously. Massively multiplayer online games are a worldwide phenomenon, yet research on them tends to treat the virtual as a world unto itself, neglecting the importance of pre-existing, historical, real-world culture to the meaning-making that occurs in the game. In this paper, I argue that the importance of online games to players is crucially connected to their real-world culture. This paper asks, “In an increasingly networked world, how are cultural identities maintained?”

*Zhengtu* is one of the most popular and one of the most controversial of Chinese online games. Two aspects of the game contribute to *ZT*'s infamous nature. The first is the game's emphasis on player-versus-player gameplay, which is called “PK” in China, an abbreviation for the English “Player-Killing.” The second is the game's business model. *ZT* is free to play, unless you want your character to have more than the tiniest bit of strength, in which case you must purchase virtual equipment (armor, weapons, etc) with real money. This ‘free-to-play’ business model results in a division among gamers into two classes, called RMB (*renminbi*) gamers and FRMB (without *renminbi*) gamers. The ‘free-to-play’ model is gaining popularity in the United States, but the combination of this business model with a sometimes brutal PK system makes *ZT* to be uniquely Chinese. This paper draws on *ZT* as an exemplar of a particularly Chinese approach to online life.

My own personal enjoyment of video games comes from immersion, simulation, escape from the mundane, and so on. As a result, I am intellectually interested in people who derive alternative enjoyment from games: community, achievement, conflict. In gaming and online games particularly, these three aspects become intertwined. Communities form out of striving for achievement in conflict with other players. Gaming as pretending or playacting is very familiar to me—gaming as a means of socializing or proving prowess is alien, and therefore fascinating. Online games, being inherently social, develop their own sets of emergent behaviors and norms. My personal membership in subversive and alternative online communities has led me to an interest in those players who challenge those norms, and the continuous negotiation of good behavior online.

My second interest is in comparative philosophy, and its applicability to anthropological study. Philosophy is \*an uncommonly rigorous thinking through\*, a sort of self-reflexive folk understanding of a culture written in a thoughtful and often pragmatic or normative fashion. Because it is thoughtful and rigorous, philosophy can reach more closely to the underlying assumptions a person makes about the world. Philosophy also represents a history of the ideas that a culture has considered important, and which they have themselves selected to preserve from the past and teach their children. My interest in comparative philosophy has been based upon a fascination with the fundamentally different assumptions made by people of different cultural backgrounds.

Western game and virtual world studies is often focused on the emergent properties of virtual worlds, the value that they contain as separate worlds, and their relationship with the 'actual world'. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the effect that real

world cultural difference has on how people understand virtual worlds and online gaming. It sometimes seems as though virtual worlds exist in a cultural bubble, where nothing of the real world has relevance, and everything is transformed into a purely virtual sociality.

This focus on emergent culture and value within the virtual has been the result of a particularly Western problematic: that of the resolution between the transcendent and the immanent. In mainstream Western thinking going back to the Greeks, a central problem has been the identifying of what is 'real' versus what is merely appearance. This problematic has an obvious relationship to the trouble virtual worlds studies has with the 'actual' and the 'virtual'. To an uncritical Westerner, even a scholar, virtual worlds seem frivolous, a mere simulation of a real world where real things happen. Scholars of virtual worlds must justify their study of something that appears to lack transcendent value—if the virtual world is mere appearances, then what there can be worth studying?

The Chinese tradition lacks a transcendent God, Reason, Virtue, or any other concept that might take a capital letter in Western philosophy and theology. It is not that the Chinese tradition declares, like the existentialists or rationalists, that "God is dead." It is that the Chinese tradition never had a use for God in the first place. Rather than a world of transcendent Being, where the senses pick up only the appearances of something more fundamental, classical Chinese philosophy sees a world of "becoming," a world of continuous transformation instead of identity. Rather than a "two-worlds" perspective, the Chinese tradition has a "this-world" perspective. All of experience becomes one great field. The *yin* and *yang* are notable not for being divided in two, but for constantly interpenetrating. Thus, I argue that for Chinese gamers, the concern for the 'reality' of the virtual and/or

the actual and the division between them. has no meaning. This perspective has consequences for how Chinese gamers make meaning in a virtual world.

How is the genre of the Massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) made Chinese? In this paper, I will trace the “this-world” perspective of Chinese gamers through three themes. First, the concept of personal quality and cultivation of selfhood. Second, in-game norms and transgression. Finally, sets of values that emerge from the game structure itself. Throughout, we see how the Chinese lack of concern for the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent affects the design of the game, the way Chinese gamers play it, and the meanings they draw from play.

What I would like to emphasize is the difference between two traditions, which leads to different tendencies among people raised in those traditions. People who can be called "Chinese" come from many different nations, ethnic groups, economic classes, environments, ages and genders. In this paper we are talking about primarily Han middle-class urban young men in the People's Republic of China. "Western" is perhaps even more broad, representing a wide spectrum of nation-states and languages. Worthwhile work could easily be done (and is being done) comparing the experiences of young men and young women in online gaming, or urban elites with rural peasants. Although generalizations about Chinese and Western culture and philosophy may not correspond to any particular population, it is only by drawing these broad generalizations that we can begin to see the importance of cultural assumptions to people's understanding of their lives - however mitigated by other factors these historical assumptions might be.

In the anthropological perspective, globalization is not a matter of indigenous cultures becoming homogenized by global forces, but an adaptation of global modernity to indigenous values. By looking at globalization from a cultural rather than political perspective, I hope to show how global processes become indigenized. This paper looks at the increasingly popular worldwide genre of the Massively Multiplayer Online Game to examine how global genres become embedded and adapted to local systems of meaning.

The data for this thesis was drawn primarily from forums, blogs and other website postings. Mia Consalvo refers to these as "paratexts". In building the culture of an online game, the texts that surround the game are often just as important as the texts within the game. The Web provides a place for players to discuss the game, their strategies, values, and purpose in playing. They can also debate with other players regarding these topics. Paratexts are an integral part of a game's culture, but due to their self-reflexive nature, they are excellent resources for drawing data about what players think about the game.

A multi-level coding process was used to more organically identify important ideas in the texts. Articles were identified using web search functions. I searched for articles that addressed playerkilling or RMB and FRMB gamers in particular, then used key terms from those articles, such as the jobs or skills popular with playerkillers, to discover more relevant articles. The translated articles were coded at several levels: level one identified key ideas, level two drew these ideas into several themes, level three sorted those themes into the three analytical chapters of this thesis. In this way I attempted to avoid confirmation bias by allowing my themes to emerge from the texts rather than searching too directly for articles that supported any predetermined themes.

Several limitations prevented data from being drawn from within Zhengtu. Technical limitations included a limited connection to the game and an inability to purchase in-game currency when not in China. Some time was spent in China performing general observation, but interviews were not conducted and citable field notes were not taken due to lacking institutional approval. Additionally, language limitations prevented me from doing effective research in-game. The Chinese of online gaming includes colloquialisms and technical terms that were beyond my skills. I found it much more effective to slowly translate external articles, which allowed me time to research difficult and unusual phrases.

The second chapter places this work theoretically among three conversations. To begin, this thesis draws on classical Chinese philosophical ideas of ontology. This is used to draw broad comparisons between the assumptions that Chinese and Western gamers make about the nature of gaming, and to link Chinese game play with the past. I also attempt to link this philosophical perspective with anthropological theory by using it as a form of ‘traditional’ understanding that informs modernity. The second body of literature is a game studies literature on deviance and transgression. Here I trace the influence that the Western problematic of the transcendent has had on ideas of norms and transgression in virtual worlds. The last is the anthropological conversation over globalization, indigenization and alternative modernities. Here I attempt to take a position focused more on culture and meaning than politics, drawing from Boasian theories of diffusion and integration of culture traits.

The third chapter provides an ethnographic background of online gaming in general, the history of games in China and East Asia, and a description of *Zhengtu* as a game.

This chapter describes the systems of the game and how it is played. The roots of these systems in Western design is identified. Particular attention is given to the mechanics of the “player killing” or “PK” systems as well as the payment system. These systems mark *Zhengtu* off among both Western and Chinese games, and make *ZT* into the special case that is particularly relevant for this paper.

The fourth chapter begins analysis by examining the way players see the self and their value in relation to the game. I argue that rather than seeing the game as a space apart from the real world, Chinese players of *ZT* see the game as a fluid extension of the real world. Contemporary Chinese ideas of ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘quality’ or *suzhi* from everyday life are seen also in the meanings player draw from the game, such as *ZT* being a ‘crucible’ for testing one’s quality. In lacking a transcendent notion of the virtual and the actual, Chinese gamers turn the game into another opportunity for self-cultivation.

The fifth chapter looks more closely at transgressive, deviant, or contentious behaviors in *ZT* and how they are judged by other players. Again, a continuity is drawn between the real world and the virtual world. Judgement is based not upon a violation of the ‘rules of the game’ but rather the ‘rules of the world.’ We first see that it is difficult to determine what behaviors are ‘transgressive’ because the norms of the game extend beyond the code, the rules, or the developer’s intentions. Norms are built in to social expectations that overcome the form of the game. We also find that judgement of contentious behavior tends to focus on ‘real-world’ rather than gaming-centered transgressions.

Finally, in chapter six we look more closely at how ‘gaming capital’, a system of values emergent from the structure of video games is adapted by Chinese players of *ZT* in the

development of personal skills that can counter the superior monetary capital of wealthy players. Furthermore, the strategies that skilled players take are related to classical Chinese strategy. This Chinese version of gaming capital is compared to Western gamers' frustration with real-money transactions. In the comparison, we can see how Chinese gamers and game designers reinterpret the distinction between monetary and gaming capital even as they deny the game a transcendent space.

This paper seeks to add to our understanding of how the global is made local even in online spaces. This work further challenges theorists of virtual worlds to critically examine their own assumptions about the value of the virtual and its relationship to the actual world. The 'this-world' perspective of classical Chinese philosophy offers a new way to conceptualize the virtual and the actual—not a virtual that simulates the real, not overlapping social worlds, not an interconnection of two worlds, but one continuous experience.

## II: Literature Review

*With the ancients, understanding had gotten somewhere. Where was that? Its height, its extreme, that to which no more could be added was this: Some of them thought that there had never begun to be things. The next lot thought that there are things, but that there had never begun to have boundaries among them. The next lot thought that there are boundaries among things, but that there had never begun to be right and wrong among them.*

Zhuangzi, in Hall & Ames, 1998, 249

### **Transcendence and Immanence**

Roger Ames and David Hall define “strict transcendence” the following way: “A is transcendent with respect to B if the existence, meaning, or import of B cannot be fully accounted for without recourse to A, but the reverse is not true.” (1998, 190). This is to say, the transcendent thing is that which is truly real, while the immanent thing is a thing of mere appearances. Strict transcendence has been an underlying assumption of much of mainstream Western thought, relied upon by the most influential of philosophers from Plato to Spinoza. The assumption of strict transcendence engenders a “a radical distinction between the ways things appear and the world as it truly is.” Thus, one of the central problems of Western philosophy and theology has been the resolution of the binary between the transcendent and the immanent—or, we might say, the actual and the virtual.

For premodern Western thinkers, the problem of transcendence and immanence centered on the God the transcendent Being, broadly characterized in four ways. The Di-

vine Mind was the place where the eternal “intellectual and moral virtues” could be found, underlying the systems of Descartes and Hegel. The Great Mechanic was the creator of the great rational “world system” that Newton sought to understand. The Arbitrary Will of God was a justice beyond understanding, brought to its most extreme position by John Calvin. The Telos of Nature was the “supreme final cause” of Aristotle, whose ultimate expression was found in teleological evolution. (Hall and Ames, 1998, 194-7).

Likewise, there were four “deaths” of God. The absolute Truth of the Divine Mind was deconstructed into a multiplicity of truths. The Divine Will was overcome by the individual will of Nietzsche and the atheistic existentialists. The Great Mechanic was taken apart by “technicians” who can reshape the world. The Telos of Nature replaced by the immediacy and individuality of New Age spirituality (Hall and Ames, 1998, 197-8). However, the Death of God movement cannot dismiss the problematic altogether, but can only deconstruct it. “The problem for rational explanation is not that of transcendence or immanence per se, but is rather the polar principle of transcendence and immanence” (Hall and Ames 203). That is to say, though it may come under question Western philosophy must continue to deal with the heritage of the problematic of transcendence. Furthermore, the transcendence problematic continues to undergird mainstream theory in the sciences and social sciences. The study of virtual worlds is particularly susceptible to this assumption.

### **Virtual Reality**

For the study of virtual worlds, the issue of the ‘reality’ of the virtual is of central importance. In this section, I will explore some of the ways that the transcendent has in-

formed previous work on virtual worlds. In this, it is not my intent to challenge the veracity of claims made on these assumptions. Nor do I want to suggest that these authors are unaware of their own philosophical foundations (indeed, several cite Plato himself). Finally, I do not mean to demonstrate these authors' bias against some kind of transcendental truth, as though a Confucian or other philosophical perspective could reach it more closely. Rather, by contrasting the assumptions made by Western scholars of virtual worlds with that of Chinese players, I want to demonstrate the importance of one's cultural heritage to critical thought of the world around oneself.

The (Western) scholarship on virtual worlds to this point has been marked by an attempt to define what precisely virtual worlds are. Not in a categorical sense: researchers are content to allow work on social networking sites, games, sandboxes like *Second Life*, and other forms on online sociality a place at the table. Rather, researchers are looking for an ontological identity - what does it mean *to be* a virtual world? Central to this debate is the 'reality' of the virtual.

Implicit in this question is the assumption, in classical Western form, that the real (transcendent) is more important than the virtual (immanent). Researchers need to identify the 'real' in the virtual in order to justify their field to outsiders that may see virtual worlds and the study thereof as frivolous activities. Defending the importance of virtual worlds becomes defending the importance of virtual world study. In part, this is necessary to explain to outsiders what, precisely, is being studied. Those who study virtual worlds attempt to address the assumption that the real is more important than the virtual in many different

ways—however, they all circle around the problematic of the transcendent and the immanent.

There are several ways to defend the study of virtual worlds to incredulous colleagues. One is to suggest that virtual worlds are analogues to the real world. Therefore, they offer the opportunity to act as a “sociological petri dish.” This strategy relies on an ability to separate the virtual world from the real one (so as not to contaminate the sample) and for the virtual world to have characteristics that mimic the real world. The second defense is that virtual worlds offer an opportunity to play as a more authentic version of oneself. The third defense is that virtual worlds interface with the real world. The final common defense of the study of virtual worlds is to insist that virtual worlds are themselves real. In practical use, these defenses are closely interrelated and often coexist in the same argument. However, I will argue that all of these arguments are also philosophically interrelated in their assumption of a real/virtual problematic.

### **Analogous Virtual**

In the case of the analogous virtual, researchers are concerned with finding out how the virtual world does or does not mirror the real world. That is, the virtual is valuable in the sense that it can help us understand the real. Implicit in this idea of mirroring is the assumption that the virtual world can be divided in some way from the real. In this way, the virtual world can act as a sociological laboratory, where hypotheses can be tested by modifying the structure of the game world. Dmitri Williams writes of a ‘mapping principle,’ “the extent to which human behaviors occur in virtual spaces in the same way they oc-

cur in real spaces” (2008: 3). For social science researchers interested in gathering great amounts of quantitative data, testing hypotheses against a control group, or doing economic experiments that may involve real risk, virtual worlds offer a unique opportunity. However, in order to use virtual worlds as sociological laboratories, scientists need to first show how virtual worlds do or do not mimic the real world. The very idea that virtual worlds can be a “map” of reality gives reality a transcendent value that the virtual world can only be an imitation of.

As an example of this kind of approach, Ducheneaut et al look at spaces in virtual worlds that are designed for sociability as opposed to ‘instrumental gameplay’ (combat, character improvement) (2007). Specifically, they examine the cantinas in the game *Star Wars Galaxies* that attempt to simulate the famous scene from *Star Wars* where farmboy Luke Skywalker enters a seedy underground bar packed with a wide variety of strange alien creatures. Ducheneaut et al find that *Galaxies*’ virtual cantinas are poor simulations, rarely holding player interest for longer than it takes to fill the character’s energy bar and almost entirely lacking any sociality. In contrasting *Galaxies*’ instrumental or “work-like” gameplay with the attempt to create social spaces in *Galaxies*’ cantinas, Ducheneaut et al suggest that virtual worlds can mirror the real world in having separate spaces for productivity and relaxation. In addition to relying on a particularly Western concept of the division of work from play (see also Malaby 2007), this idea that virtual world can mimic the real world relies on the ‘real world’ having a transcendent identity that is prior to the appearances of the real put up in the virtual world.

## **Authentic Virtual**

There are also folk understandings of virtual worlds as separate analogous worlds. For many players, virtual worlds represent an escape from the actual world, or an alternate reality. Virtual worlds offer an opportunity to play a character of a different gender or no gender, an animal or a fantasy species. Players can take on various roles: hero, villain, mercenary, tycoon. While players recognize the porousness of the virtual border, the imaginary space has importance to them. In this case, the transcendent category is in many ways reversed: the virtual is understood as being prior to the real. The realm of imagination becomes the realm of true identity.

Edward Castronova takes the most extreme position. He argues that the fun of virtual worlds is in the play-acting. In the virtual cantina of *Star Wars Galaxies*, he blames those “Earthlings” who talk about the weather on Earth for ruining the fantasy. In the *New York School of Law Review*, Castronova argued that the duty of lawmakers is to protect these imaginary spaces for the fantasy-makers (2004). While in some countries, virtual possessions are protected as possessions with real value, in essence Castronova argues that they should be protected as objects with virtual value. That is to say, real-world law should protect virtual worlds as special ‘commons’ where players can define the borders of the world as closed, porous or open, and the government has a limited ability to affect the play-space. This way, if players want their virtual belongings to stay off the real-world market, real-world law can be used to protect the fantasy. Ultimately, Castronova envisions a coming ‘exodus’ to the virtual world, where people will leave their fleshly bodies behind for virtual

bodies that can be “man, woman or both” and where fantasy rules (2007). This virtual exodus clearly mirrors the Christian rapture. Castronova sees people transcending their earthly forms for a realm of pure imagination. To be play, the play-space must be pure play-space.

## **Real Virtual**

Another way to demonstrate the value of virtual worlds is to show that economies, societies and cultures in the virtual world are real in and of themselves, in the sense that they have value. Edward Castronova argues the significance of Everquest by reference to its ‘real’ economy that operates in ‘real’ dollars (2001). Julian Dibbell’s “A Rape in Cyberspace” is overwhelmingly concerned with the realness of a virtual world that takes place entirely in text and the emotional consequences of a violation of a player-character (1996). The consequences of the rape in Dibbell’s piece are the creation of a system of law and social organization at that time unheard of in online spaces (see Golub 2010 for a summary of realism in virtual worlds).

Justifying the reality of the virtual is the whole project of Tom Boellstorff’s *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008). Boellstorff performs his research entirely in-game, to discover the culture that emerges from the virtual world itself. In validating the method of ethnographic participant-observation, Boellstorff simultaneously validates the virtual world as a location of emergent culture. Turning the quest for reality in the virtual on its head, Boellstorff instead declares, “We have always been virtual.” Which is to say, we have always been producers of imagined spaces. Here, like Castronova, Boellstorff has reversed the associa-

tion of the virtual and the actual—now the virtual is transcendent and the real world wholly an expression of shared imagination.

Although the transcendence/immanence problematic has been a major theme in the history of Western thought, it would be disingenuous to suggest that the trouble with these assumptions has gone unrecognized. Philosophers in the traditions of pragmatism and process philosophy, as well as social scientists in the field of “practice theory” attempt to move away from language of Being into that of Becoming. In game studies, Thomas Malaby argues for this kind of perspective, focusing on the contingent as opposed to the narrative generation of meaning in games (2007). Vili Lehdonvirta, reacting to the work on the “analogous virtual” argues that “virtual worlds don’t exist” as separable spheres (2010).

### **Virtual Ethics and Transgression**

These assumptions also make their way into work on ethics, values, and transgression in games. Western game theorists often draw on a key idea of Johan Huizinga: that of the “Magic Circle” (1998). The Magic Circle is a space that lacks moral consequence - if our actions have moral weight then by definition we cannot be merely playing. Within the Magic Circle is therefore a space of special ethics that relies on the game’s separation from reality (Castronova 2004). Ideas of deviance in online games often rely on a transcendent understanding of “rules of the game” that are unified and unchanging. The behavior that scholars consider deviant is often that which is deviant from these “rules.” Huizinga’s Magic Circle divides the game world from the real world, thereby creating an immanent form of the real. The ‘rules of the game’ define this immanent form.

In her investigation of World of Warcraft, Mortensen argues, “Games are sets of rules, and to play games all those who participate must accept them as real, important, and inherently good” (Mortensen 2007). Mortensen demonstrates several instances of behavior that deviate from the design of the game that are nevertheless quite common: role-playing, guild-leading, and purchasing in-game items with real money. These social behaviors involve behaviors not predicted by the designers. In contrast, David Myers demonstrated that adhering too closely to a game’s design can be deviant from a social perspective by disrupting other players’ sociality in an effort to improve his character—concluding that sociality and formal games were incompatible (2008). Both studies rely on a formal identity that is built into the design of the game, and that can be transgressed against.

Sicart (2005a and 2005b) takes an explicitly Aristotelian approach. Game rules should be considered the "potential" that is evaluated and put into "action" by the players. Sicart applies an Aristotelian virtue ethics approach, wherein an object’s potentiality cannot be revealed without understanding the object’s actuality first. This is to say, we cannot understand what an object *could be* before we understand what it *is*. Therefore, games as ethical objects cannot be analyzed from their rules alone, but must be seen as they are put into action. Ethics comes into play in the "phronesis" (judgment or prudence) of a player. Thus, the potential embodied in the game rules becomes real moral action. Sicart views the rules of the game as a neutral system that exists prior to any ethical action. Furthermore, the moral actor that Sicart proposes is an individual, without relationship with people around her. In fact, Sicart’s work focuses as closely on the possibility single player games such as the controversial *Grand Theft Auto* having moral consequences. To conceive of a

moral relationship with a game one plays by oneself requires that virtue be transcendent from human relationships.

Ashley John Craft's interpretation of a notorious incident in the MMOG *EVE Online* elaborates and codifies some of the mainstream Western assumptions about ethics and transgressive behavior in virtual worlds (2007). Craft addresses the case of the Guiding Hand Social Club, a mercenary group, who over the course of a year infiltrated an organization, assassinated its leader, and stole in-game assets worth 16,500 in real U.S. dollars. Accomplishing this required the members of Guiding Hand to act outside of the game servers, developing real bonds of trust with their target players. There were therefore two moral issues with real-world consequences - theft and betrayal.

Craft uses the concept of the magic circle in an absolute sense, by way of theatrical representation theory. Craft argues that the game is like a play. For actors in a play, it is not immoral for one to feign murdering the other, or to steal a prop. In this sense, players of *EVE* have no particular expectation that their goods will be stolen, nor have they given any informed consent. Thus, had the players behind the mercenaries of the Guiding Hand revealed their characters' intentions, they could have performed the theft as a role-play. Acknowledging that the virtual and actual intermingle, Craft nevertheless argues that the virtual/actual border is what permits moral judgements. Representations cannot carry moral condemnation, so unethical acts can only have consequence in the real world - thus, Craft's argument relies on proving that the Guiding Hand actions had real deleterious effects on the players, not their virtual characters. Craft does not elaborate on why, given the very real value of their virtual possessions, the victims of the Guiding Hand would ever al-

low a 'playacted' theft of their goods. It seems that there is no way for a player to 'playact' theft and assassination in a world with actually valuable goods without being actually morally culpable

Although many theorists take an extreme position that wholly brackets out the ethical world of a game, Mia Consalvo's more fine-grained work on cheating demonstrates some of the values that emerge from gaming culture. She refers to these values as "gaming capital." Gaming capital comes from Bourdieu's 'cultural capital'. It is about "how being a member of game culture is about more than playing games or even playing them well." (Consalvo 2007). Gaming capital is knowledge that surrounds games, that distinguishes 'gamers' from casual games players. It is made of dialogues on the value of games, of how to play games properly, and what counts as. People with gaming capital can deploy it in ways that enhance their standing - to be admired as experts or tastemakers.

In Consalvo's work, gaming capital has a complex relationship with cheating. Players have different opinions of what are appropriate ways of acquiring gaming capital and what forms it might take. Using a strategy guide might be acceptable, but becoming a skilled player without resorting to assistance is more admirable. Cheating itself can have its own cultural capital, as cheaters attempt to find ways around anti-cheat technology. Gamers will admit to cheating themselves even as they acknowledge the negative impact cheating practices have, and have varying justifications for different kinds of cheating.

Perhaps the most controversial method of cheating for the gamers Consalvo studies is the practice of real-money trading (RMT), in which virtual items or virtual currency are bought and sold for real dollars. While Consalvo has shown other examples of the eco-

conomic capitalization of gaming capital (in the selling of strategy guides, or gaming merchandise), this represents a direct capitalization of gaming elements - a direct confrontation of economic and gaming capital. Virtual loot buyers have not 'earned' their virtual material rewards through good play or time invested. They may have valuable equipment, but lack the gaming capital (knowledge, skill) to deploy the equipment effectively.

Consalvo's concept of 'cheating' provides another perspective on 'deviance.' Where Mortensen focused on deviance from the rules of the game, Consalvo's shows how one can also deviate from gamer culture. This is exemplified in 'gaming capital,' a set of shared values with a complex relationship to cheating. In this study of ZT, we will see how 'gaming capital' comes to be in conflict with economic capital due to ZTs emphasis on real-money-transactions. This challenge to (or reimagining of) gaming capital by Chinese players demonstrates how gaming culture, though uniquely and internationally generated in concert with game developers, nevertheless maintains traditional values in different cultures.

### **Chinese Perspective**

Classical Chinese philosophy lacks this ideal approach - instead existence becomes a "continuous, uninterrupted process." Because of these assumptions, deeply rooted in the way Chinese people think about the world, Chinese MMORPGs and their players have a distinct view of the ontology of the virtual and the actual world. It is not that Chinese gamers all think that the virtual and actual are one - it is that this debate has no meaning for them.

The moral person in Confucian philosophy does not adhere to any kind of transcendent virtues. Nor is this person in an individual relationship with these transcendent virtues. The self in Chinese philosophy is inevitably relational—a person is a parent, child, subject, friend. As a result, they do not have general moral obligations to universal principles, but rather very specific obligations to particular people or entities (Rosemont, Jr. in Hershock & Ames 2006). While Sicart's virtue ethics approach can work with single-player games, it would be impossible for a classical Chinese scholar to conceive having a moral relationship with a single-player virtual space (except in the sense that that space had been designed by other people.)

In opposition to Craft's Aristotelian judgement of virtual ethics, Lin Holin and Sun Chuen-tsai's account of grievers in Taiwan reveals a distinctly Confucian reaction to grief play (2005). Lin and Sun examined mainstream player's perception of 'white-eyed' players, those who "look without seeing" (p. 2n1). This includes what is generally considered 'grief play', but is not coterminous with it. It includes players who curse, cheat, rob, player-kill, beg, bot, and buy gold with real money. The category includes both explicit and implicit grievers, after Bartle's classification, which means both those who grieve occasionally or accidentally and those who purposefully join 'griever pledges' with other players.

The key component of 'white-eyed' status is to be imagined by other players as very young. Ordinary players do not recognize griever pledges as 'white-eyed', while griever pledge members can be proud of their 'professional' status. Non-professional grievers, occasional or unconscious, respond to criticism by reinforcing the age stereotypes of grievers, to claim

that they have grown out of their behavior, or cannot be associated with those younger players.

MMOs are allowing many people to experience "large-scale, cross-age co-playing" for the first time (9). By stereotyping 'white-eyed' players as immature, older players attempt to control the interpretation of gaming. Gaming in Taiwan can carry a stigma of being childish in itself. Making griefers into 'others', mainstream Taiwanese players protect themselves from criticism themselves. This also reifies traditional social roles, wherein children should not misbehave in adult spheres. As opposed to Craft's assertion that grief play is immoral because it violates the magic circle, the Taiwanese experience disfavors grief play because it violates age-centered social norms. Thus, characterization of 'white-eyed' players as childish can be seen as a Confucian reaction to modernity. Looking more carefully at Confucian and other founding texts of Chinese philosophy can reveal the deep forms that characterize more generally the Chinese response to transgressive play online.

In this paper, I will explore Chinese gamers "this-world" approach to the MMORPG *Zhengtu* through the folding-in of the game world, its rules, and the player's identity with the material circumstances of the real world. I will examine the consequences of the this-world perspective for ideas of norms and fairness in an online game. I will consider the interaction of these values with the values of gaming embodied in gaming capital. In my ethnography, I will seek to show how the influence of classical ideas has informed the way that Chinese gamers interpret the virtual world of *Zhengtu*. In particular, we will see the lack of a virtual/actual problematic for Chinese gamers, with consequences for definitions of ethics and transgression in *Zhengtu*.

Lehdonvirta argues that "Virtual worlds don't exist," but says that one could also say that "the real world doesn't exist" (2010). This is to say: nothing is real, nothing is virtual. This, I will argue, is precisely how Chinese players of *Zhengtu* view the game world. It may be important for Second Life residents to maintain a divide between their first and second lives, but this concern does not exist for Chinese players of *Zhengtu*. The problematic of transcendence does not exist for classical Chinese philosophers. Likewise, the problematic of the virtual does not exist for Chinese gamers. Chinese *Zhengtu* players' lack of concern for 'virtual reality' has consequences for how they view ethical behavior in the virtual world.

### **Indigenization**

Inda and Rosaldo, in their introduction to *The Anthropology of Globalization*, offer an anthropological perspective on globalization (2002). Unlike economists or political scientists, anthropologists focus on the impact of global forces on micro-level processes – the kind that are particularly amenable to the ethnographic method – and to the effect of global processes on local culture. In this vein, Inda and Rosaldo make two arguments. First, globalization has "de/territorialized" culture: removed it from one territory and inscribed it in another. Second, globalization has been considered "cultural imperialism" of 'the West' on 'the Rest'; the anthropological perspective questions this, finding ways that culture flows against the West or peripheral to it.

Inda and Rosaldo consistently portray globalization as a threat to indigenous culture that must be managed by governments. Largely, this is seen as the result or continuation of colonizing projects (cultural imperialism). Still, when globalization bypasses the

West in what Inga and Rosaldo call "peripheral" globalization, the imposition of foreign culture is characterized as a threat to local forms. When outside concepts invade the West, these are additionally seen as threats to the hegemony of the West. Inga and Rosaldo challenge the notion that globalization is only a process of imposition of Western culture on the world, but they maintain that culture forms are instruments of power that corrupt or overtake local culture.

From a different perspective, Marshall Sahlins argues that anthropology should focus on the effect of local culture on global processes, i.e.: indigenization (2000). Inga and Rosaldo argued that people reinterpret media to fit their own values and assumptions, but they use this in support of the argument that globalization is more complex than one-sided imposition. For them, active consumption of media only "hold[s] homogenization at bay" (18). Sahlins brings the issue of integration to the forefront.

Sahlins argues against what he calls "despondency theory", the idea that when indigenous people encounter Western civilization, they become "despondent," their culture is broken, and they will tragically homogenize to become just like us.

When Europeans change it is called 'progress', but when 'they' (the others) change, notably when they adopt some of our progressive attributes, it is a loss of their culture, some kind of adulteration (45).

Sahlins argues for the power of tradition. Tradition is not the opposite of change (or progress). Tradition is not a nostalgic look backward to a more pristine time. Tradition survives through change, indeed it enables change by fitting it in to understood practices. Inga and Rosaldo argue that globalization has failed to homogenize because the power of culture

flows in many directions. Sahlins argues that globalization has failed to homogenize because globalization does not have that power. While continuing to focus on the micro-level processes that are at the center of the anthropological approach to globalization, Sahlins also insists on the special place of culture as a form of continuity and mutual understanding. The primacy of culture in Sahlins' argument recalls Boasian perspectives on diffusion and integration.

Ralph Linton's 1936 textbook *The Study of Man* demonstrates this Boasian perspective. Two chapters on the diffusion and integration of culture traits show Boasian concerns for the movement of culture ideas around the world. Several factors take part in diffusion: distance, acceptance, and communicability. Distance is the degree of contact between individuals, not just physical distance but accessibility as well. Acceptance is the compatibility of the trait with existing traits. Communicability is a characteristic of the transmitted trait that reflects its inherent ability to be transmitted; for example, 'surface' forms are more easily communicable than 'deep' forms like marriage practices. The most difficult to communicate are "those vital attitudes and values which lie largely below the level of individual consciousness and which the average member of a society rarely tries to verbalize even to himself" (339). In all cases, traits are accepted by free will for their utility. Of course, this is not a process that is limited to moving from the powerful to the weak. One well-known section details the foreign influence on a "100% American" man, who, among a laundry list of other influences, enjoys a Native American habit, smoking, as he reads the news "in characters invented by the ancient Semites upon a material invented in China by a process invented in Germany" (327). Linton attempts to construct a more universal way

of understanding diffusion and integration that, while it ignores subjectivities, provides a model for considering the movement of various traits and the adjustment that occurs in a trait and a culture as a result of that movement.

Integration describes how new traits come to coexist with old traits. Linton describes a continuous process of adjustment of both new and old traits. Cultures are most likely to adopt the 'core' of a trait, the most concrete and tangible aspects of it, with the most obvious utility. Linton argues that no trait can wholly disrupt a culture - any trait fundamentally different enough do that would be incommunicable. However, the most disruptive traits alter the economic system, the society's method of survival, which can paradoxically also be the most easily communicated, since these traits have obvious utility.

I would like to bring this Boasian perspective into conversation with contemporary theories of globalization, modernity and indigenization that have been exemplified by Ina and Rosaldo and Sahlins. First, to continue to look closely at micro-level processes in globalization including local adjustments and adaptations. Rather than focusing on power and hegemony, I would like to focus more closely on cultural systems of meaning, to look at how tradition can maintain an 'alternative modernity' in continuity with the past. As a representative of this traditional past, I will draw on classical Chinese philosophy - in this way I hope to bring philosophers into conversation with anthropologists.

In my project I will attempt to move beyond flows of power to look at the processes of diffusion and integration that go in to the transmission of cultural forms. What are the core traits of the MMORPG form that are transmitted to Chinese players? What are the deep forms among Chinese gamers and game developers that alter the way MMOGs are

played? How do these deep forms adjust and adjust to modern technology and practices like online gaming? What features of gaming are more communicable, what features of Chinese culture are most accepting? To answer my questions, I will look closely at transgressive or contentious behavior in *Zhengtu* and the normative discourses that surround them.

### III: Ethnographic Background

#### Summary

*Zhengtu Online* (meaning "journey") is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) published by Shanghai's Giant Interactive in China since 2006. In 2008, *Zhengtu* (hereafter, ZT), was one of the most popular games in China, with a record 2.1 million peak concurrent users (GiantInteractive 2008). ZT operates on a 'free-to-play' business model, in which the game client and gameplay time are free, but players can purchase virtual items to enhance their character, as well as other services. The game has an extremely competitive environment. Characters are divided among several warring states, create factions that struggle over control of cities, and are only partly restricted in attacking individuals.

The combination of systemic encouragement of player-vs-player conflict (player-killing or PK) and the deceptively high cost of success (in Renminbi) have made ZT a controversial game in China. One news article from the *Southern Weekly* accused the ZT "system" of seizing on

the weaknesses of human nature as it calls on gamers to give free reign to depravity in a virtual world that violates the norms of the real world. It gives to those that wage war the power of indiscriminate killing, and it bestows on killers the rewards of increased experience. And the system makes note of your decapitation record. That series of numbers is the height of glory, like an Indian warrior's string of scalps, while all that the dead gain is disgrace. (Martinesen 2007, emphasis in original, denoting *xitong*, system, set apart with a different typeface)

The “system” of *Zhengtu*'s controversial reputation has led to several adaptations of the game by developers Giant. There are three other editions of ZT. The "Time Edition" dispenses with real-money transactions for a subscription payment model. The "Retro Edition" replicates the first edition of ZT, where real money could only be used to buy equipment, not other benefits. The "Green Edition" is a collaboration with Chinese Internet giant Tencent (creators of the ubiquitous chat program QQ) that is easier and friendlier. However, for players that enjoy a money-driven competitive experience, the original ZT remains popular.

Several aspects of ZT make it ideal for this study. First, ZT is a domestically produced game, developed to answer particularly Chinese demands for a MMORPG. Secondly, ZT's payment system allows free access to the game by anyone, but gives the most power to those who are willing to spend a great deal of money. These two groups of gamers are called "RMB gamers" (*renminbi wanjia*) and "non-RMB gamers" (*fei renminbi wanjia*), hereafter RMB and FRMB gamers. Finally, ZT contains a complex system of player-vs-player conflict system that encourages conflict and competition between players. In this section I will describe ZT's structure as a game and how it is used by players.

## **History**

The history of MMORPGs like ZT can be traced back to several points of origin in the United States. The technological foundation of these games derives from early text-based chat rooms. The rules of MMORPGs can be traced to pencil-and-paper role-playing games. The modern imagination of virtual space comes from science fiction - 'cyberspace' from William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, 'metaverse' from Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* and

the vision of the glowing 3D world inside the computer from Hollywood films from *Tron* to *Jurassic Park*.

The subgenre of "Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games" (MMORPGs) is based on a combination of networking technology and rules systems derived from paper-and-pencil roleplaying games. Games like *Dungeons & Dragons* emerged from the fantasy wargame hobby, as a way to play stories inspired by fantasy literature like J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*. Indeed, imagined fantasy worlds like Tolkein's Middle Earth could be considered 'virtual worlds' in themselves (Boellstorff 2008: 37). Pencil-and-paper RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* carried over structures from fantasy wargaming such as health points, armor ratings, movement speeds, and character classes and races. Many of these wargaming elements are evident in today's online role-playing games.

Character classes and races, for example, are a common element of most MMORPGs. In wargames, classes denote the nature of the military unit: light infantry, cavalry, artillery, and so on. "Races" usually translate to fantasy races in conflict with each other: Men vs. Elves vs. Orcs and so on. In RPGs, carrying over these military classifications creates a particularly historically materialist concept of identity. "Class" indicates a career path. "Race" a set of cultural ideals, homeland, etc. A character's abilities are limited to his or her class, available classes are often determined by race. In *World of Warcraft*, for example, only Night Elves and Taurens can play druids, since in the game's fiction these races are the most in touch with the natural world.

While many social spaces and situations could be considered "virtual," the technological systems called "virtual worlds" began with text-based chat rooms called MUDs, or

Multi-User Dungeons in the 1980s. While some MUDs were focused on socializing or creating worlds, others were online adaptations of pencil-and-paper RPG rules, creating violent conflict-oriented games (Boellstorff 2008). The first Chinese-language virtual world appeared in Taiwan in 1995, *East Story 2*. This game is notable because it had a Chinese theme. Unlike early Western MUDs, which drew heavily from Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*, *East Story 2* based itself on martial arts fiction. In the United States, MUDs developed into modern graphical MMORPGs in the 1990s. The online adaptation of the popular Ultima series, *Ultima Online*, was one of the first, and it was also the first in China. Chinese gamers set up their own pirate server to play *Ultima Online* without logging in to official developer servers (Chen 2007).

The East Asian MMORPG market began in South Korea, where online gaming can be called a national pastime. Government intervention following the 1997 Asian financial crisis led to the creation of one of the largest broadband networks in the world. Further government support of domestically-produced video games led to a growing domestic games supply. The government had also placed restrictions on Japanese imports, so South Korea did not receive products by Nintendo or Sony, who now dominate the console games market. Instead, South Korean gamers focused on online PC games. In 2003, South Korea had the highest proportion of online gamers in the world (Chan 2006).

South Korean games had great levels of proliferation in other parts of East Asia. In 2003, South Korea controlled more than 70% of the Chinese game market. At one time, the most popular online game in the world was South Korea's *Lineage*. Even today, "Korean ports abound in mainland China's online gaming industry," (Egan 2008). In the early

2000s, Chinese companies regularly adapted Korean and Taiwanese games for local consumption, but their support for domestic developers was relatively small before 2004.

Like in South Korea, the Chinese government sought to encourage local development of games through massive grants to game developers. In 2004, on the heels of the ChinaJoy online game expo, the government announced \$242 million for the development of up to 100 games in four years, while at the same time cracking down on importation. No new games were approved for two months preceding this announcement. Like the earlier *East Story 2*, these new games drew on Chinese history and mythology for themes. Korean, Japanese and Taiwanese adaptations could fill the market demand, but Beijing was interested in more than RMB. This government policy was a clear indication of Beijing's stake in the design of online games, and the intent to indigenize the industry. (Feldman 2004)

The proliferation of netcafes in developing East Asian countries can also be linked to rapid economic development and government intervention. In countries where the pace of technological development (often with the support of the government) outpaces the consumer's ability to purchase on an individual level, entrepreneurs saw opportunities to provide internet access to the students and others with more time than money. Online games also protect developers and netcafe owners from piracy, since players must log in to developer-controlled servers in order to play. Knockoffs of software (as well as electronics and designer clothing), called *shanzhai*, have a high degree of acceptance in practical but status-concerned China (Chan 2006).

Internet cafes are a common thread in cultures of East Asian online gaming. Silvia Lindtner argues that Chinese gamers have a "hybrid cultural ecology" when they play games

in netcafes. This means that East Asian gamers play games in ways that cross the "virtual world/actual world" divide. For example, in learning about games, Chinese gamers make use of the players sitting next to them in the netcafe more than online-only acquaintances. Socializing in the netcafe is also important. Netcafes usually provide drinks and snacks, other games such as billiards, and are sometimes air conditioned. (Lindtner 2008). Consistently, real-world, co-located socializing has distinguished East Asian game players from Western ones. However, this paper will attempt to identify other factors in the indigenization of online games.

Giant founder Shi Yuzhu is a gamer himself, and proud of it. He claims to play games for ten to fifteen hours every day, and rang the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange in a track suit to prove it. (Egan 2008) The development of ZT came out of his experiences as a gamer. Playing Korean game *The Legend of Mir*, Shi became frustrated with the endless grind, navigating mazes, killing monsters, only to fail at the last moment and have to start all over. In response, Shi purchased a high-level account from another player and spent additional money equipping his character - quickly becoming incredibly powerful. This experience led Shi to question the typical 'grind' model of this kind of game, in which player pay a subscription for access to the game and must devote hours of time to repetitive tasks in order to progress, and in which purchasing game accounts and other virtual goods with real money operates as a black market. If a player has resources, asked Shi, why should they endure the grind? (Martinesen 2007).

Giant has a somewhat unique method of promoting the game. The company leveraged the popularity of *wangba* in order to drive demand for the game from the grassroots.

At ZT's launch, Shi focused on rural areas before moving to the coastal metropolises. Giant used the lower cost of advertising in the less-developed areas to build interest in the game before they began advertising in expensive cities. Furthermore, Giant focused on direct marketing in the *wangba*, speaking with gamers directly about the new game. These techniques demonstrate Shu's understanding of gamer culture. In the first case, gamers are well-connected through the Internet, and information, such as buzz about a new game, can spread without requiring that the origin be in a major gaming hub. Secondly, Giant recognized the way that Chinese gamers play and learn about games is focused in the *wangba* and relies a great deal on person-to-person interaction. Even today, Giant employs a 2500 person marketing team that makes direct contact with gamers in *wangba*. (Egan 2008) Finally, this marketing technique emphasized the democratic nature of ZT - it is free and has low system requirements, so it is accessible even in developing areas.

## **Payment**

ZT's payment system is one of its most well-known and controversial aspects. Although technically the game is free to play, in reality it is impossible to accomplish anything without spending real money. Advertising for ZT emphasizes the 'free' aspect of the game. Publicity materials and posters often prominently display the slogan "Forever Free." However, players often refer to ZT as one of the most expensive games to play.

There are two currencies in the game. Silver coins can be earned in game through gameplay, such as by completing quests or killing monsters. Gold coins must be purchased with RMB. Much of the highest-level equipment can only be purchased with gold coins.

Other functions of the game are also only available to those with gold, such as immigrating from one country to another or getting married. Pets are also only available for purchase with gold.

Players have several options for purchasing gold. Scratch cards can be purchased with cash from various retailers. Players can also purchase directly from the Giant website using a credit card or bank account. Gold can also be billed to a mobile phone account. Players can also exchange silver into gold through an in-game 'banker' character, and players who exchange a great deal of silver can receive additional benefits through a "VIP" status.

ZT's payment system is controversial and has changed over time. In addition to the adaptation of the original game into several versions with different pay models, in 2006, ZT players began receiving 'wages' for playing the game. The requirements for wages are somewhat strict. Characters are required to be at least 60th level and spend 60 hours or more online a month. The wages are also small. Like many virtual worlds, it is possible for some players to make money playing ZT, or to play for free, although it is extremely time-consuming.

## **Gameplay**

Zhengtu has a historical fantasy theme, set during a version of the Warring States period, ~475-221 BC. In the storyline, the king and his heir have both died and ten successor states (named after historical Chinese states) are struggling over sovereignty. Each player

character is ostensibly a potential heir to the throne, although in practice the balance of power is unchangeable. The theme suggests, however, the premise of the game.

As a new character in *ZT Online*, a player learns that he or she is a scion of a forgotten royal family, who must return to society and establish a name for themselves. The goal is to form a kingdom that propels the player to that glorious station of emperor, thereby attaining the ultimate degree of power in the game. But to do so means a player must face off against, literally, millions of others who also vie for that same power. (Egan 2008)

The setting itself is therefore designed to emphasize competition and achievement.

The 'historical' setting suggested by the inclusion of real Chinese states is broken by fantastical elements such as monsters and magic. Some modern elements, such as Western-style costumes and a stock market also break the historical theme.

According to the official website, *ZT* can be run on Windows 98 with only 64 MB of video memory. In contrast, Blizzard recommendeds Windows XP and a 3D graphics card with 128 MB of memory to play *World of Warcraft*, currently one of the most popular games in China. The low system requirements plus the free game client means that *ZT* is almost certainly installed on every computer in every netcafe in China.

Like many MMOGs, the population of *ZT* are divided into dozens of servers or 'shards', identically coded but separate worlds. Each shard can host up to 40,000 players. (GiantInteractive 2008). These shards are divided among different Chinese telecommunications companies and different regions, so that gamers can select the server that provides the best service in their region.

Character creation is very simple. After selecting the server that they will connect to, players are presented with a list of the characters they have on that server or the option to create a new character. Players select a unique name of 16 Roman characters or eight Chinese characters. They choose their character's gender. Male and female characters in the game are equally effective, although research has shown that gender as coded and performed can have a great deal of importance to other players in China Wu 2007. Players select their hairstyle and hair color. Besides the character's name, hairstyle is the only immutable way to identify different characters in game, since dress and equipment can change easily. Finally, players select one of the ten states they will pledge their character to: Wu, Zhao, Zhou, Chu, Yan, Tang, Han, Wei, Qi, or Song.

New characters begin in Qingyuan Village, where players learn the gameplay system by accepting quests from computer-controlled tutors scattered around the village. These tutors award characters with their first weapons and armor and direct the player in choosing a path for the development of their character's skills. This distinguishes ZT from many popular MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, in which a player chooses a character "class" from the beginning. Classes limit the abilities that are available to a character throughout the game. In ZT, characters are never limited in the skills they can learn. This system is not a new development in RPG design, but it is uncommon in popular Western games. As characters become stronger, they can eventually leave Qingyuan and enter the game world.

Skills are the central way for players to customize their characters. Skills are divided into several "jobs" - lists of complimentary skills that are interrelated but not exclusive, a variation on 'classes'. The possible jobs include:

- Martial Artist: high health and physical attack capability
- Marksman: long-distance attacks
- Summoner: summons creatures that fight on their own
- Magician: relies on magic attacks
- Immortal: uses poison and has healing abilities
- Assassin: an expert in close-range attacks
- Guardian: good at defense and mid-range attacks

Each job also has subcategories. For example, the Marksman job includes Basic Archery, Advanced Archery, Pets, and Traps. The Magician job includes Basic Magic, Fire Magic, Frost Magic, and Electric Magic. The jobs aren't mutually exclusive, but players have a limited number of skill points to expend as they develop their character. Strategic use of skill points is a key part of mastering the game. Most guides to ZT focus on what skills should be selected to maximize a particular effect. Although the skill system is open, most players focus on one job, since higher-level skills require lower level prerequisites to be earned first.

The Assassin and Guardian jobs have special status. There are no subcategories in these jobs, only a linear progression of skills. These skill paths must be activated at a cost of 120 skill points, and are only available to characters of level 140 or higher. Assassins and Guardians can carry exclusive weapons. Assassins can carry a katana (push dagger), Guardians have a sword with two aspects, magical and physical. These weapons have no special in-game function besides distinguishing players who have access to these characters.

Besides having only one skill path, Assassins and Guardians otherwise develop skills in the same manner as other jobs.

Skills have special effects on the character or the character's target. A character can always perform a basic attack - a swing of the sword, an arrow shot - but may use skills to temporarily enhance the character's abilities or to perform a special attack that does greater damage or has some kind of side effect. A character can activate a skill at any time with a hotkey. There may be a slight delay as the skill warms up (and an animation plays), and then there is a 'cooldown' period, during which the skill cannot be used again. These cooldown periods can last between a moment and several seconds. Each skill requires that the character be armed with a weapon appropriate to the character's job. For example, to use an Assassin's abilities a character must be armed with a katana. Some skills are always on, passively providing bonuses to the character's abilities. Some skills emphasize cooperative play;. each job has one "hero skill" that provides bonuses to allies.

Characters receive one skill point each level. To get a new skill, a character needs to have an appropriate skill book, a certain number of skill points, and to have met the prerequisites for the skill. Skill points can also be spent to upgrade a skill, which requires no skill book. New books can be purchased from vendors, or may be found on the corpses of slain monsters. Each skill has its own book.

Players have the option of resetting their skill points and their ability points and re-allocating them. This requires purchase of a book. At level 25, players may purchase the "Classic of Changing Body;" after level 40 they must purchase the more-expensive "Treasure of Changing Body." The books of "Washing the Essence" similarly allow players to change

their character's ability scores. This makes the skills system particularly flexible. It prevents players from making irreparable errors in their selection of skills, and allows players room to experiment with different skill sets. This also ensures that players who spend a lot of money on upgrading their character will not lose too much should they decide to try a different type.

At level 170, players can undertake a particular quest; at the quest's completion, they receive a book that activates the "talents" system. The talents are a set of passive skill boosters. Like skills they are activated through purchased books, and may be upgraded with higher-level books, given the character possesses the requisite number of talent points. Books are acquired one page at a time from slain monsters and must be assembled by an NPC bookbinder. After completing the initial quest, characters receive talent points equal to the number of levels they have achieved beyond 170. For each level thereafter, they receive talent points in parallel to skill points, one per level.

Abilities are the other marker of a character's prowess and progress. Players can increase a character's Strength (physical attack power), Intelligence (magical attack, magic points), Dexterity (physical and magical defense), Spirit (magic points, attack speed), Constitution (health points, critical hit frequency). These are common divisions of innate character ability in role-playing games; they are fundamentally identical to five of the six original ability scores in *Dungeons and Dragons* (minus the social ability, Charisma).

An important part of improving a character is improving the character's equipment. Equipment is the part of the game that players spend the most money on. There are twelve different kinds of gear that can be worn and carried, including one weapon, a shield, ar-

mor, clothing and jewelry. Items of the same type can have different levels, indicated by the color of the name. From lowest to highest they are: White, Blue, Gold, and Holy. Except for White equipment, equipment in the other ranks is prefixed: Practical (Holy-level does not have this prefix), Strengthening, Exquisite, Timeless, and Perfect. Equipment can be purchased, looted from corpses, received as a reward, or forged. Different equipment can have different effects - some equipment may boost a character's magic defense, other equipment may boost a character's physical attack, and so on. Players can create 'sets' of equipment that can be switched between in order to adapt to different needs. Some equipment is 'bound', which means it cannot be traded, sold or lost if killed, or collected from a corpse. This helps the developers control the supply of powerful equipment and the channels through which it can be acquired.

At one time, one of the most popular ways to gain equipment was through treasure boxes. Treasure boxes could be purchased for one RMB. Each box contained a random piece of equipment, maybe worthless, maybe priceless. This "slot machine" method of gaining equipment was highly criticized in Chinese press and was one of ZT's most notorious features. In 2009, the government forbade this kind of real-money trading in online games and ZT ended the system.

Upgrading equipment is an important part of gaining power. High-level equipment has several slots in it that can be inlaid with gems. Inlaying is a difficult process, not in terms of skill but in terms of probability. Each time a gem is inlaid, it has a chance of failure - failure destroys not only the gem in use, but every gem inlaid thus far, requiring the player to start over and buy new gems. This can quickly become very expensive. Like the

treasure chests, this process has been criticized as a form of gambling, but was not ended by government edict. For some players, of course, the risk is part of the fun. Another kind of inlaying allows players to temporarily imbue their weapons with different effects. Equipment can also be upgraded by "reforging" it with raw materials or by having it blessed with a "Blessing Stone" acquired from a particularly high-level monster.

ZT players use several different terms to refer to high-level or powerful characters. Strong characters are typically associated with RMB gamers, since it is extremely difficult to advance a character through the very highest levels without the assistance of powerful equipment that must be purchased. *Dahao* and *xiaohao*, meaning "big number" and "small number" respectively, are used when comparing high and low-level players and players with powerful versus weak equipment. *Niubi* is a popular and crude epithet with a useful constellation of meanings: awesome, capable and arrogant. This is usually used to describe *dahao* and RMB gamers. The first character, *niu*, meaning bull, is often used in combination with other characters to create related neologisms such as *niu hao*, "bastard level." Use of *niu* is not limited to describing RMB gamers, but can be used for other aspects of the game considered awesome in a negative sense, e.g., "Ten Thousand Calamities of Hell: A lot of players say this move is really awesome (*duoniu duoniu*), since it can drop your health 120 every ten seconds." 'Calamities' is the strongest ability of the Trapper job, and is popular with FRMB gamers attempting to kill RMB gamers. The ability is often seen as unfair or overpowered, i.e.: *niubi*. Language such as *dahao*, "RMB gamer" and *niubi* are interrelated terms and the way they are used by players often assumes equivalency. A closer look reveals the intricacies of the terminology for describing class difference in ZT.

Players can organize into groups on several levels. Different groups have different functions. Teams are temporary associations that allow players to easily communicate while they complete group missions. Clans are a primarily cooperative and supportive organization. As one feature, as characters level, part of the experience they earn will be given to their clan members. Clan members also have access to a tank, that can be driven through hostile areas for protection. Clans can be joined at level 20. Gangs are another voluntary and autonomous organization. Gangs are more competitive, and can be joined at level 40. Gangs can compete for control of neutral areas like King City and Phoenix City. Control of these areas provides a number of benefits including the ability to tax NPC shopkeepers in the city. Gangs can also fight each other directly for experience bonuses, or plunder each other's storerooms, and can set up their own base of operations with a workshop to construct tanks. Marriages can be seen as another kind of player group. Two players with male and female characters can complete the wedding quest and receive a bonus to their Magical Defense ability that increases the longer they stay married.

States are the largest player organizations, and are mandatory rather than voluntary and autonomous. Each player selects a state for their character during character creation. Characters can transport between states by paying an official NPC in their King City and arrive on the borders of another country. The national rankings map suggests that each country has a unique shape and position.



However, each state actually has the same map, each with its own King City, Phoenix City, etc.



The "state" map is an imaginary configuration that suggests nations in conflict, not an actual space that can be moved through by characters in the game.

The game's fiction emphasizes loyalty to the state; "the player is obliged to sacrifice all for the honor of their country" according to the official web site. The state is the ultimate structure of competition and cooperation in Zhengtu. Each state has a King, which is the head of the gang that controls King City. The King has special abilities used in national warfare.

Characters can emigrate to other states, but moving to a higher-ranked state costs a large amount of gold (which can only be acquired with real money) - high level characters from the top two states can receive a bonus for moving to lower-ranked states. This is part of the designer's attempt to balance the power of different states, maintaining a dynamic game in which power does not become too concentrated.

The alliance system is also designed to balance power. This is explicitly stated by the designers on the design website:

"This situation, the strong getting stronger, the weak getting weaker, finally led to the whole continent being out-of-balance. But after the implementation of the alliance system this advantage will cease to exist, and the vicious cycle will be transformed ... if well-utilized, paying attention to strategy and diplomacy, joining together with the same purpose against powerful countries, it can be possible to win with less, to pull off a miracle!"

The alliance system allows allies to undertake missions together, such as raids and caravan robberies. Except for adding one collective raiding quest, these missions fit within the established structure of other missions. The alliance does not help with some quests, such as direct state-to-state warfare, which remains one-on-one. This is another example of a thematic, not functional simulation.

ZT has a wide variety of activities for players to engage in. The game is called the "encyclopedia" of online games because of the wide variety of possible activities. Giant claims there are over 850 features, compared to other games' 100-200. These include "quests, crafting equipment, running a business, escorting, a pet ... any outstanding feature of any other game, gamers can find in *Zhengtu*" (Sina 2006). It is the tutoring system and

the pet system that Giant is most proud of. The tutoring system allows more knowledgeable players to answer the questions of newer players in exchange for experience points. The pet system allows players to purchase a pet (real money only), which they can then rent to higher-leveled players. The higher-leveled players can use the pet to train on - this garners experience points for both the high-leveled player and the pet. Both of these design features are intended to encourage socialization and cooperation between players, particularly between players of different levels and experience.

Quests are a major part of ZT's gameplay. The large number of quests that players can attempt is advertised as one of ZT's main draws on the official website. Quests are received from computer-controlled characters such as Generals and shopkeepers. Those with quests to give have a scroll icon over their head. The average quest is a fairly simple matter of killing a certain number of monsters, collecting a number of items or delivering an item from point A to point B. These quests, their locations, and the names of the quest-granting character are listed conveniently on the official website. Players can also pull up a list in-game of local characters with available quests; right-clicking on the name provides the option to automatically walk to the character's location. These routine quests form the bread-and-butter of ZT gaming, especially at lower levels. However, true to advertising, ZT has quite a few elaborate quest systems with a variety of themes for more advanced players.

Quests are thematic, not functional simulations. The intention in their design is not to create a functioning copy of the real world, but to provide entertaining activities for the players. For example, the gardening (farming if your character is over level 40) quest involves collecting or buying a set of tools (seeds, hoe, transport, bug killer, etc.) and then

giving them to a gardener, not actually digging and planting yourself. The "business" feature is not actual in-game entrepreneurship, but a way for a group of players to make investments of virtual currency, and receive experience points, equipment and titles. The "spying" quest does not award actual intelligence, but a scroll of "Top Secret Intelligence" that is redeemable for experience points. Though quest themes can be wide-ranging, they need to fit within the game's challenge-reward structure. Some quests occur on a schedule. Most can only be undertaken a certain number of times in a day. There are only so many ways that a character can interact with the world (picking up, carrying, killing), and rewards must be something (equipment, experience points) that enhances their ability to interact with the world.

Quests often serve as ways for players to interact, cooperate and compete with one another. Characters can receive quests from their clans, gangs or nations, and completing these quests can strengthen the group. For example, one major quest for a gang is a "collection" quest, wherein characters purchase "collection gloves" and gather resources for their gangs. Clans, Gangs and States also offer quests to kill monsters. Quest completion contributes to a group's rank; the lowest ranked nations can receive a special "Great Revival" quest to increase their power. Some quests have individual rankings, such as "Building the High Temple," in which States contribute, brick by brick, to the reconstruction of the destroyed temple. The spying quest is more directly competitive - characters actually enter an enemy's country. Getting married requires its own quest, where the couple must acquire a diamond ring and a dowry. The ZT website calls this a "test of their cooperation and deep affection." All of these quests are intended to build and encourage relationships between

players, and to encourage competition between player groups. This allows sociality without losing the cutthroat competitiveness of the game.

The elaborate caravan escorting system is a good example of how quest systems serve as the framework for a variety of gameplay. Players may, singly or in groups, undertake escort missions against NPC bandits. There is an element of chance to these missions. The color of the caravan escorted is randomized, and different colors provide different levels of reward. Players must make a deposit of virtual coinage to begin the escort mission - their reward is experience in various multipliers depending on the color of the caravan. The king can have an influence on rewards as well. To encourage players to play at one time, the king can issue a "National Fortune" edict, increasing the rewards caravans give for a certain amount of time. There is also competitive caravanning. Players may apply to loot the caravans of other countries, if the other side approves playing the game as well. In another form, players can compete in a kind of caravan escorting sport, where two teams enter a neutral zone and try to move their caravans past one another. Here we see the theme of "escorting caravans" stretched to cover a variety of game systems: passive competition, active competition, and individual play with a heavy influence of chance.

If a character's health points drop to zero, they will 'pass out' as it is rendered in the game fiction. In common discourse, this is called 'killed,' as in *miaosha* - insta-killed. When a character is killed, the player has several options for resuscitation. A "safe resurrection" resurrects the character (and all his/her gear) in King City without penalty. A "free local resurrection" resurrects the character at the site, but requires that the player wait two minutes. The character also resurrects with temporarily reduced health and permanently

reduced other stats. This can only be done ten times a day. A "local resurrection" requires a special skill and costs money. This can also be done by allies and comes with no other penalties.

## **Player Killing Modes and Games**

In addition to competitive rankings between gangs and states, ZT features a number of different Player Killing systems, from the individual to the state level. 'PK' (as gamers refer to it) is direct combat between players. Often 'PK' implicitly refers to random violence between characters, usually a more powerful character attacking and quickly destroying a weaker character. In broader usage, PK refers to systems of player-vs-player combat, both singly and in groups. For groups these battles generally confer experience bonuses as rewards, but may also award sovereignty over a city.

There are many provisions in Zhengtu to limit one-on-one attacks. For example, characters under level 20 cannot PK and characters above level 60 cannot attack players below level 60. Players can set their PK status with a click: peace mode prevents all attacks, 'all' mode allows all attacks. Team, family, state, and allies modes allow only attacks from enemies to these groups. Area mode allows characters to attack trespassers in their territory, or anybody in a neutral area. Other areas restrict PK entirely, such as the training village and some dungeons (so that players can focus on levelling). The last PK system is the "good/evil" system, which attempts to curb excessive, unwanted or unfair PK.

PKers receive titles: Hero, Knight, Commoner, Gangster, Hoodlum, Demon, and Devil. Killing a "commoner" is killing a character from your or an ally's country, outside of

proper PK settings such as an arena. This lowers your title by one level. The color of your name reflects your level. Chronic PKers will have red titles. Killing a PKer will grant a person the title "Beautiful." A character that is killed by a PKer can place a bounty for their arrest; a character that completes this bounty receives a greater experience bonus, and there is a chance that the Evil character's gear will drop. An evil character will find the price of goods from NPCs increasing as the character kills more commoners. The "Good and Evil" PK mode allows characters with positive rankings to fight those with negative rankings.

Group PK comes in many varieties. The "City Gang War," is the struggle over control of a city, fought in an underground "Secret Chamber." Gangs can attempt to control King City, Phoenix City, or the Neutral Zone in any of the ten countries, not just their own. The "Zhengtu empire battles" are random matches between nations. These battles are structured around strategy computer game tropes: gather resources, build units, research technology. One player becomes imperial leader with the power to construct and research technology. Allied characters serve as infantry, cavalry and archers. Units work like rock-paper-scissors: infantry beat cavalry, cavalry beat archers, archers beat infantry. The side that destroys the enemy camp is the winner.

The "State Harassment War." is unrestricted and freely initiated by any player. The goal is to cut down the flag and secondary flags in an enemy city. This is different from "Declared War," which is an invasion of the enemy's King City. A "State Surprise War" is an attack on the enemy nation's supplies and supply officer, meant to incapacitate the enemy cavalry. This does not actually have an effect on the cavalry in the "Empire battle" or any other battle. A "Sea battle" replaces characters with warships. "Arrows" can also be launched

into an enemy country by gathering enough resources. Only gangs can really claim control over certain places. States have their sovereignty limited to their version of the world map (each state controls an identical version of the world).

The Formal National War system provides a good example of the complexities of these games, and is one of the most popular PK systems. Formal War is a ninety minute conflict in the defending state's King City. When the battle begins, a summons goes out to all characters in the defending nation. Attacking characters appear in a safe zone outside the enemy's King City. From here they must enter the city and kill four NPC gate guards. They must then claim the national totem and find the NPC "Generalissimo" and kill him. If the attackers lose control of the totem, the Generalissimo becomes invincible again and the attackers must struggle to regain the totem.

Each King has several special abilities to influence the battle. The King of each side has the ability to summon his or her subjects to the King's location with a special seal that can only be used twice a day. The defending King can summon spectral warriors, restore his or her health points, or make the the King invulnerable for a short time.

After 90 minutes, if the Generalissimo is still alive, the defenders win. If the attackers kill the Generalissimo, they win. If the defending country loses, they have the option of teaming up with their allies for a counter-offensive. The winner of a formal war receives stars that indicate state rankings. Participants in the battle gain experience points; also, all monsters killed in the victor's country give 1.5 times as much experience for a short time. There are also several opportunities for gaining achievement awards in battle - for killing an enemy character, for example. The winning side also receives 3% of the assets in the losing

side's national treasury. The loss of assets can be negated if the defending country lost the initial battle but won the counterattack.

At the end of all this, no territory has actually changed hands. The National War is a simulation of aesthetics, attempting to evoke the feeling of a national campaign. The website declares, "In deciding the strength of nations words count for nothing; true strength can only be demonstrated on the battlefield! One victory can raise the fighting spirit of the nation, make the alliance sincere and willing, and chasten the enemy." PK in ZT is not really a battle over land or resources, but of pride.

Generally, ZT players leave their PK setting on "allies", so that they are unable to harm or be harmed by members of their own state or their state's allies. "Nation" mode is rarely used - only when one ally betrays another. Switching between PK modes is always autonomous, but may be required in order to take on certain quests. The Good/Evil PK mode is a special case. The 'allied' modes do not work like Good/Evil mode. Players do not have to be in Good/Evil mode to earn Evil points. Any time a player kills a member of their own state, they will be marked as a player-killer.

Different modes of PK can conflict with one another. This is due to the overlap of various allegiances that players can have. For example a gang of players may want to attack another gang for control over part of a city. However, since the gangs are both members of the same nation, they need to switch to "gang" mode in order to fight one another. Or, if players from different alliances want to do a mission together, they will need to create a temporary team and switch their PK setting to team mode. Modes cannot be combined, so

unless the player selects peace mode, characters are always vulnerable to someone outside of the circle.

The overlap can permit unwanted PK. If two gangs have switched to gang mode to fight one another, they are vulnerable to any other player in a third gang. Other players in the area may also be vulnerable to misfired abilities or splash damage if their PK settings allow it. Outside of legitimate inter-alliance PK, such as an underground fight between gangs for control of a district of a city, attacking members of one's own alliance will earn a character Evil points, and their victims can use Good/Evil mode to strike back.

Despite the ability to restrict PK via personal settings, unwanted PK occurs constantly. Part of this is due to the overlap of various allegiances that players can have. Another level of unwanted PK comes from higher-level players taking advantage of lower-level players. PK is a central feature of ZT, and many of the activities that players can engage in, particularly those with valuable rewards, require PK. However, ZT places minimal restrictions on how characters of differing levels can engage in PK. Very-low-level characters are protected until they reach level 20. There are some 'Peace' zones, but most of the game world is open season. Players often complain of being attacked while doing other activities, such as temple construction or escorting caravans. The complaint is not necessarily that PK happens - this is considered to be the nature of the game. The complaint is that the PK is unfair, since these higher-level players, who have probably purchased expensive gear, can so easily kill a lower-level player.

Another contentious PK practice in ZT is "corpse-camping." When a character dies, players have several options for where they may resurrect. Since local resurrection costs real

money, FRMB gamers will choose to resurrect for free with a 'gravedigger' NPC. Players expect that their characters may be killed if they travel to an enemy country. However, some players choose to follow the ghost of someone they have just killed to the gravedigger's location, wait until the person resurrects, and then kills them again. This can go on indefinitely. One player suggested that characters should be restricted from killing the same character again for thirty minutes.

#### **IV: Levelling Up: Self-Cultivation in Playerkilling**

Players of *ZT*, particularly those attempting to justify a contentious behavior, often assert the game's link to 'reality' or the 'real world'. This real world includes such phenomena as 'survival of the fittest' and personal 'quality' which are seen as also part of the virtual world.

The game reflects society. The killers are all top-level RMB gamers. Semi-RMB players are in the middle of the food chain. Top players don't like to kill FRMB players because there is no challenge. Therefore semi-RMB players are their target. Semi-RMB players, to release their tension, kill FRMB players. That's the truth.

This summary touches on several themes found in player discussions of *ZT* the game and the real world. First, the game is a reflection of society. Players are roughly divided in to classes, just as they are in the real world. Second, the relationship between these classes is like a 'food chain'. The idea of the 'survival of the fittest' is a common refrain in these kinds of discussions online and is tied to ideas of selfhood and quality (*suzhi*). Finally, the importance of challenge and fun and the notion of the game as a form of relaxation, or tension-release, which is nonetheless tied closely to one's strength as a character. While fictitious, games like *ZT* offer an opportunity for self-cultivation. These discussions reveal some deep assumptions that Chinese people make about the world, and also some more contemporary Chinese anxieties about modernity.

There are three points to be made here. First, the idea of "survival of the fittest" not only links the virtual world with the actual world, but argues that these worlds are one

and the same. Two, discourses on *suzhi* link the virtual world to contemporary Chinese anxieties about modernity, but do so in a particularly Chinese way. Finally, at the deepest level, these concerns reflect a more fundamental concern with the cultivation of the self in relation to others. In this way we see how Chinese gamers have indigenized the form of the online game by denying the transcendent in two ways. First, they do not separate the real from the virtual in the sense that the virtual is 'mere appearance'. Secondly, though *suzhi* refers to an autonomous individual body, they do not separate the individual into a being that transcends sociality.

### **Survival of the Fittest**

RMB gamers routinely justified their position by appeal to the "law of the jungle" or the "survival of the fittest." The first suggests that their advantages are the result of 'nature.' The second phrase suggests that their position is the result of rational or scientific process. Either way, RMB gamers felt that their advantages in ZT were 'just right.'

This came to the fore in one discussion in an official online forum. The debate was over the practices of 'cart stealing'. Cart-stealing takes place during a certain kind of caravan mission, in which the player attempts to escort the caravan through enemy territory, opening himself up for attack by enemies of any level. 'Cart stealing' is a contentious practice in which higher-level or better-equipped player-characters not only kill the target but also destroy or steal the contents of the cart. Caravan missions like this require some investment of game money, so destruction or theft of the contents of the cart results in the loss of more than just time. Some players feel that the killing is part of the game, but the de-

struction of the goods in the cart is excessive. This practice is usually linked to RMB gamers. In the debate, the topic specifically called out *dahao* as the most notorious perpetrators of cart-stealing. Many RMB gamers and some FRMB gamers defended the practice, while a majority condemned it.

Argued one RMB gamer, "Survival of the fittest is the law of life, to encourage the strong. Life is just this way, much less a game!" This player sees 'survival of the fittest' as a law not merely of the game world, but of life itself. There is a border drawn between real life and the game, yet the same process of 'fitness' gives purpose to both. "Encouraging the strong" is the meaning of life in and out of the game. Appeal to "law" and the scientific theory of 'survival of the fittest' gives this position a modern, rational and scientific weight, as well as a sense of inexorable social process that controls all levels of human interaction. The game is even more an arena for testing the strong and weak than real life.

Defending the practice of cart-stealing, one player wrote. "The game is just this way. It's the law of the jungle. Among the mountains, one is highest. If you can't kill it [your opponent], you can run, if you can't run, you can die. That's just the way it is." She appeals to natural imagery - the mountains - to argue that the position of some players is superior to others for no more reason than an inherent quality, such as height. This is unchangeable, and player actions must be predicated on this truth.

Definition of 'fitness' includes more than just material resources. Skills can be seen as just as important. 'Skills' can mean both a player's proficiency with the game as well as a character's skill points. These are similar manifestations of gaming capital, since building skill points requires an investment of time into the game.

Some people spend so much money to get the wrong equipment and spend little energy to upgrade their skills. How can they bully xiaohao? Of course its a game of survival of the fittest. I say, in real life, if you don't have skills, and others look down on you, do you resist?

Spending a lot of money on equipment doesn't guarantee a player a position of strength.

Getting the right equipment requires specialized knowledge. Different equipment can provide different bonuses or special effects. Equipment can work well or poorly with a player's chosen skills and/or playing style. A player unwilling to invest the time and energy to upgrade their skills would likely lack this specialized knowledge. Without these abilities, money has little effect. Another player defended cart-stealing, saying "I'm a level 165 xiaohao, but I can kill a level 190 dahao. It's the law of the jungle." Much of the discussion of cart-stealing assumed that the transgressors were RMB *dahao* whose advantages came from their money. This player reverses these expectations, yet still appeals to the idea of the 'law of the jungle'. Whether *xiaohao* or *dahao*, ZT is a jungle where a person can test their fitness.

This jungle-style play nevertheless requires rules to maintain its fun. One more moderate RMB gamer wrote:

Really, the game is just like real life. Without competition, without survival of the fittest, life (and the game) lose their fun. But you also have to pay attention to fair and unfair competition. This might be normal, but cart-stealing, corpse-camping, etc, should be discussed. Life and the game are alike, both require competition and survival of the fittest, but both also require rules. A fun game is no more than attention to this.

A "fun game" is made up of attention to both competition and rules. Competition: the freedom to impose yourself on other players, testing both your and their fitness. Rules: the restrictions that prevent unfair competition. 'Fun' requires competition, but this competition cannot be wholly unrestricted. Contentious actions such as cart-stealing deserve discussion, he argues, to determine the effect they have on the fun of others. Unlike the natural world from which the idea of "survival of the fittest" is derived, both the game and human life require some kind of restriction. Nevertheless, this player's idea of what is fun remains rooted in the concept of determining who is the most fit.

The idea of 'survival of the fittest' establishes the game of ZT as linked to or a part of 'real life'. This 'real life' is defined by a sense of natural order - the "law of the jungle" which is "survival of the fittest." Players justify contentious behavior by appeal to this 'real' or 'natural' order. The game is therefore characterized as a space for the 'real' to continue to be expressed. Although the game may be bounded from real life, there is no sense that the game is not also real.

Furthermore, contentious behavior in the game is not associated with the structures of the game. There is no sense that the game is a peculiar space where natural laws do not apply. Even rules are declared to be a part of both the real world and the game. Rules are therefore not positive, but negative. They prevent you from living the full scope of human life. Later we will see that ZT players see rules as a way to control abnormal behaviors from the real world from entering the game.

## Selfhood

*Zhengtu* players' idea of the functioning of 'the law of the jungle' relies on a particular conception of the self and its relationship to the game and to the real world. This concept of selfhood and the role of games in developing selfhood articulates with beliefs in 'survival of the fittest' and with the post-reform Chinese concept of *suzhi*. In the debate over cart-stealing, one player wrote:

Actually, inside the game is fictitious. People often forget that the game is a special concept, even if it links to reality in you. This must be confronted. Although survival of the fittest is a cruel reality, for lack of a better option, enduring daily life is enough. Experiencing the rough patches, you realize that playing games is good for the heart. Killing is a contradiction. Playing games is a time to relieve the pressure on your mind. Games give you control over yourself. They allow you to find your place. What kind of person am I? What games do I play? What must I accept? If you overstep this line of thinking, think again. Don't blindly assign blame to a game. They are there for your quality of life (*shenghuo zhiliang*), yours and mine. The willing should come, the unwilling should go

Surprisingly, this player fell on the side of allowing the cart-stealing to continue. In her mind, survival of the fittest is a "cruel reality," in both the real world and the game world. Games, however, give you a chance that the real world may not have. Games are therapeutic. They give you control. They allow you to explore your self in a way that the real world does not. Since they are "fictitious" their consequences are not as severe. The author cautions against assigning blame to the game. It is not the rules of the game that are responsible for negative experiences but your own perception.

Said another player of *dahao* killing *xiaohao*, "This is normal and just like real life. If Iraq wasn't so small would the US have invaded? Fortunately, this is a game. The crucial point is your heart." Again the game is linked and seen as analogous to the real, yet the status of ZT as a game reduces the impact. What is important is your personal reaction to the game, "your heart." "Anyway, if you don't want to get bullied, get better equipment, level up, become a *dahao*, then you can protect yourself. You have only yourself to blame," argued another player. These players argue that the game is a special case of the real in which you have the opportunity to better yourself, not only your character (skills and equipment) but yourself as a real person. They argue against restricting player's ability to cart steal, which would thereby limit one's ability to prove fitness by altering the game rules.

A third player argued, "ZT is a crucible for your heart. RMB gamers live it up. Semi-RMB gamers pursue the game. FRMB gamers wallow." Again, the game is seen as a personal trial for the spirit. RMB players, like monied people in real life, have no struggle. Semi-RMB gamers have both enough money and enough gaming capital to succeed at the game. FRMB players have no choice but to go along for the ride. In this player's mind, it is really the semi-RMB gamers who are pursuing the game, who are testing themselves in the "crucible." RMB and FRMB are merely living.

One FRMB player supported unrestricted cart-stealing. "The game is in your heart. We chose to play FRMB, so it is up to us to find a way to enjoy the game. Don't they say, life is like a rape? You can't resist, you just have to learn to enjoy it." In this player's mind, ZT is also a form of personal discovery - but without money he cannot really pursue the

game - not like the semi-RMB gamers are able to. Instead, FRMB gamers must find their own way to enjoy the game.

Ideas of 'survival of the fittest' and a radical selfhood seem to be imports from post-Darwinian Western thought. How are these ideas 'made Chinese?'

## **Quality**

In reform-era China, one concept has drawn the attention of multiple researchers. This concept, *suzhi* (and related terms), is seen as very important in understanding post-socialist Chinese constructions of the body, class and proper behavior.

*Suzhi* is a means of organizing various knowledges around the notion of "quality"; at the same time, it is conceived as a "substance" (zhi) that is to be transformed. ... In all cases, *suzhi* refers to a combination of material and ethical substances that it is claimed can be known, calculated, and, in most cases, improved. Most important, *suzhi* is a key concept for articulating value in a capitalist (or postsocialist) mode of production. (Sigley 2009) 539.

*Suzhi* is a way of measuring forms of conduct in a way that emphasizes the bodily capacity for improvement. It is also a way of dividing people into those with and without 'quality'.

Ann Anagnost argues that *suzhi* is a way of defining middle-class Chinese identity. *Suzhi*, in the eyes of the urban bourgeoisie, defines "the minute social distinctions defining a "person of quality" in practices of consumption and the incitement of a middle-class desire for social mobility." (Anagnost 2004 190). It is related to the Chinese government's population project, which seeks to increase the quantity of rural farmworkers and the quality of urban Chinese. This is part of a series of broader neoliberal economic reforms, and a

neoliberal conception of the body as a place for potential development. The idea of quality also fits in with scientific ideas such as 'survival of the fittest' - *suzhi* being those traits that make one fit. In ZT, this is money and/or game proficiency.

Furhtermore, *suzhi* is strongly associated with autonomy and selfhood. "Suzhi as it relates to forms of human conduct valorizes subjects that display a high level of 'autonomy' ... subjects deemed to have "low quality" are considered without the capacity for "self-improvement" (Sigley 2009 547). In ZT, players consider each other responsible for their own self-improvement, both in terms of their character's abilities and equipment and their own skills as a player. Some players are excluded from this possibility since they lack the money to purchase powerful equipment. Yet, *dahao* still expect *xiaohao* to take responsibility for their own *suzhi*. This is identical to the way *suzhi* is used in actual China. *Suzhi* is simultaneously considered something that is independently gained, yet categorically denied to a wide swath of people.

One player wrote, "[Games] are there for your quality of life (*shenghuo zhiliang*), yours and mine." *Zhiliang* shares a root with *suzhi*: *zhi*, meaning a substance whose quality can be determined. Sigley includes *zhiliang* among the constellation of terms of 'quality'. This player argues that games are a place for self-discovery. "Games give you control over yourself. They allow you to find your place. What kind of person am I? What games do I play? What must I accept?" Thus, games allow one to experiment with upbuilding oneself, dealing with hostile others and mastering a rational system. Games can be a place for improving one's *suzhi*.

Contentious behaviors can be seen as lacking *suzhi* by other players, whether one is a high- or low-level player. Regarding corpse-camping, one player wrote. "What's a *dahao* killing a single person worth? He doesn't have *suzhi*" The author's grammar makes it unclear, but it seems both the attacker and the victim that lack *suzhi*. The victim is valueless in the neoliberal economy of self: the character's level is low as well as the player's ability. The *dahao*'s actions similarly lack *suzhi*. Nothing is earned by killing the character - not in the game nor in real life. The *dahao* does nothing to advance his position through random violence.

Although it would seem that the most powerful players are the ones with the most *suzhi*, the phrase can be used negatively to describe contentious PK-ers. "Everybody hates these gamers that love to kill others. They're the most pathetic. Their investment-to-quality (*suzhi*) ratio is the worst." In this case, *suzhi* describes the worth of the player's gameplay as opposed to the time they have spent on the game. Chronic PKers have no *suzhi* because the time they spend in the game is wasted on the unworthy. Anagnost argues that *suzhi* is used in two ways: first to describe the governmental project of improving the quality of the population, then adapted to a second meaning of middle-class micro-adjustments driven by the desire for social mobility. Thus, FRMB players lack *suzhi* because their work is not valuable enough to earn them a wage that can pay for expensive virtual goods. Abusive RMB PKers have no *suzhi* because what they have invested in the game has turned out nothing of value - just bad behavior.

Sigley and Anagnost tie *suzhi* to Chinese ideas about survival of the fittest and natural selection. In particular, *suzhi* is about individual survival in a modern world, what

Sigley calls “this emerging hybrid of neo-social Darwinism, Chinese socialism, and neoliberalism.” The presence of discourses on natural selection and ‘quality’ in *ZT* demonstrates how Chinese debates over the nature of a game have a particularly Chinese character, which is the result of historical, political, social and cultural causes.

## **Conclusion**

*Suzhi* is a Chinese adaptation of neoliberal forms. However, in the deployment of *suzhi* in *ZT*, we also see a deeper, more traditionally Chinese concern with self-improvement. In some ways, improving one’s quality can be seen as a Confucian moral imperative. Furthermore, the concept of *suzhi* in *ZT*, especially in its relationship to ideas of ‘survival of the fittest’, reveals how Chinese gamers do not view the game world as something that is any way separable from the real world. The game world is not a special gaming space, but yet another opportunity for self-cultivation. Therefore, in this case we see the structure of the game interpreted culturally by the players. The nature of the boundary between the real and the virtual is clearly one that is culturally constructed, and this culture is one that transcends the boundary between real and virtual.

## V: The Rallying Call: Ethics in Playerkilling

### Introduction

While Western theories of ethics in games generally rely on the game as bounded by a ‘magic circle’ of virtual as opposed to actual ethics, this problem does not exist for Chinese gamers. In judging the behavior of other players, Chinese gamers are far more likely to make appeal to the real world, and the game as an expression of that world, not a separate space. In this section, we will explore norms and transgression in *Zhengtu*. First, an understanding of game norms that recognizes the layers of complexity and multiple contentious interpretations thereof. Second, a particularly Chinese understanding of the ‘rules’ of the game that does not appeal to the ‘special status’ of the game but rather the rules’ social purpose. Third, a look at bullying and personal attacks as an example of Chinese-style moral transgression and condemnation. Finally, an appeal to community as a norm that reveals a connection to traditional Chinese ideals of responsibility to the community.

### Norms

What is expected when playing *Zhengtu*? On one level, what is expected is purely formal. In ZT, one does ‘playing an MMORPG.’ “Generally I get on [ZT] to earn gold, do missions, or kill the enemy, like any normal FRMB gamer.” The game has a formal structure of risk, challenge and reward. This is what a player would generally think of when they describe their ‘normal’ activities in the game.

However, there are also expectations that go beyond the formal structure of the game. One has expectations of how others will play the game as well. “Getting killed when you go abroad is normal, but some *dahao* guard the resurrection points and kill you again!” This behavior is called ‘corpse camping’. The more powerful player guards the fallen body of the weaker player. If the *xiaohao* attempts to resurrect their character at that same point, they must spend money, or they will be resurrected with very low health and reduced abilities. Otherwise, they can resurrect their character in a safe point in the city, but lose all their progress in whatever mission they were on. In a PK-centric game like ZT, players have a certain expectation of danger, but some behaviors cross a line. These behaviors do not fit with the formal expectations of the gameplay, they go overboard. The PKer does not just kill the enemy, he harasses him by killing him continuously.

Other players disagreed. “Everyone has experienced [corpse camping]; pay it no mind.” Despite not fitting with the formal structure of the game, the behavior has become part of the social norms of the game. “Wherever you go, this happens in games” said one FRMB player. This behavior, though disruptive and counterproductive has become commonplace in not only ZT but in other online games. It becomes difficult to say what is normal and what is transgressive when the behaviors so many people hate are so common. Therefore I have rendered them “contentious.”

Contentious behaviors are generally associated with RMB gamers; rarely do RMB gamers complain about FRMB gamers’ play.

What’s the point of discussing it? ZT is a game for the rich. They can reach level 180 ... can you? Whenever you find a new area, there’s always some-

one there with better equipment, better skills, and a love of killing. Think you can get rid of them?

RMB gamers are treated like pests. They are everywhere and you can't get rid of them. Furthermore, RMB gamers have the power to make your life miserable, thanks to their expensive gear. Even if not RMB gamer loves killing, there will be one. And "the wealthy, like the old, will never change." The wealthy will always look for a way to demonstrate their prosperity. In fact, it is almost a prerequisite for harassing players in this way is to be much more powerful than them, so that your own character will not be at risk as you kill them repeatedly.

Yet FRMB gamers defend contentious practices too, arguing that they are part of the normal game.

All games have rules. If you're not going to kill people or go on missions, you might as well just go home and sleep. ... you've never killed anybody? Never killed any *xiaohao*? Don't pretend you're innocent.

Of course the FRMB gamers are not all innocent victims. There is always somebody lower on the heap. Here, PK is placed on the same level as doing missions as part of 'normal' gameplay. On the other hand:

When I'm doing missions, I generally neither want to kill nor be killed. I just don't understand why you would kill someone when the mission doesn't call for it. It ruins my mood. It makes me not want to do anything.

Other players feel that missions are the legitimate form of the game. Killing someone outside the context of a mission is incomprehensible.

It is therefore very difficult to assign an analytical category to ‘transgression’ in an online game like ZT. Different players have different ideas of what the ‘norm’ is and therefore different ideas of how that norm may be violated. These norms involve conceptions of the reality and design of the game, as well as personal. Furthermore, norms can be inherently social. In some cases, they take on a particularly Chinese sense of relational duty.

One debate on the ZT forums asked: if the nation is attacked, do FRMB gamers have as great a duty to report to defend the nation as RMB gamers? When a nation is attacked or attacks another nation, an alert goes out to all players; clicking the alert allows them to teleport to the battlefield and participate in the defense or assault, but this is optional. Should the war go well for the home country, everybody, including those who did not participate, gains a multiplier bonus to experience points earned from killing monsters. However, participating in a war can be dangerous for *xiaohao*, since they will come in to direct contact with characters far more powerful than their own.

In addition to equipment, there are two aspects of State War that RMB gamers have an advantage in. First, if killed, a RMB gamer can pay to be immediately resurrected in the same location at close to full strength. Without paying, a player must either travel from a resurrection hub or resurrect on-site with significant penalties. RMB gamers can also pay money to repair the ‘tanks’ that are used in the State War. As a result, *xiaohao* insisted they were far less useful in a war than RMB gamers.

While FRMB gamers pointed out these deficiencies, RMB gamers appealed to community to entice them to join.

Whether you are a RMB gamer or not is unimportant. Playing a game is just another kind of group cooperation. What's the point of playing alone? In a national battle or a Holy City Battle, you can take pleasure in war. RMB and FRMB play for one reason: playing is fun. Aren't you tired of pulling carts and running missions? ZT may be only a game, but in a game you can see people's quality. RMB gamer's equipment is good, and FRMB gamers can benefit from it too. So I think that no matter how much money you spend or don't spend, everyone should join the battle. Heed the call!

Why play alone? It's more fun with others! Even if a character doesn't have good equipment, in a war they can benefit from RMB gamers' stronger gear. Thus state warfare can build the community and improve the strength of everyone.

Another RMB gamer made an appeal to nationalism, drawing equivalence between one's virtual nation and one's actual nation.

If FRMB gamers don't have money for local resurrection, or fixing tanks, that means they don't owe RMB gamers anything by joining the war? Does that mean if China and Japan or the US start a war common people don't have a responsibility to join the war? It's a game, but you have a virtual country in the game, so the country's business is not just *dahao* or the officer's business. Since you are part of this country you have responsibilities to the country. Even though you are useless, your presence can make the enemy see one more person, so they can see we have more unity.

This makes joining the war a duty of a virtual citizen, no matter the level. This goes beyond the usefulness of the FRMB player-character, but appeals again to 'unity'. Added another player, "Because 'unity is strength,'" a revolutionary slogan of the Mao era.

More generally, other RMB gamers argued that it is about the society more than the nation.

Regardless of whether or not RMB gamers participate enthusiastically, coming in to the virtual world is for the purpose of building a virtual society, making lots of friends. If one person shuts themselves away, doesn't participate in national activities, then does "the rise and fall of nations concerns everyone" have any meaning!!!?

No one should be an island. 'Unity' is a matter of building a society and making friends. The consequences are greater than the individual boost to experience points that everyone gets if they win. It is a matter of upbuilding the society. The author uses the idiom regarding the "rise and fall of nations" to broaden the appeal.

Some FRMB gamers agreed. "Of course they should go! Unless you are in the middle of a mission, victory in war is good for everybody! I'm not some famous rich guy, but I go every time." The winning side in a state war receives a bonus to experience points received from killing monsters for the state's whole population for a certain amount to time. In this way, helping to win a state war can be in a FRMB gamer's advantage.

Other FRMB gamers were more pessimistic. "When we get attacked in our own country nobody comes to help. When *dahao* rush to our aid, then we will gladly make war!" Despite the material advantage that going to war would gain, FRMB gamers are still resentful of the unequal relationship between RMB and FRMB gamers.

More than an obligation, community can also be a positive reason for playing the game that reaches beyond the formal structure. The virtual state can be a space for players

to construct elaborate imaginary shared realities. These imaginaries draw on both Chinese mythologies and real human sociality.

"War Accounts" are written retellings of in-game wars. This genre has a special section on the ZT website. Here, one player recounts, in elaborate prose, an instance of state war in which her country lost.

6/22/2008, 8:15. The war between Chu and Tang was beginning.

A few days earlier in this war, the high-level players of Chu had been slaughtered en masse, their souls flying above the hills and valleys of Chu.

When Chu was at its height ... if you looked at the world rankings both Chu and its heroes put the others to shame.

Before the battle began, King Ah Gang of Chu had a good plan. At 20:15, Tang attacked Chu. "We must win," said the legends. Watching the 'black points' [the numbers of the enemy] increase, war chariot against war chariot, the king called a rally to inspire the troops - but at that time, 20:48, the enemy captured our totem and killed our general. The war was lost.

But there was nothing we could do. They are a great power. Though we lost, everyone who rallied felt in their hearts we didn't. I truly believe Chu will always have the most spirit.

I thank you with the voice of the State of Chu!

Parts of the game system are intermixed with the fantasy narrative. The player describes the nation's past glories - literally their ranking among the other nations. It is apparent that the state of Chu's power has waned - a not uncommon occurrence in ZT. The player invokes 'legends', a purely imaginary rhetorical device with no basis in the system, to declare the importance of the battle. However, the fact that their high-level players had

been "slaughtered" some days earlier affects only the morale of the players, not their resources - these high-level characters, though killed, would have been immediately resurrected and available for this most recent battle. "Black points" refers to the appearance of enemy characters - on the radar and map they appear as black dots; closer by, their names are written in black above their heads.

Most importantly, "rally" is an ability the king of a country can use during a battle. The special ability allows the King to summon players from the world in general into the state war arena. Players can accept the call and be teleported to the King's side in the arena. Although the rally ability is of tactical importance, in this article it is also a symbol of the 'spirit' of the members of the state of Chu. The writer is proud of the way her countrymen responded to the rallying call, seeing it as indicative of a community that is more vital than ranking and strength.

An example by another author in the same genre:

I remember that day, 5/26, after 8pm. (the precise time I don't clearly recall). I logged on ignoring a melancholy feeling in my stomach, a bad omen in my heart. Sure enough, the King (Gudu Tian Lang) had sent the red warning signal - our nation would attack Han. The entire country mobilized, ordinary men and women, old and young, the old, weak, sick, and disabled equal in the assault on Han.

But, seeing the confused masses hurriedly arriving, my thoughts suddenly turned to self-preservation, a desire to find a shady tree and sit cross-legged beneath it. You would think we never had taught ourselves the way (*dao*) of battle, or how not to get sliced like vegetables. We should find a place that

is safe where we can launch a secret attack. (At the east gate of the Capital City).

Finally succeeding in destroying the last totem and bringing down the enemy's Generalissimo, the author ends:

At last, after two hours, the state of Zhou finally won. The king declared victory, saying: "This proves our people are diligent, brave and wise. We can overcome any obstacle. From now on, we will all rally close around myself, building a harmonious society under our mighty flag ... then, a mighty shout. Inspired by joy, I celebrated until 2 am.

In this second example, the author likewise blends game elements with fantasy. The "red warning signal" is a red-colored text alert that announces an upcoming battle. The reference to the for an ambush is parenthetically tied to the east gate of the enemy city - this is the default location for an attacking nation to enter their opponent's territory. This is the expected entry point, not a strategically important one, so here the author is embellishing the game mechanics. Similarly, all player-characters in ZT are healthy young people. Reference to the "old," "weak, sick and disabled" could refer obliquely to new or poorly equipped or skilled players, but is mostly another embellishment.

In this case, the events of the game had great personal significance. The author describes his emotional state as melancholy. He is apprehensive of the battle. The game connects not only to a historical fantasy but to the player's real life psychological state. Finally, the author describes partying for some time after the battle completed. This celebration seems unrelated to any mechanical rewards. The imagined community of the game

extends beyond systematic success to include bare sociality. Ultimately, the flowery and imaginative prose serves a purpose. In creating a fantasy world of doomed heroics, the author simultaneously creates an imaginary community with the other members of her nation and calls back to Chinese history.

## **Fairness**

Huizinga argued that games created a separate reality, divided from the real world by a system of rules that made a separate morality, where behaviors like betrayal or violence were allowed or encouraged. Chinese gamers have a different opinion of how 'fairness' is constructed in a game. For players of *ZT*, poor behavior is not a violation of the separate space of the game, but rather a part of a continuous field of immoral behavior that ultimately rests on a player's real world relationships.

One player's opinion on cart-stealing provides a good outline of players' relate the 'rules' of the game with reality.

I'm always being bullied by dahao, but that doesn't mean all dahao are bullies. I've cart-stolen too, and been cart-stolen about 11 times. We FRMB gamers don't have it easy. We play after work or school and don't want to spend money to be entertained. If we spent money, we'd be 10, 100 times better than the dahao. We work hard to get the cart to the border, only to not only be killed but have the cart smashed as well. Some even mock us for it! Sometimes when I do a spy mission, they'll kill me and then camp my corpse. They say, "You trash! You garbage! You newbie! Bad level, bad equipment. You dare to spy? Run back to your country! Ha ha!" What if our positions were reversed? Look at it from our position. If someone killed and insulted you, how would you feel? I wish they would quit killing

us on missions. If you want to kill people, there are lots of ways: national battle, sea battle, total war, these are reasonable PK. But we still don't have it easy!

More than just defeating *xiaohao* at a game, these *dahao* heap on the insults. They call the *xiaohao* “newbie,” implying a lack of familiarity with the game. Although the *xiaohao* may have less power than the *dahao*, they could very well have been playing just as long—power does not necessarily equal experience in ZT. As the author says, with money the *xiaohao* could be several times as powerful as the *dahao*. Yet the *dahao* mock them for ‘daring’ to attempt a mission - that is, for attempting to play the game. They exclude the *xiaohao* from interaction with the game world and with the society of elite-level PKers. “Run back to your country,” and don't bother with challenging our power, they are saying.

In ZT, a player's success is closely tied to how much money they can afford to spend, and therefore is closely tied to their economic well-being. The *xiaohao* is not a member of a leisure class - he must play after work or school, and doesn't want to have to spend money to be entertained. Instead the *xiaohao* must “work hard” to complete the caravaning mission. Then they are not only killed, but their cart is destroyed. Since players must invest virtual money in the cart in the first place, this is a wanton destruction of additional hours of labor. It is not hard to see the parallels between an oppressed working class and a monied elite.

This player argues that there are legitimate and illegitimate types of PK. He asks that the *dahao* leave him alone during missions. That is to say, he wants an opportunity to play the game in a formal sense, to earn skill points and loot. There are ‘reasonable’ forms

of PK. There are PK arenas that are set up as battles where one can really test one's power. But its not really that activities like cart-stealing are inherently illegitimate - the author admits to them himself. He just wants some respite from being totally outmatched in the game by the wealthy. The 'legitimate' forms of PK he suggests are therefore tied to real life differences. The missions are places where a *xiaohao* can earn rewards without risking himself against those who greatly outspend him. His plea is thus one that rests not on unfair systems of competition, but on unfair distribution of resources - that come from real life into the game.

This *xiaohao* asks the *dahao* to consider being in his shoes. He appeals not to the rules of the game but to their relational sense of ethics and empathy. He asks the *dahao*, "How would you feel?" Beyond mere structural unfairness he asks the *dahao* to consider his emotional reaction. Thus the rules of the game become subordinate to the reality of emotion, and a class anxiety that is all-too-real in modern China.

Countered another player:

Of course the game is unfair. There are no equal games. To spend money or not to spend, these are clearly different. We have to remember this is just a game. When we shut of the computer we return to the real world. If you have a million RMB it is nothing to spend ten thousand on a game. But in the game there are many poor people. To play ZT you must learn to endure. To live you must spend money. Know that any distinguished person has suffering at their back.

Although one returns to the real world when one shuts down the game, the inherent unfairness of the wealthy and the poor remains. What makes it 'just a game'? For the

wealthy, gaming is frivolous - for them it is nothing to spend ten thousand RMB on a game. The poor must endure. The author puts forth that the idea that any person with money has suffered to earn it. Having already suffered in the real world, RMB gamers have earned their place at the top of the virtual world.

No matter which side of the argument a player takes, they do not appeal to a distinction between the real and the virtual in the same way that Huizinga or Craft do. The game does not have a special set of rules that make it a different moral space from the real world. For Chinese gamers, for good or ill, the game is a part of life. The rules of the game are a tool for creating a fun environment. This is a reflection of the lack of the transcendence problematic in Chinese culture. There are no transcendent virtues, only relationships with other people. Thus, there can be no virtual space where virtue is suspended, as in the 'magic circle'.

### **Bullying and Abnormality**

Contentious behaviors are also not restricted to violations of the game forms. They can also take the form of personal attacks - that fall on the player, not their character.

You RMB *dahao* don't believe we are human! You call us pigs, and say we are not like you. When people bully you, does it make you feel good? The wealthy aren't omnipotent. ZT is the kind of game that will always have bullies. It is said that many enemies are not equal to many friends. With a lot of money you can kill xiaohao, but can your money save you from death? Only your close relatives will shed tears. Your money is useless.

The player's very humanity is at stake here. In saying FRMB gamers are pigs, unlike RMB gamers, the RMB gamers are really saying that only those with money can be real people.

The FRMB gamer's response is a similarly personal attack. He asks, how does it feel to be bullied yourself? If you are such a bully, how can you have any friends in the real world, much less the game? The final remark attacks the most personal of events: death. You will die alone, the author says, and your money will not comfort you. Clearly, this author has taken RMB gamers' attacks very personally.

Explanations for why RMB gamers feel the need to bully *xiaohao* can take a similarly personal direction. "When you max your level, there's no reason to start killing *xiaohao*. Are you crazy? Did your mother beat you every day?" In this player's imagination, real-world violence begets virtual violence, and the wounds of the body are transferred to the game. To another player, "they must be incredible perverts with some sort of mental or physical problem." Only someone with some sort of real-world problem could do such a thing - clearly this player does not believe this behavior to be a consequence of the game. Or a third, "if you're afraid of dying, don't play ZT. This is a game for mental cases."

What can be done in response to abuse and bullying? Not much. Wrote one RMB player, "Pay no mind to those who shout, 'Justice first, down with Imperialism!' They're too afraid of those with higher levels to take revenge." What other response can there be when the powerful outclass the weak so easily, and when these differences are built in to the very structure of the game. "Let's fight this. I have an idea. Email me for the details," wrote one FRMB gamer on the ZT website. The immediate response: "Ha ha! This guy has a plan." A FRMB gamer's plan could be little more than this,

I'm sorry, if this is you *dahao*'s style of play, cursing we *xiaohao*'s style of play throughout the world until 3am, well, my people's numbers are great.

If you want to bully *xiaohao*, then I'm going to bully the bully-ers. And my cursing level is higher.

Jokingly, this player suggests that although his in-game level may be lower, he has a far higher level in 'cursing' and abuse. Though FRMB gamers may outnumber the RMB gamer, the most powerful aspects of the gaming system are restricted from them. It seems the only response available to them is personal abuse.

Or is it? In response to a thread asking what could be done about RMB gamer abuses of ZT, two players wrote: "If you have the skill, go kill some *niubi*! Ha!" and "Objective: Kill. I want to kill millions of *niubihao*, heh heh." For many FRMB gamers, this is another response. Contentious and abusive behaviors have already become normalized for many players. When the norm is personal violence, the only response can be violence as well. The ironic laughter that each writer ends her statement with suggests a frivolous stance towards the game. These players, one would imagine, are the same who respond to calls to rein in RMB gamer's strength by admonishing fellow FRMBers to stop taking the game so seriously and just play. But if power in *Zhengtu* relies on having a lot of real-world money, then how can FRMB gamers compete?

## **Conclusion**

In this section, we have looked at the construction of norms and transgression in *Zhengtu*. First, we see that norms are social, informal, multiple, and contentious. The norms cannot be uncritically rendered as part of the game world, but are rather linked to both real-world economic status and real-world social expectations. Building a social imaginary around mythological Chinese themes can be a powerful way of building community,

and a reason for playing the game in itself, which upsets formal definitions of what online gaming is. The idea of what is 'fair' in *ZT* is not dependent on the game being a separate space from the real world. In fact, appeals to morality inevitably question the transgressors real-world morality as well, and their relationships with others as well as their economic status. Resistance to imposition by wealthy players on poor players often takes the form of personal insults. However, in the next section, we will explore a form of resistance that is more closely related to the structure of the game.

## **VI: Ten Thousand Calamities of Hell: Skill, Capital and Conflict**

### **Introduction**

In this section, we take a closer look at values that emerge from gaming as a form, how they conflict with other sets of values, and how these values are transformed into something that could be called ‘Chinese gaming’. ‘Skills’ are one complex expression of a set of values that Mia Consalvo called ‘gaming capital’. Gaming capital is a form of social capital that is emergent from the form of games. This form of capital can conflict with economic capital when gamers use money to bypass the development of skills and knowledge. *Zhengtu* is built around the very concept of using money to bypass gameplay. However, in *Zhengtu*, we also see the development of a class of FRMB gamers who attempt to develop skills in lieu of spending money on equipment. By comparing the conflict of gaming capital and economic capital in *Zhengtu* and in a typical Western game, we can see how the development and emergent gameplay of *ZT* represent a particularly Chinese take on the values of online gaming.

### **Skills**

News articles on *ZT* focus on the way that players can spend real-world money to purchase gear, bypassing ‘boring grinds’ and ‘mazes’ to become instantly powerful. It would appear that *ZT* players have little interest in the ‘game’ as typically understood. However, a closer look at *ZT* reveals a secondary set of values for players. Buying powerful gear is not an automatic ticket to the top of the heap. A player also needs ‘skill’ at the game. What are

skills? In the context of ZT, what does it mean to have skills? For a character 'skills' are a set of attacks and abilities that can be improved through the application of skill points earned from completing quests. For a player, 'skill' can mean many things - strategies, tactics, knowledge, and raw ability are some. 'Skill' is a way of interacting with the game world that circumvents and challenges the monetary value of expensive equipment.

Part of having skill is selecting the right job and set of character-skills. Some jobs are known to be FRMB-friendly. The Assassin job is popular because the speed and efficiency of its attacks, as well as its defensive abilities that focus on avoiding damage, make the job ideal for ambushing and escaping. Similarly, the Trapper and the Beastmaster, subclasses of the Archer job, allow low-level characters to attack from a distance, where their character is at less risk. One RMB gamer countered FRMB accusations that cart-stealing was unfair by saying:

Kill-and-be-killed is normal. If it makes you feel bad, get some money and buy equipment. If you don't have any money, you can play a trapper. Reflection can kill a dahao. If you see a *dahao* in your country, follow him and use traps.

As we have seen, in a world where the 'law of the jungle' is the norm, the proper reaction is to improve one's self. One way to do that is to earn some money in the real world, and then apply that to your character's equipment. Another way is to improve your ability to use skill-friendly classes and abilities. 'Reflection' is a type of armor that a character can equip which has a chance to reflect an attack back at the attacker. For a character without much attack power themselves, this has obvious utility. Players playing as a Trapper can am-

bush from a distance with powerful and fast-acting magical traps. For FRMB gamers, selecting a Trapper and learning how to use her is one aspect of having 'skill.'

Skill can also be the very reason for playing the game. Wrote one player in the debate over cart-stealing

I think we should cut out stuff and just leave experience. It doesn't matter how much money you spend if you don't have experience or have spent a long time playing. If people don't do missions, ZT becomes boring and loses its core.

For this player, the 'core' of the game is not spending money to optimize his character. He places value on experience and the length thereof. It is not 'fun' to spend money. The fun, core, part of the game is the missions.

On the other hand, another player writes, "If you are a FRMB player, it is useless no matter how higher your level is, because you still get insta-killed by those who spend tons of money." A character's level cannot be bought (not directly), it must be earned through play. So, for this player, there is little point in earning experience points and building one's level if there's someone else out there who can just spend more money than you and kill your character in a moment. Where the first author finds fun in completing missions and building experience, this player finds little reward in building his level - his character will still be killed by those who could spend more money.

Other players recognize another possibility. A third player argues, "We cannot compete with their equipments and we cannot compete with their level, so we can only do something on the skills." The level of a character is only one aspect of their strength. A

higher level means more time invested in the game. Stronger equipment means more money invested in the game. Developing skills, however, represents a greater engagement with the game as a challenge. Without good equipment, a high level is useless, but with some skills, a FRMB player can hope to compete. Money and skill combined would make a player a formidable opponent. Part of FRMB gamer's pride is to be skilled without spending a lot of money. "If we spent money, we'd be 10, 100 times better than the *dahao*," wrote one FRMB gamer. Thus we see that skill is painted as the antithesis of spending money.

In ZT, knowledge can be skill. In the absence of money, high levels of knowledge and experience gathered in the game and the community around it can give a well-studied FRMB player a serious advantage.

I'm level 169 now, in addition to Assassin I've basically played all the other jobs. (I propose that everyone should try to play each job. First to understand how to react against them. Second to know all of their skills and moves.) Be prepared! Otherwise, other players will kill you and you won't know what's going on. Don't laugh! The first time I used Thousand Calamities to kill a 190-level he didn't even use Paragon [a defensive ability], just keeled over and then chased after me to ask what skill I used! I was speechless! Ha ha!

By playing with different jobs, this player understands how others may attack him or react to his attacks. Players with a high level of 'skill' are invariably those that also have a high level of knowledge. This player killed a character of a significantly higher level than his character through effective deployment of knowledge.

Players who rely on ‘skills’ over money are not necessarily naturally proficient at the game. Sharing strategies for the game is the purpose of the vast majority of paratexts written by players about ZT. Becoming a player that relies on skills may not require a player to unlock the secrets of the game system - just follow directions:

Trapping is a job for lazy people. It’s really simple. The trick is to overwhelm people. In the middle of the Ten Thousand Calamities, if you can cover them for one second, you can count victory.

The ‘Calamities’ is the trapper’s most powerful ability and is often cited as a key component in a FRMB tactics. The attack does a great deal of damage very suddenly from a distance, making it ideal for sudden, devastating attacks that one may need to escape from if they don’t work. This player argues that using this character-skill does not take any real skill, just activating the Calamities power. This recalls the use of strategy guides - an inauthentic way of gaining gaming capital.

However, the use of the Trapper’s Calamities attack can be more complicated than the above player argues. Skill is more than learning rote attack patterns. Skill can help a PK player prepare for contingencies.

Actually, most people don’t point out the weaknesses [of Calamities of Hell], like that you don’t have any control over the target, who can activate Paragon, or clear his PK status, or teleport back to a city, and so on. Without a lot of skill, it’s hard to predict if you can kill a *niu hao*.

The reactions a target can take to an attack are highly varied. In addition to attacking back by physical attack (with any number of kinds and variations of weapons) or using an attack

ability, or a defensive ability such as ‘Paragon’, a player may also simply set their PK status to “Peace” rather than get involved in a random battle. They might also simply escape. Highly-skilled players must be prepared to face these possibilities, and though learning through strategy guides can help, the possibilities are extremely broad.

‘Skill’ is also more than simply understanding the virtual game world. Another player further complicates the use of the Ten Thousand Calamities of Hell:

I should point out that the rate of success for this move [Calamities] against *dahao* is actually rather low, because when you are close to the *dahao* and start the move, there is a split second when they can hear a warning sound. Experienced PKers wear headphones so they can hear the sound and run away.

Here we see that skill is not merely a matter of articulating one’s character with the gameworld, but also requires techniques of the body. A successful PKer in ZT must not only create an effective character, with an optimized set of skills and equipment. They must not only develop an awareness of the rest of the game systems. They must also optimize the game as a sensory experience. This involves using a special piece of cyberorganic hardware (headphones) to improve a player’s ability to hear coming attacks. Thus, skill involves not only intellectual strategy but visceral reaction and bodily proficiency.

Even those players that rely on skill more than expensive equipment need to equip their characters with appropriate gear. Selecting one’s gear is a skill in itself.

First, determine your job and the appropriate gear. Mainly you want to reduce injury and improve survival, but some people like reflecting gear.

Me, I like injury-reducing gear! Because there's a lot of magic [in PK], you may want magic-resistance gear.

Different gear can have different effects on a character's effectiveness in various situations. Some gear takes the simple route of attempting to reduce damage taken, some gear specializes in physical damage (from weapons) or magical damage (from special abilities). Other gear has special effects, such as reflecting gear, which has a chance to reflect a part of a magical attack back against the attacker. Different gear may be appropriate for taking on different tasks or targets. Attacking a magic-using character may require magic-resistant armor. The Guardian class has improved defensive capabilities that a lower-level character may have difficulty breaking through. Reflecting gear can be used to turn the Guardian's own more-powerful attacks against him.

For at least one player, part of having skills is also being able to master PK in a system that is resistant to it. Wrote one self-avowed FRMB PK master:

There are too many assassin masters! They all think they are infallible!  
Haha! In my mind, the best job is Guardian. Real masters should start playing Guardian - but that's just my suggestion! Haha!

The Assassin job, as noted, is one that is very popular with FRMB PKers. The Guardian job has powerful defensive abilities that can negate the Assassin's speed advantage. The Guardian's slow attacks that rely on physical proximity are clearly a poor fit for a FRMB gamer who cannot afford protective armor and powerful weapons; a FRMB player must inevitably defeat their target quickly to avoid being overwhelmed. For the author, 'skill' in

ZT is much more than learning to master a single system. A 'true master' or PK can succeed even when the game system is stacked against them.

At the same time, different game systems can be more or less amenable to this style of gameplay. One master of Assassin PK claimed, "Other games' PK systems can't keep up, here you can be a real PK master." The player did not elaborate on how these other games' PK systems compared, but we can see already how ZT is an exciting PK game. The challenge level is extremely high for FRMB gamers. The odds are already stacked heavily against them if they attempt to take on RMB gamers. There is little room for error when a *dahao* can insta-kill you (*miaosha*) with a single hit. Furthermore, ZT features a wide variety of PK arenas including individual and team-based action. There are many opportunities for players to practice and demonstrate their skills.

Following is an extended example of the kind of strategizing that is shared on ZT forums, wherein the author describes how she, as a FRMB gamer, uses Assassin abilities to kill much more powerful RMB gamers. We can see here the full constellation of the meanings of 'skill' and place them in the context of the 'strategy guide' genre.

The Best Way for a FRMB player to kill a RMB player

Today at my relative's house I have no way of playing Zhengtu. I've got nothing to do, so I'll tell you what I've learned about PK.

I'm a FRMB player myself, so I think that Assassin is the best profession. I'm already level 197, but without a full set of purple gear my attack is not high, only 24, magic 14 (attack bonus 180), physical attack 11 (attack bonus 190), in addition I have a set of -93 protection gear. I rely on these for my assassination missions.

Actually, if you want to be the strongest you'd better have a full set of "ignore" gear. People who use 'ignore' gear are frightening, so level 197 are generally good at reducing physical damage. 5 or 8 star gear 4~5 equipped. (take note of the general level.)

Furthermore, FRMB, the most important thing to emphasize is PK skill. You can't let your enemy hit you once. You have to hit him ten times to be efficient, or you'll be killed instantly. Next, we'll discuss PK techniques. When I approach a dahao, I use Eagle Attack and see how much damage I do, to determine what gear they have on. If it's physical damage reducing, I then use Eagle Slaughters Dragon, using the dodge bonus to strike him twice. First invincibility, then use Judgement Chain, then a few strikes with a five-star weapon, (with an eight-star you can do a little more damage and stun him.)

Once you reduce his magic defense, immediately use Eagle Slaughters Dragon. Quickly switch to a bow and arrow, use invincibility, use the 'ignore' bow and arrow, if he doesn't die, quickly sneak away.

The player begins by describing her base stats: overall level, attack level and magic level. Level 197 is quite high, but without good gear her attack and magic levels remain low. She uses 'protection' gear that reduces the amount of damage taken; she also suggests a similar class of 'ignore' gear that can also reduce damage. However, her gear is not the focus of her article.

Clearly, according to the author, the most important aspect of PK for FRMB gamers is 'skill'. Efficiency and speed are prized. Avoidance of damage and attacks are key. The character-abilities she suggests players use include several popular ones. The first allows her to gauge the target's resistance and the quality and type of their gear. This allows her to

tailor her attack to the target. 'Invincibility' protects her character temporarily from damage. 'Judgement Chain' is the Assassin's most powerful ability, and following that a few strikes with a weapon that reduces their resistance to magic. Finally an additional magical attack, a distance attack, additional protection, and then escape.

All the elements of 'skill' are present. Speed and efficiency, avoidance of damage, preparation. Knowledges are gained through paratext, including the configuration of equipment, the efficacy of certain attacks and how they can work together, and how to adapt to the opponent's abilities.

### **Gaming Capital**

News outlets portray ZT as a game for those with money. Yet ZT got its start in the low-income rural areas of China. ZT's low system requirements and free client make it ubiquitous in Chinese netcafes, even the poorest ones. It is true that the most powerful characters in the game are the ones who can spend money on expensive gear. At the same time, however, ZT is a game for those with very little money.

There are no players of ZT that are entirely "without RMB." It is not possible to get very far at all without spending a little money. At one time, characters could not even leave Qingyuan village without purchasing a rickshaw ticket. "In actuality, anyone who enters this virtual microcosm must become an "RMB gamer"; the distinction lies only in how much you are willing to spend" (Martinsen 2007). In writing articles on playing as a FRMB gamer, authors acknowledge that they have spent some money on ZT, as has everybody. Some call themselves *wei-RMB* or *ban-RMB* gamers - "little RMB" or "half RMB."

Furthermore, RMB gamers cannot merely buy their strength. The tools of success in ZT are up for sale, but the 'skills', quite literally, are not. RMB gamers can buy armor, weapons, even experience points, but the selection and use of skills remains in the economy of gaming capital. While community articles on the Assassin class provide tactics for destroying RMB gamer's characters, the far vaster selection of community articles on the Guardian class popular with RMB gamers provides information on how to most effectively spend the skill points purchased and how to most effectively combine articles of armor for different purposes. RMB gamers still require gaming capital to be successful at ZT.

As a result, the distinction between RMB and FRMB gamers cannot be clearly divided based on behavior. Both sets of players must spend at least some money. Both sets of players require some gaming capital to be successful. It is also difficult to connect 'those willing to spend money in the virtual world' with the upper economic classes in the actual world, or to connect 'those unwilling to spend money in the virtual world' with the lower classes. Students, for example, are one of the groups most active in gaming in China - they may be personally broke, but come from wealthy families. There is also a question of care. For some, the virtual world can be far more important than the real world, and even the poorest may spend every penny on virtual status. For others, the virtual world can be a mere distraction, and their lives have concerns that draw their wealth away.

The distinction between RMB and FRMB is not primarily one of economic status. Instead, the difference is cultural. It is a difference of values. RMB gamers don't care for the tedious grind that is the path to gaming capital in many games. They work hard in the real world. Why not take the benefits of that in the virtual as well? FRMB gamers have no

respect for those who have bought their way to the top. In ZT's PK system, particularly the assassinations, what we see is class warfare, between those with gaming capital and those with economic capital - between those with skill and those with money.

The rewards for assassinating a RMB gamer, even one with a negative aura, are small. FRMB assassins don't suddenly claim all of the fruits of the RMB gamer's capital; they don't acquire the RMB gamer's valuable armor and weapons. They don't even cause harm to the RMB gamer, who can simply resurrect back in King City - unless they want to pay some gold to come back immediately and take revenge. The goal of FRMB assassins is not material (virtual) gain, but gaming capital.

In ZT, part of gaining gaming capital for FRMB players is harassing RMB gamers. Attacking those who have bypassed gameplay with money is a surefire way to improve one's own status with other gamers. As a coda for a strategy guide on using traps, one player wrote:

Maybe you've never killed a king or minister, officer, or any of those bastards (*niubi*) - let me tell you: I kill them every day, haha. Killing them is the most fun. Clan and guild members will think you're awesome (*lihai*). Generally, they'll be coming back from a mission. So their 'immortality' at the time of attack are already used up. Not only can they not resist, as soon as they catch on, they're already in the trap! In general, once one guild knows you, you will be famous throughout the world, haha!

Same-level players may not be able to escape my traps, but my goal is not to be like my peers. I want to kill those who I could never possibly kill, to create a myth around myself. I believe in Zhengtu only trapping can achieve

this goal. I hope that everyone who loves PK but keeps getting killed by their victim's friends will try trapping!

I like PK, though some may call me a black hand, but I play to have fun. As long as I don't go to a market or a mission site random killing is just fine! Haha.

If I've written poorly I hope everyone can understand. Here I'd like to thank Zhengtu for producing this fine illusion, for accompanying me in my loneliness and boredom, for introducing me to so many good online friends, I hope all my friends in Zhengtu are happy every day, and that we can all join forces to make Zhengtu the happiest of families!

This article exemplifies the conflict between RMB and FRMB players as a conflict of gaming capital versus economic capital. This player uses harassment of RMB gamers as a way to gain prestige around the world and to develop the myth of her character. She specifically targets powerful characters such as kings, ministers and officers as a way of becoming *lihai*, awesome, fierce, or feared among these same powerful people. Her goal is not to defeat those of the same power level as her, but those she “could never possibly kill,” thus demonstrating the strength of her skills. However, her acquisition of gaming capital is not based on her skills alone, but also her ability to defeat those who have bypassed the development of gaming capital by buying their characters’ strength. This may be controversial and dangerous for her—she may be called a “black hand” and need to avoid public places like markets or mission sites. Yet at the same time, her development of gaming capital through skills lets her join a community of like-minded gamers. In this way, a subculture of gameplay develops around a rejection of economic capital as a means of playing.

For most Western games in this genre, development of gaming capital is the norm, and bypassing development of skills via money is vilified. By comparing the conflict between gaming and money economies in *Zhengtu* and a Western game, we can see how Chinese gamers make this conflict their own.

Mia Consalvo, looking at the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI*, finds a similar conflict of economic capital and gaming capital. In *FFXI*, valuable equipment drops from certain monsters when killed. For some high-value equipment, players must take turns fighting the monsters that carry them. Turn-taking is not built in to the game, but is a social development based around valorization of the individual and his or her hard work. However, 'camping' the monster and selling the valuable equipment for a marked-up price is among the many ways that gold merchants earn their product. This is not simply a matter of economic capital not being respected in the game, but actually interferes with the play of gamers in the gaming capital economy. Market prices are inflated, activities are monopolized, and the gold finally ends up in the hands of those who didn't earn it in the game.

In *FFXI*, however, real-money transactions are against the rules, and the developers attempt to alter the game to crack down on gold-sellers. In the previous example, developers altered the nature of some equipment so that it was 'bound' to the character that picked it up and could not be sold. In response, gold-sellers sold the 'rights' to the equipment after it dropped from the monster, but before it was picked up and bound. Furthermore, players have a "visceral" reaction to gold-sellers in-game (Consalvo 2007: 164). They harrass them with harsh words and actions. This is because gold-sellers have transgressed against the

dominant economy in the game. *FFXI* is a system (as designed by developers Square Enix) and a culture (as enacted by the players) that rejects RMT as a method of success.

In *ZT*, this relationship is reversed. The FRMB player is the transgressor. RMT is the name of the game in *ZT*. The game was designed from the beginning to be one that relied more heavily on the money economy rather than the gaming economy. Players who get by with skills and knowledge are interrupting the normal order. When FRMB players assassinate RMB players, they are denying RMB players the ability to walk unmolested through the game world - a position RMB gamers would assume they had bought.

FRMB gamers have a similar self-righteousness when it comes to RMB gamers. In both *Final Fantasy XI* and *Zhengtu* one sees those with much gaming capital deriding those who purchase their success. This reflects these games' position within the larger gaming culture. *ZT* is controversial because it is not an island unto itself, but part of the wider discourse on games. This is why there are several newer versions of *ZT*. These versions appeal to the holders of greater gaming capital. The Retro and Green versions maintain RMT, but gamers believe these are more fair in execution. The Time version is similarly considered more fair, since it rewards those with time rather than money to spend on the game.

Through this comparison, we can also see how gaming capital is reinterpreted in a Chinese way. In *FFXI*, using money to buy success is part of a chain of transgressive behaviors that denies the game's status as an independent reality that valorizes independent success. In *Zhengtu*, the game is designed to reward spending money and so is inevitably linked to the actual world. Developing gaming capital in this case then becomes not an upholding

of the virtual world's transcendent separation from the real world, but a form of resistance against the dominance of the monetarily wealthy.

The "Chineseness" of FRMB gamer's reliance on skill and their valuing of gaming capital could be read more deeply by reference to classical Chinese strategic thought. A close look at one strategy guide for playing an Assassin can provide an illustration.

#### Assassin Equipment and PK

1. I'm not going to discuss how to go about it, but the first stat to increase is your Constitution; your Strength and Wisdom are later. If you increase your Constitution you can increase your hit points, and you can increase your chance for a critical hit. However, no matter how much blood you have, it will be useless when you face the highest-level player. Against lower level players, critical hits are the key.

2. If you are over level 208, prepare to face higher level players, if you are below 190, this strategy is not for you. See what you need to increase your skill. For level 208 players, when you are on an assassin mission, if the higher-level player increases his skill points by 5 you should increase by 7. What we need is attack strength. We cannot compare to those higher level players, they easily have a stronger attack. Remember what is suitable for you, as long as your skill points are enough.

3. All the necessary equipment, if you can put it on, put all of them on. Me, for example, I ignore the knife, the shield, and the bow, the magic wand, and the sharp knife. I carry a magic rod and add two illusion rods; these are both necessities.

4. Now, when you are PKing, since we are doing an assassination mission, we ignore how good the Assassin is, we abandon our defense system. The first thing, when you see the enemy, you cannot be afraid and your *qishi*

cannot be weak. When you see the "bastard *qi*" (devil status), you must charge first. This is what you can control. Eagle Attack and Eagle Slaughters Dragon: with these two skills, although you cannot control your enemy, you can keep him from running. It can also protect you from several strikes. Don't look down at this, if you use these attacks, your enemy cannot hit you. When you do this you must know your enemy's equipment. I recommend observing the enemy so you can "Know yourself, know your enemy" (Sunzi). If your enemy has Magic Drain, that's simple. You can use a horse and a bow to shoot him from a distance. Be careful if your enemy uses Plum Magic. If you are blown away, immediately charge again and change to a knife and ignore the shield. If you add a shield you get five points to *hushi*. Besides, your knife can slash faster. For enemies with *mojian*, if he has 10 stars and when we fight, I use *wudi*; If I don't wash, he will be killed. If you use a bow and you don't kill him immediately then use *wudi* immediately. Then use the knife to slash. If he uses *gongshe* and you *wudi* fails, use Invisibility immediately. This skill is very useful. While he can't see you, change your equipment, follow him, and then charge him again. The players that you can defeat must die this time. Lower-level players, I recommend using an Assassin. But can an Assassin deal high damage? If you use a rod, you have a chance - you have no alternative.

5. The most important thing when you are PK is the operation. You have to be fast. In Zhengtu, Assassination, on the operational level, is more interesting. Sometimes, when you are fast enough you can kill your enemy in a second, but other times it's yourself.

This example is an article posted to the Zhengtu knowledge base on the official site.

In this article, the author, Wan, describes a technique for killing high-level characters (called *niu hao* or *niudengji*, "bull level") who are guilty of killing other characters. This is

framed as part of an "assassin mission," where players gain rewards from the game for hunting down chronic PKers, who have a "devil status" Wan argues that speed, preparation and deception are the most important aspects of this strategy. In the fourth paragraph, the author uses the term *qishi*, meaning 'momentum,' 'energy,' or 'power.' This compound word draws on two distinctly Chinese concepts: *qi*, spirit or vitality, and *shi*, power or tendency. Both of these terms have deep roots in Chinese philosophy.

In the *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*, and other work from the period, *qi* is a key metaphysical concept. *Qi* is both the "animating principle" and the "thing it animates." Western philosophy has a history of distinguishing between the mind and the body, or between noumena and phenomena, or the real and the virtual, concepts that divide the sensible world from its energizing force. In contrast, *qi* is an energizing "field" that encompasses the whole of existence. *Qi* is not composed of various parts that make up the whole, but is the field of all things where only focus, not classification, distinguishes the specific. In refusing the immutable, *qi* represents a metaphysics of "becoming" rather than "being" (Ames 2001 19-24). Manipulating one's *qi* is therefore a matter of adapting and flowing with the environment, a 'way' (*dao*) that is noncoercive and adaptive.

*Zhengtu*, the coded system, does not assign *qi* a mechanical value, like it does *tizhi*, "constitution," which can have a numerical score. In official materials, "devil" is described as a ranking or status, not a state of *qi*. It is indicated in game by the color of a character's name as it appears over their head and has penalties such as increasing the prices of goods at shops. Characters with negative rankings can be assassinated by other players, and their reward is a special ranking - a 'beautiful' *qi*. For Wan, the ranking is more than a mechani-

cal status, it is a reflection of the player's social status - not just a 'devil' (*mo*) but a 'bastard' (*wangba*). He expresses this social reality through the concept of *qi*, invoking the complex whole that is Zhengtu, placing both himself and his opponent in a system of moral judgement.

Ames, in his translation of the *Daodejing*, argues that *qi* is "both the animating energy and that which is animated," "the vital animating field and its focal manifestations" (2003, 63). In Zhengtu, as portrayed by the author of this passage, *qi* is both the status of the characters, good and evil - a reflection of the player's moral choices - and the potential energy that can be released upon the devil player. It is simultaneously the field of moral status and the focused application of that status - good vs. evil. The article describes a system of justice or balance. Negative ranking is what allows one player to take on a special mission to kill chronic PKers, and their reward is a special ranking - a 'beautiful' *qi*. Framed in terms of *qi*, this system is more than a way to control and punish PKers, it is a system of justice and balance.

In Sunzi's *Art of War* and other military classics, the meaning of *shi* comes out of this overall metaphysic. Ames points to *shi*'s "cluster of meanings" including "situation," "disposition," "influence," "momentum," and "strategic advantage" (1993). Each time *shi* is used, he argues, it does not mean just one of these things, but all of them at once. In Sun Bin, *shi* is analogously compared to a crossbow, held taut with potential energy, released with perfect timing, striking suddenly and from nowhere. *Shi* is located in the field of possibilities, but is also the potential one has for altering that field. Like a crossbow, one small movement can pull the trigger and release the power. At the same time, this power is al-

ways contextual, not fixed or invariable. It always anticipates and adapts. In a *qi* cosmology of 'becoming', *shi* is the ability to turn a changing situation to one's advantage.

Wan's strategy in this article exemplifies *shi* by emphasizing speed, adaptability and deception. The most important technique, which he emphasizes several times, is speed. Furthermore, Wan encourages relying on the 'critical hit' - a decisive and devastating blow. He says if you are fast enough you can get a *miaosha* or "insta-kill" - an instant defeat. Sun Zi likewise argues that "the supreme consideration is speed" and "in joining battle, seek the quick victory" (Ames 1993 157, 107). A protracted battle wastes resources and increases risk. For both Wan and Sun Zi, a long battle with a stronger opponent gives that opponent the opportunity to bring his full power to bear. Better to defeat him quickly and escape, as Wan suggests.

When Wan writes, "know yourself, know your enemy," he refers to the famous aphorism from the Art of War that closes Chapter 3: "He who knows the enemy and himself will never in a hundred battles be at risk." Wan encourages readers to investigate their target, know its powers and strengths. Wan suggests ways to counter each possible resistance. If the opponent uses magic, you use a bow. If the opponent uses *mojian* you use *wudi*. If nothing else works, Wan suggests using an invisibility power to feign escape - and then return to suddenly strike again. Sun Zi writes that "warfare is the art (*dao*) of deceit" and encourages the general to attack when his opponent is unprepared (Ames 1993 104-5). Wan's use of the power of invisibility to mislead and surprise exemplifies classical strategy.

In the article, very alternative is considered, and Wan encourages others to consider their own situation. "It is by scoring many points that one wins the war beforehand in the

temple rehearsal" writes Sunzi, after he describes the considerations a commander must make before entering battle. (Ames 1993 105). Sun Zi's master general, like Wan's assassin, considers every possibility before considering to engage. Wan asks that assassin's be sure of their strength and their opponent's before they enter battle. For both Wan and Sun Zi, the battle is won in the preparation.

The combination of an emphasis on speed, adaptability, and a decisive victory makes Wan's strategy particularly classical. Sun Zi writes, "victory can be anticipated, but it cannot be forced." Unlike Clausewitz's 'friction', which must be overcome by force, Sun Zi and Wan's strategy relies on the fast, unexpected surprise attack, adaptation due to intelligence gathered, and deception. Wan writes for characters that are of a lower level than their opponents, characters that have a lower raw strength. But, through cunning, classically-styled tactics, he demonstrates how powerful enemies can be defeated.

It is interesting, however, that Wan considers defense to be unimportant. *Sunzi* emphasizes protecting troops and supply lines. In this case, we see how the game system can be unsympathetic to classical ideas. There is no reason to protect one's own character, since the game will simply resurrect a slain character with minor penalties. On the part of the designers, this is a concession to other functions of the game - namely the reward system, whereby players acquire gear as they succeed in the game. Losing these rewards on any defeat would potentially make combat too risky for players to enjoy. On the other hand, on a smaller scale Wan does argue that the techniques he suggests not only limit the opponent's ability to escape, but also protect the attacker from being hit, at least for a short time.

In this analysis, I do not mean to suggest that all FRMB assassins are unconscious disciples of *Sunzi*, or that Western games and gamers do not find similar advantages in speed, surprise, and preparedness. However, it is Wan's use of *qi* and *shi*, in combination with his overall thesis, which suggests ways that classical strategy could be an informing assumption of Chinese game design and play. "Gaming capital" could be seen as something that relies on Western assumptions of individual prowess. Here, we see how the value of strategy and skill in games could be "made Chinese" in a deep, historical sense.

## **Design**

The RMB and FRMB classes are emergent properties of the game system, the code of the world. Many contentious activities are a result of this. However, both RMB and FRMB strategies are one part of an overall design that benefits the game designers by resisting resolution of the class conflict.

On the issue of RMB gamer abuse, one player wrote: "Doesn't matter. It's just a pastime. Those who spend money naturally become bull-level (*niu hao*), otherwise the game has no interest. The developers rely on their money. It's not worth bothering about." This player recognizes that rewarding RMB gamer investment with powerful equipment is how the developers of ZT make a profit. This minimizes the significance of the difference between RMB and FRMB. It's just what the game is.

Another player argues that, "When the strong and the weak are in balance, ZT can earn money. If everyone is strong, how do they earn money? If everyone is weak, how do they earn money? You have to accept this fact." ZT was designed to be a game for players with more money than time. From the beginning, the game has given the most power to

those willing to spend. But the game also supports FRMB players through its design. The game is free, runs on low-end computers, and has features that allow players with more money than time to compete - at least to a small degree. Like the neverending war between the ten successor states in the game's fiction, the conflict between the FRMB and RMB gamers is impossible to resolve in the game. This is in the best interests of the game designers, who profit from both money economies and gaming economies.

Maintaining a healthy economy of gaming-capital-wealthy FRMB gamers ensures several appealing aspects of ZT. It promotes exploration of the system and testing of its limits. There are several variations of ZT, some with subscription services. A player can use the free version to try the game out, and if she found she liked the missions but not the unbalanced PK, she could try another version. Most importantly, permitting accumulation of gaming capital by FRMB gamers keeps them in the game, and no one plays ZT for long without spending some money.

Introducing the wages system in ZT, Shi Yuzhu appealed to a Chinese sense of historical materialism. He proposed a history of Chinese games. The first games used a card-point fee system, a subscription-style system that he compared to feudalism. Like a tax, players paid their landlords, the game company, for the privilege of living in their lands. The second generation used a free-to-play model with value-added services, like ZT. In this model, the poor pay no taxes while the rich pay high taxes (and receive benefits to match). This system is progressive, but really just reveals the disparity between the rich and poor. The most advanced system is the third, where the largesse of the wealthy subsidizes the poor.

This, he argues, creates a truly "harmonious network society" (*wangluo hexie shehui*) (Zol-ComCn 2006).

The addition of wages to ZT was not, therefore an acquiescence to player demands, but a socialist revolution. And, like the best socialist revolutions, it was lead from the top, making a small change in the lives of the underclass, but mostly reaffirming the status quo. Shi Yuzhu's wage system supported the habits of the most hardcore of FRMB gamers, but did little to affect the power gap between the FRMB and RMB. The rich continue to fund the world, and reap the benefits in terms of power and prestige. And, ultimately, it is the game designers who benefit

This is just one way that the conflict between FRMB and RMB gamers has been controlled by the game design. The very knowledge and strategies that FRMB gamers rely on for the development of their skills have in fact been put there by the game developers. Writes one FRMB gamer,

Many have experience the Assassin's startling ability "Judgment Chain."

This is one strange technique, but this has happened before - there is always strangeness, this is what Zhengtu is about, right?

I don't encourage everybody to spend money to play a game, nor do I encourage people to spend no money at all. The business of gaming won't run without funds. Occasionally spend money, there's a lot of people, everybody takes what he needs. But the greedy and cruel in Zhengtu cause people to point fingers. But we're the one's with the final say. First, you can't tear equipment that is bound, unless a monster destroys it, so prices have gradually risen. It's gotten so bad that to buy white clothes from a

treasure chest costs 19 ounces of gold! Were it not for players complaining at the gates of the business quarter, nobody would know.

Zhengtu, you create the game skills, isn't this your planned end? Apocalypse Chain!

Apocalypse Chain is a high-level ability for characters with skills in the Assassin set. The ability not only does a great deal of damage to the target, but also weakens the targets defensive abilities, both Physical and Magical. Assassin abilities often have effects of this type, called "buffs" or "debuffs" in games. The author of the above article views this ability as a concession to FRMB gamers, one of many 'strange' things that have happened in ZT. This includes rising prices due to control of the supply of equipment. By binding equipment dropped from killed monsters, the developers limit FRMB gamers' ability to trade equipment in game—for example, by selling equipment that their character cannot use. The recent addition of this ability means that the game developers felt that some aspect of the game needed to be changed. This player's reaction to the change tells us that the issue addressed is contentious.

This is evidence of the triangle-shaped relationship between players, developers and the game. Player complaints through game paratexts like message boards - such as the ones we have been examining - do not fall on deaf ears. It is in the best interests of the game designers to adapt their design to the wishes of the players. Thus, the designers do not attempt to control the game design to solely benefit their paying customers. To maintain a healthy game world they need to draw all kinds.

## Conclusion

In this section, we have seen how some players without access to a lot of money can develop 'skills' as an alternative form of capital. This 'gaming capital' inherently runs in opposition to the dominant form of gaining power in *Zhengtu*, which is the use of monetary capital. By comparing *ZT* with the Western form of the conflict between monetary and gaming capital we can see how in *ZT* this conflict makes particularly Chinese assumptions. Namely, gaming capital is not used to reify the game as a separate space, but to challenge the actual-world position of the RMB gamers. Finally, we see how the conflict is monetized by the game's developers, and the game is built in such a way as to maintain rather than resolve the conflict.

## VII: Conclusion

This thesis has examined players of the Chinese game *Zhengtu* in an attempt to demonstrate how the form of online gaming has been indigenized, or made Chinese, by players and developers. Throughout, we have seen how a Chinese “this-world” perspective provides an alternative system of meaning-making for virtual worlds. Looking first at ideas of selfhood and personal quality, we saw how the game carries over values from modern China like *suzhi*, which are nonetheless linked to traditional ideas of continuous experience and self-cultivation. Then, looking at norms and transgression, we saw that the “this-world” assumption colors debate on contentious behavior, and players appeal to personal and relational morality rather than transcendent virtues. Finally, looking at the emergent values of online games, or ‘gaming capital’, we saw how these values ‘become Chinese’ in that they are used not as the absolute values inherent to gaming, but rather as a form of resistance against the monied gamers that seem to hold all the power in *Zhengtu*.

The content of this thesis was drawn primarily from online forums and other websites devoted to gaming and *Zhengtu*. These forums presented debates about elements of the game in a static format that could be easily analyzed. These debates also drew to the surface disputes that were more implicit in game. Furthermore, by looking at areas of contention among gamers, we could see how they nevertheless shared common assumptions about the game world.

Unfortunately, relatively little time could be spent playing the game itself. This was due to several issues. First, my own skills in colloquial, Internet, and gaming Chinese are

lacking. In addition to the standard challenges of Mandarin, the Chinese Internet has its own set of slang, memes and idioms that I was not prepared to understand in the real-time setting of the game. Furthermore, the game itself offers a challenging vocabulary drawing from fantasy literature and Chinese history. As a result, I found it much more effective to slowly break down written articles word-by-word to attempt to understand this culture. Furthermore, technical limitations prevented me from playing ZT when not in China; in particular, I needed to buy gold cards from real-world vendors. However, it is a testament to the importance of exterior texts to understanding a game that this thesis could be written based almost entirely upon them.

I should also recognize the limits of my real-world experience. I could spend only a few weeks for two summers in Chinese netcafes and conducted no interviews with people in the real world. As a result, I have no account of sociality in the netcafe as opposed to in the game alone. I also have no account of how *Zhengtu* fits in with the regular lives of Chinese gamers.

It is not the intention of this thesis to Orientalize Chinese gamers. I do not mean to suggest that Chinese gamers have a universally alien way of playing online games. I do mean to assert the importance that culture has in the adoption of new technologies. It is also not my intention to idealize 'Western' gamers, who are obviously made up of many different groups of people from many different countries and cultural backgrounds. The broad strokes I draw with these two groups are only to show that there can be difference in how people from different cultural backgrounds approach gaming.

Further research could elaborate on these broad strokes, looking at multiple kinds of ‘Chinese gaming’ and multiple ‘Western gaming’ cultures and their interconnections. For example, so-called ‘casual games’ such as Farmville on Facebook use the kind of free-to-play, pay-to-improve model that *ZT* relies on. These casual games are controversial among ‘real gamers’. I would argue part of the reason is Western gamers’ cultural assumption that games should be worlds set apart, not integrated with real money and real social networks.

It may be a stretch to draw upon classical Chinese philosophy when talking about contemporary gamers. Gamers themselves are not in the habit of directly quoting the past masters, or devoting themselves to explicit Confucianism or Daoism. It is difficult to demonstrate a clear link. My intention has been to show how some classical assumptions about the world may be traced into contemporary arguments.

I must also recognize that *Zhengtu* is a special case. Not all games in China follow the kind of pay model that *ZT* does, nor do all games in the West follow a subscription model. Perhaps *ZT* is simply the kind of game that attracts players with a cynical, Darwinian view of human relations and the potential for gaming to be a space set apart. However, I believe the connections I have drawn to other research on contemporary Chinese culture and classical assumptions belie this argument. If *ZT* is a special case, I also believe it is an exemplary case.

This research has important implications for several fields. For the anthropology of indigenization, this research demonstrates how a focus on culture rather than politics can look more deeply at the movements of various traits and forms as they are integrated worldwide. In game studies, this research suggests the importance of understanding the real-

world culture of one's subjects even as online worlds develop emergent cultures of their own. It also elaborates on models of norms and transgression by adding a layer of real-world norms to models based on rules and developer intent. This research also draws connections between classical philosophy and contemporary culture, showing how an understanding of traditional assumptions can help us understand very modern forms.

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