

“Writing Back” To Which Empire?: Constructing Chinese Identities in Tabletop Roleplaying Games in Singapore

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition that both analogue and digital games research has been dominated by an Anglo-American perspective, and scholars are seeking to develop a stronger connection between game studies and postcolonial theory (Mukherjee and Hammar 2018). This postcolonial turn in games studies has made several important contributions to the field, including arguments that the form and affordances of landscapes in games perpetuates the logics of empire (Magnet 2006); that games created away from centers of power carry unbearable burdens of representation as they are shunted through different political terrains (Murray 2023); and that the notion of play as ‘civilising’ must be reframed to acknowledge the white European canon from which this idea derives (Trammell 2022). Beyond form and medium, genre also matters: tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Arneson and Gyax 1974), for example, reproduce Orientalist tropes (Trammell 2016) because the genre of fantasy is itself anchored in imperialist nostalgia (Young 2015; Vossen 2020).

While questions of how imperialism and colonialism have influenced the making, playing, and reception of games are crucial considerations in games studies, this approach still takes the West as a point of departure. The legacy of empire and the workings of Whiteness, understandably, become inescapable constructs that those working (and playing) in the margins must contend with. In this paper, however, I want to move away from this center of gravity by examining how the identities of TTRPG players in Singapore are shaped not only by the West but also by the rise of China. As a former British colony where English is the lingua franca of choice, Singapore hosts—among many other ethnic and migrant communities—a dominant Chinese diaspora which has been settled in its country for many centuries. Its contemporary geopolitical positioning and politics of identity-making are therefore doubled: its Singaporean Chinese citizens define themselves as neither Western nor mainland Chinese, but in-between both or not enough of either. As one of my fellow *Dungeons & Dragons*

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(D&D) players said to me, the core of the Singaporean is failure: neither Chinese enough nor Western enough, he argued that the Singaporean Chinese identity is grounded in uneasy mimicry.

The complexity of ethnic identity plays out in the way that people find pleasure in games. I show how Singaporean Chinese players experience their identities as dynamic and processual unfoldings through the act of homebrewing their TTRPGs. A game of *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen and Willis 2005) reveals the pleasures of postcolonial irony: of meddling with imperialist history by becoming historical flaneurs, re-playing stories of origin and power across the Chinese diaspora in the wake of imperialism and war. Fitting D&D game mechanics to Chinese genres such as Xianxia and Wuxia on a streamed game enables a subtle critique of Chinese nationalist politics and the creation of a “rogue archive” (de Kosnik 2016). An attitude of irreverence and a disposition towards remixing carries millennial players towards coming to terms with being “not Chinese enough”. In examining these player practices, I show that the construction of Singaporean Chineseness in TTRPG players is influenced by colonial and migration histories which are in turn experienced differently across generations. The pleasure of play is not incidental or escapist, but an attempt to “hold reality hostage” through acts of creation (Mizer 2019).

These arguments draw from an in-depth study based on twenty months of ethnographic research spanning 2021 to 2023, where I record participating “playing alongside” others in at least 245 public and private gaming sessions (Boellstorff 2008). I further conducted thirty-eight semi-structured qualitative interviews with players to understand play cultures in Singapore’s TTRPG scene. Contextually, these play experiences are also positioned in a milieu of rising xenophobia against a newer wave of Chinese migrants now settling in Singapore. To understand this, I use migration scholar Sylvia Ang (2022)’s work on how Singapore’s Chinese identity is intimately related with the evolution of China and the Singapore government’s state narratives of Chinese homogeneity.

The question of whether games can take on the role of “writing back” as the subaltern is an ambivalent one: as Mukherjee (2018) argues, the challenge of doing so is that the act itself always seems to involve “the apparatus of colonialism” (518). Instead, this paper asks what can be revealed when players are not singularly oriented towards the West as carriers of a colonial history but also attuned to the rising global power of China as members of a diaspora. Is “writing back” still what players want to do—and if so, which empire, exactly, is the addressee?

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