

# Playing Home: Gaming, Affective Routines, and Mediated Belonging among Chinese International Students

**Fanxi Feng**

The University of Hong Kong  
Pokfulam, Hong Kong Island,  
Hong Kong  
ff2023@connect.hku.hk

For Chinese international students living across conditions of geographical mobility, gaming often exceeds the status of mere entertainment. Embedded within everyday routines and social practices, digital play becomes entangled with how continuity, familiarity, and belonging are sustained across distance. Drawing on scholarship on belonging, affect, and mediated everyday practice (Ahmed 2004; Yuval-Davis 2006), this paper examines how gaming practices function as forms of “playing home” in diasporic life. It argues that belonging in transnational contexts is not simply preserved through digital media, but also continually enacted through mundane, affective, and repetitive forms of engagement.

The study draws on qualitative interviews conducted between April and May 2025 with 19 Chinese international students across 6 countries, recruited via personal networks and online communities. Participants’ length of residence abroad ranges from less than two years to nearly a decade, and the sample reflects diversity in gender, field of study, and gaming experience. Semi-structured interviews explored participants’ everyday gaming routines, affective attachments, and social interactions, including memories of early play, game preferences, and perceptions of belonging. Data were analysed thematically, focusing on how digital play mediates emotional connections, social intimacy, and cultural engagement in transnational contexts.

Participants’ accounts reveal several interrelated ways through which gaming practices become embedded in the experience of studying abroad. Many participants trace their engagement with games back to childhood or adolescence. Although they do not necessarily continue playing the same games over time, gaming itself has accompanied them across different stages of life, evolving alongside changes in age, social environment, and personal circumstance. It therefore functions as a form of temporal continuity that links past and present selves across geographical mobility, allowing individuals to maintain a more coherent sense of self amid the disruptions of displacement.

Another important dimension of gaming lies in its capacity to sustain forms of mediated co-presence. Through shared play sessions, voice chats, guild activities, and ongoing game-related communication, participants maintain intimacy with friends, partners, and communities across distance while also developing new forms of social connection abroad. Beyond direct interaction, participants also describe attachment to game worlds

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

themselves as emotionally reassuring spaces that provide companionship, familiarity, and temporary relief from loneliness or uncertainty.

Gaming also becomes deeply woven into the affective routines of everyday life. Repetitive activities such as daily logins, task completion, and “clearing stamina” are frequently integrated into fragmented schedules shaped by study, commuting, and emotional fatigue. Rather than merely filling time, these routines help structure everyday rhythms, creating moments of predictability, emotional regulation, and continuity within otherwise unsettled conditions.

Participants’ gaming practices also reveal persistent orientations toward culturally familiar linguistic and media environments. Chinese-language interfaces, platforms, humour, and aesthetic styles often function as intuitive and emotionally resonant spaces of engagement, reproducing forms of cultural familiarity and mutual intelligibility across distance. At the same time, participants’ accounts also reveal ambivalent and shifting forms of attachment that cannot be reduced to fixed cultural identities, reflecting more fluid negotiations between familiarity, curiosity, and adaptation within diasporic life.

This paper situates these exploratory findings within an emerging conversation between game studies, migration studies, and affect theory. The practices of “playing home” foreground how ordinary digital play contributes to the enactment of mediated belonging in transnational settings. At times, these mediated forms of belonging may resemble what Anderson (1983) conceptualises as imagined communities, sustained through shared symbolic and communicative practices across distance. Rather than positioning games as either escapist diversions or integration tools, the study highlights their role as everyday technologies of belonging that sustain continuity, sociality, and affective home-worlds for diasporic youth. Practically, attending to these dynamics suggests that campus support services and intercultural initiatives might more meaningfully engage with students’ existing digital practices by recognising these community channels as valuable sites of peer connection and emotional support.

## **Keywords**

diaspora, digital games, belonging, international students, home-making

## **REFERENCES**

- Ahmed, S. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge.
- Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. Verso.
- Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. Belonging and the politics of belonging. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 40(3), 197–214.