A Chinese Cyber Diaspora: Contact and Identity Negotiation on Taiwanese *WoW* Servers

Holin Lin
Department of Sociology
National Taiwan University
Taipei, Taiwan
holin@ntu.edu.tw

Chuen-Tsai Sun
Department of Computer Science and Graduate Institute of Education
National Chiao Tung University
Hsinchu, Taiwan
ctsun@cs.nctu.edu.tw

ABSTRACT

Due to the long-delayed release of *World of Warcraft's* (*WoW's*) second expansion in China, many Chinese players moved their accounts to Taiwanese servers in 2008. This "*WoW* rush" resulted in daily contact between tens of thousands of residents of Taiwan and China, two countries whose official relationship is marked by limited contact and political tension. Instead of having short-term political discussions on online forums, Chinese and Taiwanese players are now establishing long-term relationships in ongoing game worlds. This represents a new form of virtual migration, consisting of individuals who physically exist in their home countries, but spend large amounts of time engaged in cross-border interactions in cyberspace. We call this new practice "migration without physical presence." In this paper we analyze this phenomenon and its implications, and review the characteristics of cross-Taiwan Strait interactions at various stages of this cyber-diaspora.

Keywords

online gamer migration, telepresence, *World of Warcraft*, MMOG operation, persistent worlds, cyber-diaspora

INTRODUCTION

We are currently witnessing two conflicting global trends: increasingly strong post-9/11 physical border control, and a growing volume of online cross-border interactions. One of the most popular channels for such interactions is *Massively Multiplayer Online Games* (MMOGs), which offer ongoing worlds in which relatively stable groups of players "live together" for months or even years. One example for analyzing the implications of such daily contact is the East Asian version of *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, with large numbers of Mainland players migrating to Taiwanese servers to live and play with Taiwanese players.

Due to Chinese government content regulations and publication control policies for imported games, companies that own distribution rights for *WoW* in China have suffered several long delays when trying to launch new expansions. During the long 2008 delay in the release of *WoW's* second expansion (*Wrath of the Lich King*), many Chinese players abandoned Chinese *WoW* servers to play on servers located in Taiwan. Many players continue to use Taiwanese servers, regardless of the *WoW* version being offered on Chinese

servers. As a result, thousands of daily contacts are taking place between residents of two countries whose official relationship has long been marked by limited contact and political tension. In short, hundreds of thousands of Mainland Chinese are leading separate lives in a foreign country.

We have two reasons for analyzing this phenomenon as an example of online immigration. First, MMOGs are *persistent worlds* (Castronova, 2005; Taylor, 2006) in which players take part in cumulative activities. Steinkuehler and Williams (2005) note the similarity of such virtual worlds with the informal sociability "third places" identified by Oldenburg (1999). Players spend hours each day interacting with other game world residents for months on end, thus forming server-based communities marked by relatively stable player relationships and various levels of inter-player contact and familiarity. Second, the combination of MMOG telepresence and players' "digital bodies" can create a strong sense of place and residence, with players being fully conscious of cultural differences between Chinese and Taiwanese servers.

Individuals on both sides of the Taiwan Strait use the term *immigration* to describe online gamer movement. Pearce (2009) uses the concept of *diaspora* when describing the movement of players whose favorite game was shut down (*Uru: Ages Beyond Myst*). When immigrating to other game worlds, many of those players identified themselves as "refugees." Pearce observes that the profound connections formed by play patterns suggest that online game activity has unique social qualities that sustain long-term affiliations. We believe that the China-Taiwan online immigration phenomenon represents a new type of interactional model, one having significant differences with the temporary political conflicts that are commonly found in online forums. At the same time, there are clear differences between this online phenomenon and immigrant contact in the physical world. In this paper we will refer to this cross-Strait movement as "migration without physical presence."

LITERATURE REVIEW
We found the phenomenon of *WoW* immigration has theoretical implications in at least three aspects: (1) the relations between virtual world and presence; (2) the relations between the architecture and social arrangement of virtual world and its users' experiences; (3) the meanings of virtual world as a place for migration.

Game ecology and presence
Lindtner et al. (2008) approached online games as digital-physical hybrids when analyzing player interactions within cultural ecological systems. As part of their investigation of Chinese *WoW* player game activities and collaborative practices in physical spaces (e.g., Internet cafés), they adopted and expanded Crabtree and Rodden's (2007) hybrid ecology approach to perform a socio-technological analysis. They emphasize the continuously evolving characteristic of socio-technological environments, as opposed to determined by simple technological arrangement. In addition, they pointed out the social value and policy in the physical world are influential factors for information ecologies. The ecology concept has also been used by Nardi and O'Day (1999) to analyze information and media ecologies. They emphasize the continuous evolution of socio-technological environments, as opposed to simple changes in technological arrangement. In addition, they emphasize how physical world social values and policies influence information ecologies.

Regarding player sense of presence, Lindtner et al. adopted Mantovani and Riva's (1999) cultural ecologist approach, which emphasizes the ways that linkages and interactions shape relations among individuals, as well as between individuals and their environments. According to this approach, reality and sense of presence are socially constructed, as opposed to being determined by the senses or physical objects. Consequently, the experience of presence varies across participants, regardless of whether or not they are located in the same physical space, or one that is perceived as identical. For our purposes, game servers are acknowledged as presenting identical landscapes, missions, and objects, but with different compositions of players and physical world connections that work together to create unique game cultures on one server—or in the case of the present study, a group of servers serving the needs of a specific techno-linguistic region.

Architecture of cyberspace

Lessig (1999) coined the term "code as law" in his study of digital space, observing that virtual world architectures consisting of hardware and software largely determine the physical and economic laws that profoundly affect individual and collective behaviors. Architectures also shape game community cultures; similar to real-world communities, those cultures undergo change over time. When analyzing the process of social design in virtual worlds, Taylor (2004) addressed the issues of ownership and commercialization, and described a trend toward increased regulation of virtual spaces by internal (game company) and external (government) sources. She also found this to be true for global virtual worlds such as MMOGs.

Castronova (2007) asserts that when virtual world designers cannot employ single rule sets to satisfy all users, they tend to employ user preferences to create subgroups. As in the physical world, such arrangements are considered negative by the inhabitants of virtual worlds. A game company might create customized designs for different servers based on its understanding of player location or cultural context, yet try very hard to conceal such attempts so that players do not immediately notice any differences when they log on to various servers.

Another major factor is in-game organizations such as player guilds, through which players participate in local community interactions with little consideration for the broader society. Similar to the way that real-world immigrants gravitate toward Chinatown or Little Italy neighborhoods in urban centers, MMOG players migrate to ethnic communities in virtual worlds. Also in the same manner as real-world communities, player guild splits occur and factions emerge over time. As Chen, Sun and Hsieh (2008) point out, online player guild size, functionality, and life cycle are all subject to influences resulting from game design decisions. For example, a reduction of raid size from 40 to 25 players can trigger quarrels and splits in high-end guilds as members compete for first-team positions. For this study we focused on significant political differences between two populations sharing the same ethnic background, and observed subtle yet influential differences in game design that reflect physical world political and cultural contexts.

Migration and diaspora

Karim (2003) uses the "third space" concept (Bhabha, 1990) to address the use of media by diasporic communities, and expands the original local third space concept to a cross-national space for accommodating the needs of members who are scattered across broad geographic distances. Since online games are not simply channels, but spaces and places, their designers and regulators wield influence over political ecologies and interactional frameworks. Whereas members of physical diasporas are aware of their diversified worlds, the perspectives of online gamers are also strongly affected by spatial construction. The implications of technology are critical, but players may not be aware of them.

Members of various diasporas are using the Internet for simple communication, as well as to establish or preserve cultural, historical and political identities. In her investigation of the Eritrean diaspora, Bernal (2006) looked at ways that activists organized protests and demonstrations, collected funds in support of armed conflict, debated the content of a new constitution, and tried to influence the Eritrean government. Thus, the Internet was not only a platform for information exchange, but also a space for expressing emotions and constructing new concepts. This perspective is essential to the present study, since game networks are used for both simple communication and for expressing player identity. Such identity is both national (Taiwan) and spatial (Taiwanese servers). In virtual spaces, diasporic members are neither refugees nor immigrant workers; they create new ethnic communities, political practices, and forms of citizenship.

Diaspora researchers have studied dialogues between those who leave and those who stay. In this study, our focus is on dialogues between natives and newcomers. Hiller and Franz (2004) investigated how migrants from Newfoundland province in Canada used four kinds of digital tools (search engines, email, BBSs, and chat rooms) to maintain ties with relatives and old friends and to make new Newfoundlander friends after moving to the Canadian west coast. The authors divided migration into three periods—pre-migrant, post-

migrant, and settled migrant—and found that tool usage varied in accordance with motives at different stages. Hiller and Franz reported that website owners used text descriptions to create a sense of presence for visitors—for instance, the *Newfoundland Kitchen* website contains the sentence, "So come on in, help yourself to a cup of tea, pull up a chair, and enjoy the company!" We also found that online games provide many opportunities for presence and shared conversation, with familiar landscapes and daily activities such as missions, raids, and guild participation helping to maintain old ties and establish new ones.

METHODS & DATA

We used ethnographic field observations, secondary data analysis, and in-depth interviews for data collection. Both authors have over four years of experience playing *WoW*, and our daily participation in and first-hand observations of the Taiwanese *WoW* community helped us identify the trends that we address in this paper. We have noticed remarkable changes in local game culture as influenced by the influx of Chinese, and we used those observations to determine and refine our research questions. Secondary data were gathered from posts found on Taiwanese and Chinese game forums. To understand the collective experiences and memories of Taiwanese players, we monitored *Bahamut*[1] and *Gamebase*.[2] Although *Bahamut* is Taiwan's most popular gamer forum, it only keeps data for 3 to 6 months. *Gamebase* contains significantly fewer posts, but its database goes back to 2005, thereby supporting a historical perspective on Chinese *WoW* player immigration. To gather information on Chinese player attitudes, we looked at three game forums: *National Geographic of Azeroth* (NGA),[3] *Duowan*,[4] and *MOP*. In all cases we used two keywords ("China" and "Mainlander"[5]) to search for discussion threads on our topic of interest. Based on our observations, we also used search terms that might be considered slang expressions—for example, Chinese game players referred to Taiwanese servers as "Taifu" (台服) or "TF." The majority of our data came from posts that were published between June 2009 and August 2011. Details regarding data collection from Taiwanese and Chinese game forums are present in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1. Data collection from Taiwanese *WoW* game forums.

	Game forum			
	Gamebase	Bahamut*		
Extraction date	2011.08.03	2009.06.11	2009.12.11	2011.08.01
Posted date	2005.01~2011.08	2009.03~06	2009.06~12	2011.05~08
Number of threads	522	124	89	32
Number of posts	6,618	3,302	1,966	797

* *Bahamut* only stores posts and threads for 3 to 6 months.

Table 2. Data collection from Chinese *WoW* game forums.

	Game forum		
	NGA	Duowan	MOP
Extraction date	2011.06.17	2009.12.10	2009.06.25
Posted date	2005.09~2011.06	2008.11~2009,12	2007.02~2009,06
Number of threads	30,952	7,824	434

Note: Due to volume, we did not count the total number of posts.

We browsed thread headings on the five forums to identify common discussion themes. In the Taiwanese forums they included comparisons of Chinese and Taiwanese play cultures, Chinese player behaviors, the

positive and negative impacts of Chinese player migration on Taiwanese server ecosystems, and complaints about local player consumer rights. Within these categories we found self-reflective thoughts on cultural conflicts based on personal in-game experiences.

Common themes discussed by Chinese *WoW* players included reasons to stay on or leave Chinese *WoW* servers, reasons to move to or avoid Taiwanese servers, technical problems and solutions associated with Taiwanese server migration, complaints and analyses about the lengthy Chinese approval process for *WoW* expansions, and impressions of Taiwanese player culture. We noticed that Taiwanese players were more likely to find general agreement regarding "we/they differences," but that similar discussions on Chinese forums frequently resulted in heated arguments and flaming. On a few occasions we noted that complaints posted on TW game forums about Chinese player behaviors were re-posted on CN game forums, thus triggering additional acrimony. We used general-purpose search engines to locate supplementary data in an attempt to verify our forum observations. In many cases we found re-publications of original posts on bulletin boards, web forums, and personal blogs.

To understand interpretations and reflections on cross-border contact experiences, we conducted two waves of interviews with Taiwanese *WoW* players, during September-November, 2010 and April-June 2011. Since we wanted to compare player experiences and perceptions at different stages of Chinese player migration, for the first wave we purposefully recruited long-term continuous *WoW* players.[6] We posted announcements on the *WoW* bulletin board on PTT (the largest BBS in Taiwan) to recruit volunteers, and then used snowball sampling to locate additional interviewees. For the second wave we made a special effort to increase sample diversity in terms of demographic traits (e.g., gender, age) and play experience (e.g., hardcore/leisure players, membership in different guilds). We interviewed a total of 21 Taiwanese *WoW* players (15 males, 6 females) between the ages of 21 and 31—13 in the first wave and 8 in the second. Of these, 18 were active during all of the Chinese player migration stages that we will describe below; the other three were only familiar with what we describe as the WLK migration. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to build a general understanding of the players' game experiences and history of contact with Chinese players. We used this information to write and refine more focused questions to fit the interviewees' individual experiences. Several dimensions were emphasized: contexts, frequencies, and feelings of in-game interactions with Chinese players (including those living in Hong Kong); identification with national/geographic origin; and self-evaluations of the impacts of contact experiences.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE EVENT
Blizzard Entertainment launched the first version of *WoW* in North America on November 23, 2004, and released regional versions the following year. Blizzard's Chinese representative, The9 Limited, released a simplified Chinese character version for open testing on April 26, 2005; its Taiwanese counterpart, Game First, released a traditional Chinese character version on October 5 of that same year for players in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau. Except for linguistic interfaces and minor cosmetic variations,[7] *WoW* versions are essentially the same worldwide. However, geographic segregation means that modular adjustments are required in terms of server infrastructure. Thus, American players are assigned to the U.S. server group, players from Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan are assigned to the "TW" server group, and so on.

Both companies released game content on the same schedule between October 2005 and April 2007. Most players simply used servers in their own countries, but a small number of Chinese players paid "tourist" visits to TW servers. Some visitors documented their visits on the official Taiwanese *WoW* forum and various Chinese chat boards, using titles such as "My Thirteen-day Experience on a TW Server" and "A Comparison of Taiwan Servers and National Servers."[8] These written accounts had the same tone as international travelers sharing their experiences and cultural insights from visiting a foreign country in person. Hostile comments and arguments were rare.

The Burning Crusade Rush—A Visible Minority in "the 70s"

In January of 2007, Blizzard released its first *WoW* expansion set, *The Burning Crusade* (TBC), containing what was considered breakthrough content. Since the highest level a character could achieve in the new game version was 70 (compared to the previous 60), this era is referred to by many *WoW* players as "the 70s." Blizzard required its regional operators to upgrade server hardware to support the updated content in order to earn rights to release new patches. Game First made the adjustments and quickly released TBC on Taiwanese servers, but the Chinese operator was hesitant about investing in new equipment, in great part due to Chinese government policies, a lengthy approval process for imported games, and an emphasis on "harmonious-society-oriented" game content.[9]

Some impatient Chinese players started migrating to TW servers. A handful posted firsthand information (e.g., game-related statistics and screen shots) on Chinese game forums, thereby encouraging more players to migrate. Unfortunately, a large number made the jump during the summer school break in Taiwan, triggering server overloads, long log-on queues, and lags in gameplay. Many Taiwanese players blamed "invading" Chinese for these inconveniences, made worse by the fact that some Chinese players ignored or challenged Taiwanese online social order and gaming culture. A significant number of Chinese players flooded public channels with messages, failed to wait for their proper turn in game order, failed to extend the common courtesy of saying "Hello" upon joining a team, or engaged in impolite conversation—all considered infractions of both gaming literacy and cultural sophistication. Gaming quality was compromised by such activities as hiring players to level up characters, or exchanging game currency for real money and vice versa. Taiwanese players considered these acts as direct consequences of allowing large numbers of Chinese players to use Taiwanese servers. Some Chinese players with more experience using TW servers agreed with such criticisms, and posted their comments and suggestions for "new immigrants" from China. They tried to explain differences in Chinese and Taiwanese gaming cultures, and encouraged their fellow migrants to respect and follow host country customs.

Game First eventually responded to the overloading problem by increasing the number of TW servers. It is questionable whether such an investment was worthwhile, since the TBC rush lasted for only a few months. When The9 Limited released a mainland Chinese version of TBC in September of 2007, the large majority of migrant Chinese players immediately returned to their local servers, giving some TW servers the appearance of game world ghost towns. Game First responded by merging and eliminating servers to maintain profitability. Once again, Taiwanese players blamed their Chinese counterparts for problems associated with this scaling-back process, using terms such as "locust plague" to describe their predicament.[10]

The Wrath of the Lich King Rush in "the 80s"

(1) Collective immigration

Blizzard released its second *WoW* expansion pack, *Wrath of the Lich King* (WLK), on November 13, 2008. TW servers introduced a local version five days later, but The9 Limited refused to announce a release date. It became the target of rumors that it was having problems renewing its contract with Blizzard. During three months of CN server problems, another wave of Chinese players migrated to TW servers during the first half of 2009. This time Game First was prepared, so when The9 Limited lost its license on June 7, the Taiwanese company immediately welcomed players to register accounts on five new TW servers through a Chinese IP.[11]

The main difference between the TBC and WLK rushes was that in the second, Chinese players migrated collectively, with many player guilds moving intact. In addition to expressing simple disappointment about the delayed launch of the new expansion on CN servers, some achievement-oriented guilds did not want to delay their attempts to earn international fame by becoming the first to defeat certain game bosses. They therefore recruited members who were willing to migrate to a TW server to cope with these problems.[12] As

part of this movement, a large number of individual players living in China went searching for recruitment posts from Chinese guilds that were already located on TW servers—a strategy they called "seeking relatives and depending on them."

It appears that the majority of Taiwanese players felt renewed resentment toward a new "locust invasion," and once again started complaining that Chinese players did not respect the existing Taiwanese game culture. Even worse, they felt that the new wave of Chinese players was dominating the Taiwan servers and moving the local game culture in a wrong direction. Since the new wave of WLK immigrants was much larger, so were the queuing and lagging problems. On many occasions Chinese players outnumbered Taiwanese players, resulting in exceptionally large changes in the local gaming environment. Public channels were filled with new and incomprehensible jargon and acronyms, and the use of simplified characters began causing problems on game interfaces programmed to use classical Chinese characters. Taiwanese players also complained about Chinese players cheating in order to collect game currency, exploiting game design loopholes, and generally acting aggressively as part of a money-oriented mindset. There was a sharp increase in the number of quarrels on public channels concerning national/ethnic identities and cross-strait conflicts.

(2) Decisions to stay and live on TW servers

In September 2009, Blizzard signed an agreement with a new Chinese operator, NetEase, and CN servers resumed operations. However, due to content regulations for imported games and internal competition for control between two government bureaucracies, NetEase was forced to continue using the outdated (by one year) TBC version of *WoW*.[13] By the time Blizzard announced the release of its newest *WoW* expansion pack (3.3) in December of 2009, the majority of Chinese players had given up hope for returning to CN servers and decided to become the online equivalents of resident aliens.

As the WLK immigration wave stabilized, at the end of 2009 Game First announced that it would begin freezing accounts that were lagging in terms of making payments or with no payment histories, effectively blocking new players in China from using TW servers. This move stabilized the ratio of Chinese to Taiwanese players. Taiwanese players were increasingly acknowledging the number of Chinese immigrants who had become "permanent residents," and accepting the reality that Game First was not going to do anything to stop the incoming population. A significant number of Taiwanese players looked for ways to boycott or take control of their indigenous gaming environment. Their actions included filing complaints with game masters about specific players who were guilty of flooding public channels, using a consumer ombudsman to challenge Game First in terms of contract violations and service quality,[14] and mobilizing players to send protest letters to Blizzard complaining that Game First was ignoring their customer rights, among other problems.

Throughout, the main complaint among Taiwanese players was that Chinese immigrants were not willing to respect and adjust to local game culture. Specific issues included the use of simplified characters and Pinyin[15] acronyms on public channels, and the assumption of homogeneous Chinese audiences when asking questions such as "Which networking agency are you using?" Taiwanese players complained about feeling disrespect as "the guests became the hosts." One interviewee, who had gaming experience on American and Japanese servers, told us that "respect for existing play language, culture, and interactional themes" should be viewed as central principles by migrating players. Chinese players were commonly considered too aggressive in terms of finger pointing, their "speed-up speed-up" approach, and their tendency to flood public channels with impolite messages. The absence of greetings during interpersonal interactions was viewed as a "lack of common decency."

(3) Stay here or go home?

On August 31, 2010, 19 months following the US launch of WLK, NetEase finally received government approval of game content, giving Chinese players a choice of staying with TW servers or moving back to CN servers. Some Chinese players described TW servers as being neither friendly nor stable—there was the

potential of having their foreign IPs blocked and losing all of their accumulated game rewards. However, a larger number of Chinese players—generally better off economically and more concerned with gaming achievements—had no confidence in CN servers. They believed TW servers were faster in implementing expansions, and that TW players were more polite; they therefore preferred becoming "permanent alien residents."[16] Another segment kept one gaming foot in China and one in Taiwan until TW servers released the new *Cataclysm WoW* expansion in December 2010, when they felt the need to choose one or the other due to costs.[17]

Player flow between Chinese and Taiwanese *WoW* servers at different stages is summarized in Figure 1.
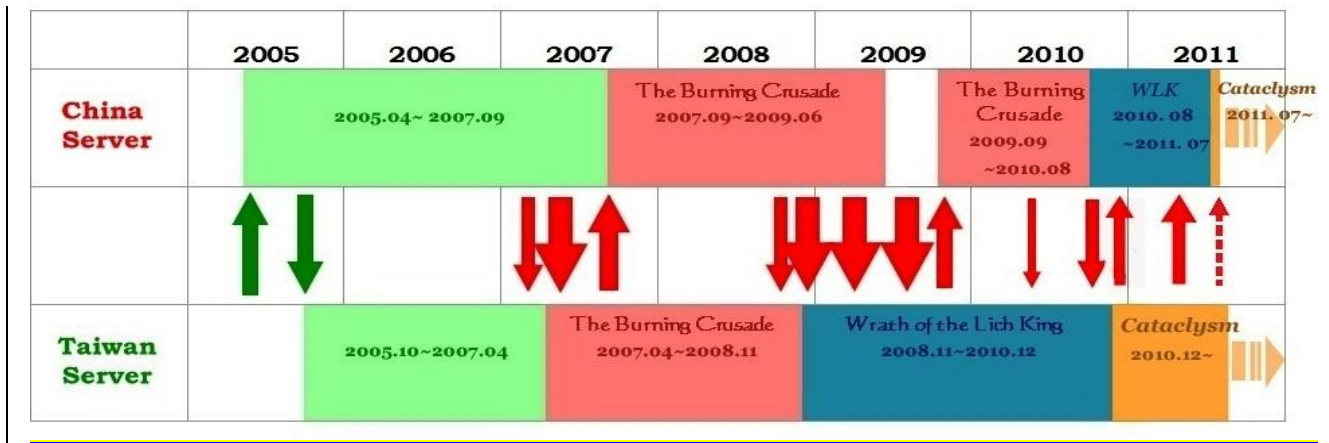

Figure 1. History of player migration between Chinese and Taiwanese *WoW* servers.

PRIMARY FINDINGS

As online gamer immigration developed, we observed how political elements emerged in the contexts of game architecture and administrative control. We also observed political interactions and conflicts between cross-Taiwan Strait players through overt and covert interactional channels. In this section we will describe three major categories of political interaction.

A. Political interactions in gaming—expression, conflict, and looking-on

(1) Political identity on display—satire as part of game worlds

Chinese have a long history of using homophones to comment on public figures and situations. We found many examples of players expressing their political opinions through the sarcastic use of game-related character names and commentaries. It is our understanding that Game First forbids the use of the names of major political figures such as former Taiwan president Chen Shui-Bian (陳水扁) or current president Ma Ying-Jiou (馬英九), therefore players must use homophones when referring to them. Examples include "Hu Jintao" (胡錦濤), the current president of China, "Was A-Bian Wrong?" (阿匾錯了嗎),[18] "Wu Shu-Jen Stands Up" (吳淑珍站起來),[19] "Li Gang is my son" (李剛是我兒子),[20] and "River Crab" (河蟹) and "Grass Mud Horse" (草泥馬), the last two referring to Chinese Internet control policies.[21] If nothing else, these names and comments stimulate curiosity on the part of players who have little understanding about political affairs on either side of the Taiwan Strait. We noticed a range of intensity, from teasing comments about respective domestic issues (generally friendly and curious) to strong assertions regarding national ideologies and political identities (strongly declarative, sometimes provoking and antagonistic). Examples of the second category include character IDs such as "Taiwan Belongs to China" and "Long Live the Taiwan Nation" (or "Long Live Taiwan"). We also observed exceptionally hostile character names such as "Kill 426" (a Taiwanese homophone for "Damn Chinese"), "Chink Pig," and

"Taiwan Wimps." Another popular ID is the highly sensitive term "Falun Gong" (法輪功).[22] Since these names tend to provoke strong emotions, they are more likely to be found during low-level game activities instead of organized raids and other high-level guild activities. Regardless, they are now a regular part of the landscape, noticeable by anyone who spends time playing on Taiwanese *WoW* servers, thus injecting strong real-world political sensibilities into a fantasy game world.

(2) Open nationalist confrontations

Political confrontations on public channels represent a separate type of political interaction. These conflicts were particularly numerous and vehement during the early stages of the WLK rush, since it was the first time for so many players from both sides of the Strait to come into contact with each other on a daily basis. The majority of clashes began with Taiwanese players openly complaining about the disregard that Chinese players showed for local game culture on public channels. Typical comments were "Please don't flood the channel," "Don't use simplified characters," and "Don't use Pinyin acronyms." In some cases, Taiwanese players accused Chinese raid leaders of stealing team rewards. Chinese players occasionally responded with comments such as "Don't Taiwanese players also use their own mandarin phonetic symbols [bopomofo]?"[23] "Aren't Taiwanese players under the strong influence of Japanese culture?" "How can you be so sure the raid leader came from China?" and "Don't paint everyone with the same brush." Occasionally these disputes elevated to crude exchanges such as "Chink pigs go back to China" and "We are here to colonize you." These quarrels had exceptionally long lives and attracted dozens of commenters. We noticed that some players made attempts to cool emotions—for instance, suggesting "Let the game be a game, don't discuss politics during the game," but they were generally unsuccessful.

Due to their profits from the large influx of Chinese players, Game First was not willing to let these political exchanges continue. In early 2010 it posted an announcement on its *WoW* log-on page that "improper political opinions" were no longer permitted on public channels, and that players who violated the new rule were in danger of having their accounts suspended. The announcement triggered protests by Taiwanese players about speech censorship,[24] with some organizing a letter-writing campaign to Blizzard to express their disappointment.[25] But there was a sharp decline in the number of open conflicts on public channels. New quarrels attracted responses such as "No politics in games!" and "Not again!" Most died quickly.

(3) Private exchanges of viewpoints

While strangers are limited to public channels in game worlds, acquaintances can use other, more private ways for communicating—for example, quest-oriented team or raid channels, members-only guild channels, and chat channels created by players for their own social networks. Political topics are considered sensitive and something to be avoided, since they can break relationships and deter cooperation. However, as trust builds within a specific group, players may feel comfortable bringing up political topics. We occasionally observed Chinese player complaints about government monitoring and control, and critical comments about China's "harmonious society" policy—for example, "We Chinese players have minds that are too weak to see the skeletons of dead people!" (meaning that skeletons would be covered with skin and muscle on CN servers).

We found evidence of restrained yet honest exchanges of political opinions on one-to-one private channels. Several of our Taiwanese interviewees said that they had relatively close friendships with individual Chinese players who privately expressed curiosity about Taiwan's democratic system and election culture, asking questions such as "Is it really OK to publicly criticize your leaders?" Some comments indicated naïveté about outside world perspectives of China—for instance, "No way that all of you have heard of Falun Gong!" One interviewee told us that when she talked about Taiwan's political and election cultures, her audience was really excited and asked for more stories. She told them, "Welcome to Taiwan, with freedom of speech."

B. Factors affecting virtual cross-border interactions

We found that online games are providing an alternative space for cross-border interactions. Similar to their real-world equivalents, virtual political interactions are shaped by communication channels, social contexts, and structural conditions. We consider three factors to be the most significant.

(1) Seeking segregation based on linguistic and cultural differences

East Asian residents are different in terms of linguistic dialect, use of simplified or classical Chinese characters, and historical and cultural developments in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Mainland China. All of these factors provide clear clues for identifying a *WoW* player's nationality, and provide motivation for segregating practices. Many of the Taiwanese players we interviewed mentioned linguistic factors: they use bopomofo phonetic symbols while Chinese use Pinyin terms; Taiwanese follow American gaming culture, and use English terms and acronyms (e.g., DK for "death knight," oom for "out of mana"), while Chinese use Pinyin acronyms (e.g., FS [fa-shi] for "mage," LR [lie-ren] for "hunter," and FM [fu-mo] for "enchanting"). Taiwanese players believe that interactional courtesy is important, while Chinese players emphasize gaming efficiency. Almost all of our interviewees described Chinese players as focused on competition and extremely ambitious. When describing collective behaviors associated with leveling up, strengthening equipment, and conquering new enemies, one of our informants expressed the opinion, "It seems that their entire nation wants to get strong, and feels that it must do so quickly." Another commented, "Chinese players prefer names that express their characters' skills, such as 'The Kingslayer.'[26] In comparison, even when they possess the same achievements, Taiwanese prefer less aggressive titles, such as 'Fool For Love'[27] or 'The Seeker.'"[28]

It is interesting to note that our informants expressed much less confidence in their ability to identify Hong Kong players, perhaps due to the common belief that Hong Kong players have a game culture that is similar to theirs. Consequently, our interviewees said that they relied on voice channels to identify Hong Kong accents. In other respects, Taiwanese players generally have neutral feelings toward Hong Kong players.[29]

We noticed that after identifying visible behavioral features and having unpleasant contact experiences, many Taiwanese players tried to eliminate, limit, or strictly control future contacts by posting large numbers of complaints on game bulletin boards, protesting to Game First, appealing to Blizzard, or requesting help from consumer ombudsmen to prevent large invasions of Chinese players. Rumors and urban legends circulated among Taiwanese players. For example, there was a story circulating that Chinese players could be forced out of networks by typing the message, "Falun Gong is great" on public channels, since the Chinese government was sure to see it and respond by eliminating all Chinese players on that game map.[30] A more subtle segregation strategy consisted of stating preferences for Taiwanese or Chinese players in guild recruitment announcements. Instead of openly stating a preference, a Taiwanese looking to form a guild might state, "Those interested, please type in the secret code ㄅㄆㄇ" —the first three symbols of the bopomofo phonetic system that is used in Taiwan; few Chinese players have the software required to type these symbols on their keyboards. In short, shared spoken language is the most important reason and critical condition for Chinese players to immigrate to TW servers. However, differences in written language and cultural habits cause separation and distinctions between "foreigners" and "natives" after immigration.

(2) Player types and positions affecting contact experience tracks

Despite the above background, it would be wrong to describe all Taiwanese players as having homogeneous attitudes toward Chinese players. We observed that player type affects player development route, thus shaping structural power positions and ways of experiencing game life. The core *WoW* activities of exploring dungeons and executing raids require groups of players working together. Players with rich social networks can minimize their contacts with undesirable outsiders, while still meeting the collaborative requirements of the game. However, there is a large group of leisure-oriented players who do not have extensive networks, thus forcing them to join teams consisting of unknown players. Collaboration generally ends when tasks are finished, which may not give players sufficient time for changing previously held

prejudices or for promoting mutual understanding. This explains our field observations and interview data indicating the most negative anti-Chinese attitudes among Taiwanese players who lack social network resources. They frequently complained about being rushed, bluffed, criticized, and treated impolitely by Chinese players. We heard many claims of cheating by Chinese players in randomly composed dungeon teams or short-lived raid teams.

In contrast, we noticed much different attitudes among Taiwanese players who managed the most well-known guilds, whose members have some of the highest ranks, and whose interests are focused on raid progress. Unlike the power structures of short-lived teams, high-end guilds tend to have clearly hierarchical structures, with managers at the top wielding great power in recruiting and regulating members. Chinese players who are allowed to join these guilds (which are dominated by Taiwanese) are likely to obey guild rules and accept the existing interactional culture. As a result, it is easier for them to feel acceptance from Taiwanese players and to develop more open and positive relationships.

(3) Effects of population ratios on collective dynamics

We found that the Taiwanese-to-Chinese player ratio plays a critical role in shaping interactional and gaming behaviors. Since Game First does not release this kind of information, we had to use indirect evidence from the early stage of the TBC rush. We determined that although there were many Chinese immigrants, they were still in the minority. This changed with the WLK rush, due to the exceptionally long delay in providing the game expansion on CN servers.[31] Chinese players were no longer like tourists who were self-conscious about their language and behaviors, and who therefore tried to maintain low profiles.

During the TBC rush, Chinese players developed a minority/majority relationship with Taiwanese players. Many immigrated to TW servers in groups or guilds, thus bringing their own social networks and becoming visible and identifiable. However, they still maintained relatively low profiles in public, with some Chinese guild managers officially asking their members to fit in with local game culture, and to use traditional Chinese characters for communication. Some of our interviewees expressed appreciation for these efforts to blend in. When asked to compare Chinese players in the TBC and WLK rushes, they described the former as relatively polite guests and good playmates willing to respect their host culture. In contrast, they described Chinese players during the latter rush as annoying and lacking cultural literacy.

Following the WLK rush, players on both sides of the Taiwan Strait were fully aware that the number of Chinese players had grown immensely (although the situation varied on different servers). This development allowed many Chinese players to view themselves as "surrounded by fellow Chinese players," and therefore feel less of a need to blend in with the local culture. We heard one story of Taiwanese players protesting the use of simplified characters or Pinyin acronyms; some Chinese players arrogantly responded with the comment, "Oh, do we still have Taiwanese here?" The increasing use of simplified characters and Pinyin acronyms gave many Taiwanese players the feeling that "foreigners are everywhere," and that they had lost their host status. A significant number chose to remain silent during public debates.

IMPACTS AND MEANINGS

A. Emergence of an integrated and hybrid culture

Following Lindtner et al.'s (2008) suggestion to expand the existing physical-digital hybrid concept, we found many examples of interplay between game and physical worlds. They emphasized the tendencies of Chinese *WoW* players to gather around gaming machines in Internet cafés, getting together with friends, and using instant messaging to maintain a third social network—in other words, having two worlds interact at a player's "client end" or "near end." In this study we emphasized interaction at the "server end" or player's "far end." What TW servers provide to Chinese immigrants is not hardware (e.g., buildings and roads), but a game culture shaped by Taiwanese players. Thus, Chinese players need to negotiate two sets of norms: how to play on a TW server, and how to behave in their host society. The hybrid cultural ecology concept also

applies to Taiwanese players, who compare their game world experiences with Chinese against information they receive in the physical world, using both sources to revise their perceptions of Chinese collective behavior or Chinese culture.

Whether based on rational decisions to keep games running smoothly, or on the blending that occurs following a long period of contact, both Chinese and Taiwanese game cultures have evolved to produce a hybrid. In general, there is less frequent use of simplified characters, but a few specific characters have been adopted and are now used regularly by Taiwanese players. Some Chinese players are using Taiwanese terms such as 拍謝 ("sorry") and 便當 ("lunchbox"), and some Taiwanese are using mainland terms such as 杯具 (a homophone of 悲劇, "tragedy") and 貌似 ("It looks like"), as well as Pinyin acronyms such as "YY" for 英勇, a common gaming skill. Even without the presence of Chinese players, Taiwanese might use such vocabulary in a natural way.

Another complaint we heard had to do with courtesy regarding dropped equipment within randomly composed and short-lived dungeon teams. In the past, the default option among Taiwanese players was "Greed," meaning, "I would like to have that piece of equipment if no one needs it." However, the Chinese default is "Need," which generally expresses a higher priority than "Greed." According to one interviewee, "I no longer hit the 'Greed' button immediately after equipment is dropped, I wait to see what others choose. If you hit 'Greed' I'll follow with the same, if you hit 'Need' for something you don't really need, I'll follow with 'Need,' too."

B. New understanding through daily and long-term contact

When looking at the implications of new social spaces created by MMOGs and the immigration of Chinese *WoW* players to Taiwanese servers, we witnessed two meaningful and evolving phenomena above all others. First, the ongoing worlds of MMOGs create opportunities for daily and long-term collaborative contacts among individuals who in the past had no interaction opportunities. The *WoW* game architecture requires players to cooperate, which distinguishes it from other interactive platforms. Second, long-term cross-Strait player contacts encourage introspection and effort to find new ways to understand "foreigners." The comprehension and understanding induced by this form of game world telepresence can be either positive or negative, but in either case it challenges contact models based on traditional channels, both online and off.

We met young Taiwanese players with no international travel experience and no opportunities to meet Mainland Chinese who described their online "personal experiences" as helping them to form and modify their political values and attitudes toward Chinese. In some cases they explained how such "real" or "personal" contact experiences reshaped political views that they had adopted from their parents. In some cases, their experiences led to clashes with pro-China parents. In other cases, ongoing interactions have led to the establishment of more sophisticated understanding and introspection about Taiwan's political environment. During interviews and when reading posts on game bulletin boards, we occasionally noted critical comments that were tempered by views that the categories of "Chinese" and "Taiwanese" are full of internal differences. Some players described themselves as becoming aware that their viewpoints revealed "statistical discrimination"—that is, they were aware that Chinese players are more likely to behave in certain ways in groups, and that such actions should not be used as a standard for judging individual Chinese players. In addition to enhancing mutual understanding, such contacts also provide alternative non-official channels for looking at the world outside of Taiwan, thereby stimulating analyses about their own country's political situation. Many Chinese players expressed private curiosity about how the outside world views their homeland—note the surprise expressed in the above-mentioned comment, "You all know Falun Gong!" Opportunities for such awareness are fewer in China's political environment. In contrast, some Taiwanese accept Chinese influences, others reject them. One player reacted to the lack of willingness to block Chinese influences by stating, "This contact may be inevitable, but may it never happen in our real world!"

C. The power of virtual world social design—the latest episode

In August of 2009, Blizzard announced its third *WoW* expansion set, entitled *Cataclysm*. It was launched on European and American servers on December 7, 2010, and on Taiwanese servers two days later. NetEase released the Chinese version on July 12, 2011.[32] The new version brought dramatic changes to game ecology, with a new guild advancement system strongly promoting the functionality of player guilds, with significant impacts on gaming organization and player social life. A new "guild point" system is based on collective contributions from members—that is, an entire guild can level up after it accumulates enough points. Higher-level guilds possess highly desirable functions or skills such as increased leveling speeds for its members, increased speed for resource collection and mobility, the ability to instantly move entire teams to new locations, and team reincarnation. Players who do not join a guild are denied access to many types of game equipment. The two most obvious results are (a) small guilds have generally disappeared while large guilds have prospered, thus marginalizing casual players; and (b) large guilds find it easy to form dungeon or raid teams from their own memberships, thus eliminating the need to deal with unknown strangers.

These changes have strongly impacted the structure of Taiwanese-Chinese player interactions, with achievement-oriented guilds tending to recruit members based on existing social relationships, which are more likely to consist of players from one country. Guilds that already had mixed memberships tended to maintain their compositions, but frequent and spontaneous interactions among random groups outside of guilds have largely disappeared. In short, the new guild-centered features found in *Cataclysm* have increased player segregation.

This is the latest example of Lessig's (1999) code-as-law concept and Taylor's (2004) assertion that virtual world mechanisms and player interactions are regulated by machine architectures and defined by machine code. It is also an example of Castronova's (2007) description of policy processes in virtual worlds as highly efficient—when designers have an idea, they can put it into a new version of a game and refine it as needed. Even though players possess strong and autonomous power in game worlds, they have no choice but to negotiate with and adapt to alignments embedded in game systems by an outside controlling power.

CONCLUSION: The meaning of MMOGs as a new space

Online diasporas are triggering new community forms and political practices, altering ways of political participation, and challenging traditional borders and official narratives. In the physical world, migrants are using digital media to maintain connections with their societies of origin and to make new ties in their host societies—for example, posting messages under headings such as "Hello to Anyone In Alberta From Central Newfoundland" (Hiller & Franz, 2004). However, we observed very few instances of such calls for connection, since Chinese players are capable of participating in Taiwanese *WoW* player cultures while surrounded by their fellow countrymen in Chinese Internet cafés (Lindtner et al., 2008).

Another difference between real-world and online immigrants is their sense of belonging to their homeland. According to Hiller and Franz (2004), computer-mediated communication builds an online community from a generalized sense of belonging, which is based on a group identity and a territorial homeland, and reinforces it through online interaction. A key issue regarding online immigration is whether Chinese players identify with their CN servers. In this respect, comparisons between places of origin and places of residence are cultural (based on the characteristics of other players on the same server) rather than geometric (based on the landscape design of a game). Except for alterations in content required by Chinese harmony policies, game landscapes are essentially the same, meaning that for Chinese immigrant players, their sense of out-migration largely depends on their identification with the gaming cultures found on CN servers and their relationships with fellow Chinese players. We found that most Chinese players do not identify strongly with their own player cultures, thus making friendships the most important factor. Homesickness and nostalgia do not exist, since old ties can be sustained by collective migration or replaced by new ties. In contrast, the effects of Chinese in-migration on Taiwanese players are strong. Identity emerges from cross-Strait contact,

but in terms of sovereignty and locality it only occurs on TW servers, giving Taiwanese players a sense that "these are *our* servers," and Chinese players a sense of "these servers really belong to someone else."

MMOGs represent a unique interactional platform, with implications that differ from those associated with Facebook, Twitter, Plunk, blogs, or bulletin board systems. There are three primary differences: (a) in addition to interactions, online games provide material for contacts and mutual understanding, which are different from the "pure opinions" expressed on other platforms and in forums; (b) there is an abundance of different types of fractures and timeouts between gaming activities (e.g., time spent looking for teammates or waiting for teams to assemble) that resemble real-life activities; and (c) online games preserve anonymity and pseudonymity for interactions between strangers, as opposed to the construction of social networks based on offline acquaintances. This has advantages in terms of avoiding speech censorship and political suppression.

In the fantasy space of MMOGs, players bring their cultural habits and political views from their physical worlds. However, since real-world politics (including the power associated with business profits) do not fully control game worlds, they still retain meaning as spaces that support border crossing with little or no control, contacts between foreigners, and opportunities to experience different cultures. We found plenty of evidence indicating Chinese awareness of ever-present political control, but from time to time we noticed players willing to openly express their opinions. This may be a result of the idea, "I am not on a CN server," or a belief that in-game dataflow might be too large to monitor, but further evidence is needed for confirmation.

Of course, migration without physical presence is not without constraints. Daily and intense contacts between Chinese and Taiwanese *WoW* players are possible partly because they are sharing the same language and time zone. Moreover, such contacts are shaped by structural conditions tied to real-world politics as well as societal, cultural, and historical factors, therefore the phenomena described in this paper are not possible in other scenarios and contexts. Nonetheless, even though individuals may not be able to see the physical landscape of other worlds in MMOG interactive spaces, they can still sense other cultures and the potential for interacting with other people in those cultures. Population movement via telepresence and part-time residency in foreign spaces supports the idea that entering a MMOG world is not, as many believe, "escaping from reality and entering a virtual fantasy space." Instead, it represents "entering a new space" in which the influences of political and social power tied to physical location are reduced.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://www.gamer.com.tw/.

[2] http://www.gamebase.com.tw/.

[3] http://bbs.ngacn.cc/. NGA is the most popular game forum in China. It keeps all past data since the forum launched.

[4] http://www.duowan.com/.

[5] "The Mainlanders" (大陸人) is one of the most common terms used in Taiwan to refer to people in China.

[6] Due to this criteria for recruitment, our interviewees all fall in the age categories of young adult and adult; no adolescents in the poll of our interviews.

[7] Skeletons are not shown in the Mainland Chinese version to reduce the risk of offending local cultural sensibilities. Otherwise, all game mechanics are identical. In the rest of the world, the only differences have to do with font pacts for displaying text in different languages.

[8] Chinese players were the first to use the term "national servers" (國服); it was later adopted by Taiwanese players, who were accustomed to using "Taiwan version" and "Mainland version."

[9] To make changes such as removing skeletons requires huge amounts of manpower and time to revise images, videos, and text content.

[10] "WoW's Dilemma in China: A Game Between MC and GAPP." Retrieved from http://mmdays.com/2009/10/14/wow_at_china/.

[11] Officially, Chinese IPs were not supposed to appear in the techno region of Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, but they were let through. This "open border" period lasted until July 7, 2009, when Game First temporarily blocked new accounts. In December of 2009, Game First announced that accounts with no payment records would not be activated. Retrieved from: http://twt.zhreader.com/2009/07/blog-post_4921.html.

[12] There were also many recruitment posts on Chinese game bulletin boards. More often than not, they mentioned that the guild was Chinese-based, but had migrated to a TW server.

[13] China's Ministry of Culture (MC) and General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) were divided over WoW. The MC approved WoW for the Chinese market, but GAPP considered it an illegal product because its content had not been officially reviewed.

[14] Consumer ombudsmen responded by asking Game First to solve the log-on queuing problem, under threat of being fined. Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FQDQhTF1F7A.

[15] Pinyin is the official Mainland Chinese system for transcribing Chinese characters into phonetic spelling.

[16] A story with the headline "WoW Leveled Up, Wandering Around or Coming Home?" appeared in the *GuangzhouDaily* on September 2, 2010. It included a survey of opinions. "Give up TW servers and come home right away" received 912 votes (341%), "the future of CN servers remains uncertain, keep playing on TW servers" received 904 votes (33.8%), and "I have no opinion on this issue, just watch the situation develop" received 862 votes (32.2%).

[17] See a discussion thread under the title, "TW servers are like drugs, even if you quit, you cannot stop thinking about them" on the NGA AzerothWoW forum: Retrieved from http://bbs.ngacn.cc/read.php?tid=3886551&_fp=7.

[18] *A-Bian* is a popular nickname for Taiwan's former President Chen Shui-Bian, who is currently serving a nineteen-year sentence for two bribery convictions. The fictitious character has a pet named "Tu Cheng" (土城看守所), which is also the name of a detention center where Chen was held for a period.

[19] Wu Shu-Jen, the wife of former President Chen Shui-Bian, was sentenced to a 17.5-year prison term for perjury regarding political corruption during her husband's presidency. Wu was paralyzed in a car accident in 1985.

[20] On October 16, 2010, a car accident at Hebei University resulted in the death of one female student and severe injury to another. The young drunk driver did not stop, but was quickly captured by school security guards and angry students. Instead of showing remorse, the driver, Li Qiming, yelled out, "Go ahead and sue me, my father is Li Gang!" Li Gang is a Deputy Chief of the local Security Bureau. "My Father is Li Gang!" has since become one of the most popular catchphrases on the Chinese Internet.

[21] "River Crab"（河蟹）is a homophone for "harmony"（和諧）in Chinese, referring to the official harmonious-society-oriented Internet-content control policy. "Grass Mud Horse"（草泥馬）is a homophone for a common curse that is considered tame, yet is forbidden on the CN Internet. According to WoW's Armory statistics, there are fourteen characters named 河蟹, and fourteen named 草泥馬 on its servers.

[22] *Falun Gong* (or *Falun Dafa*, the official name used by its followers) is a new religious/spiritual movement arises in China in the 1990s. Since its fast growing number of adherents, *Falun Gong* has been increasingly viewed as a potential threat by the Communist Party of China. In July 1999, Falun Gong was officially banned in China and a nationwide crackdown followed. In the years since the suppression campaign began, Falun Gong adherents worldwide have emerged as a prominent voice in the Chinese dissident community.

[23] *Chu-yin*, also known as *bopomofo*, is a system of phonetic symbols for transcribing Mandarin Chinese. In Taiwan, this system is widely used as an educational tool and Chinese computer input method.

[24] Since "improper comments" and "insulting political comments" lack clear definitions, Taiwanese players complain that Game First is suppressing their freedom of speech. Retrieved from http://www.metamuse.net/2010/02/blog-post.html.

[25] Retrieved from http://www.gamebase.com.tw/forum/4715/topic/88232173/1.

[26] These are the titles of raid achievements in *Fall of the Lich King*.

[27] To earn the *Fool For Love* title, players must complete the following achievements: *Love Is In the Air—Heartmender; Flirt With Disaster; Nearest and Dearest; Nation of Adoration; Sweet Tooth; My Love is Like a Red, Red Rose; Shafted!; Lonely; The Rockets Pink Glare; Fistful of Love; Be Mine; and I Pitied The Fool.*

[28] A player needs to complete 3,000 quests to receive this title.

[29] The visibility of Macau players is even lower. Among all of our interviewees, only one (a staff member for a major guild) mentioned Macau players.

[30] We tested this theory personally, and found that it is not true.

[31] We learned privately from a Game First manager that about half of its players at the time were Mainland Chinese. One of our interviewees gave an estimate of 60% or more, based on his long experience in cross-server warfield play.

[32] http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%AD%94%E5%85%BD%E4%B8%96%E7%95%8C

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