LFG: Looking for Global (and Local) in Online Gaming

by

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Abstract

‘Global’ and ‘Local’ are prevailing terms used to indicate the varying and often opposing characteristics of different subjects in the context of globalisation. Yet what is meant by their use is multifaceted and not discrete: ‘global’ and ‘local’ apply different according to what is being examined. To demonstrate and clarify the diversity of globals and locals, this paper investigates how three such uses apply to online computer games. Online games embody many clearly identifiable aspects of globalisation, such as the compression of space and time, the fear of alienation of communities and individuals, and the question of the role of the nation-state. These three aspects of online games will be considered in terms of ‘global’ and ‘local’.

Keywords: globalisation, global, local, online gaming, MMORPG, China

For Jan & William Johnston,

And for E.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

What is globalisation? The word undeniably captures the essence of manifold forces that shape and reshape our contemporary world. But like 'culture' or 'civilisation', 'globalisation' has become a catch-all idea that expresses many different things to many different people. In *What is Globalization?*, Ulrich Beck highlights its fickle functionality as "one of the most rarely defined, the most nebulous and misunderstood, as well as the most politically effective" terms used to describe the different processes and effects that define our world (Beck, 2001: 19). Precisely because it captures many processes and effects, it can be used as a reference point for almost anybody: from a house-husband to an economist, community leader to media mogul. Globalisation triangulates our lives and work in the wider world around us. But an economist interpellating his or her transnational market flow data may employ one understanding of globalisation, and a community leader coordinating domestic or international protests against the business practices of a multinational corporation (MNC) will likely use quite a different reference point of globalisation. The stepping-off point for this research project was how to consider the multi-faceted nature of globalisation—how different definitions and terms of globalisation are applied, and where/how we might find clarity. But rather than keep this investigation purely theoretical, I wanted to ground it in a practical example. Consider the dominant tropes of globalisation. For many people, albeit not all, globalisation describes the global economic phenomenon of international, interpenetrating markets and commodity flows overseen by MNCs. Such interconnection is facilitated by the advance and spread of information-communication technologies (ICTs), enabling data to travel around the world at unprecedented speeds and cut across time and space. Finally, thanks to the breadth of ICT penetration, people from all around the world can associate and connect beyond their local communities and nation-states. It is with these three predominant, interlinked aspects of globalisation that I determined that the entertainment

and cultural phenomenon of online gaming could provide a useful example for advancing our understanding of globalisation.

First and foremost, those readers who are unfamiliar with video games may find this a curious leap: globalisation and gaming? What's the connection? Put bluntly, "[v]ideo games are a global phenomenon. Half a billion people world-wide play games online at least an hour a day" (Aslinger and Huntemann, 2013: 1). Being global—globally produced and globally played—games are naturally involved in processes of globalisation. There are international commodity flows including multipolar production hubs, from gaming giant Ubisoft's international offices across Shanghai, Paris and Montreal, to smaller scale networks of independent companies making games out of places like Việt Nam and Chile. The GameDevMap by Gaurav Mathur in Figure 1.1 shows us the multitude of regions and cities across the world where developers make games.

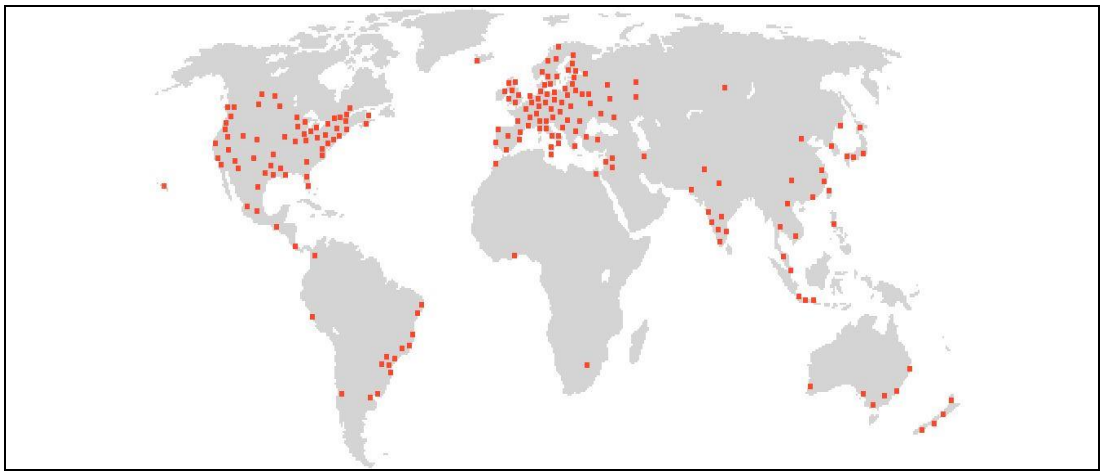

Figure 1

GameDevMap, © Gaurav Mathur. See www.gamedevmap.com for more information.

Then there are the gamers themselves, whom with the increased prevalence of network penetration have access to vast numbers of online and downloadable game titles. Moreover, gamers game together, either in the same room, on a Local Area Network (LAN) or even more so online. Massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs) may host millions of active players simultaneously. In short, online games are *a global economic*

phenomenon involving international flows of capital and multinational corporations, and they use technology to connect people beyond their physical communities, cities and nation-states. There are natural thematic links between globalisation and online gaming. Globalisation has changed the way games are made and the way they are played. More specifically these changes have occurred through aspects of political-economy, globalised culture and transnational cultural flows, and information-communication technology. Although tracking the relative courses and impacts of these is not my primary object, a preliminary understanding of these aspects will help to show how and why online games provide such a rich and important example of the forces and processes globalisation implies.

- The Political-Economic Aspect of Globalisation

This aspect of globalisation is primarily expressed as a *theoretical value* or set of theoretical values that demonstrate internationalisation (in terms of transnational market flows and cross-border communication) and liberalisation (in terms of the opening up and deregulation of markets) often at the expense of government agency and sovereignty (Scholte, 2008). For example, each year since 2002 the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology has published its KOF Index of Globalization. Based on various data—such as actual flows of goods, informational flows between people, and numbers of countries' high commissions and international delegations—the KOF Index ranks countries on a point-based system of globalisation. In 2013, Belgium was the overall most globalised country, scoring 92.30 on the index (ETHZ, 2013). In a political-economic sense, the processes globalisation suggests have been abstracted and reduced to numbers.

What is important about the political-economic aspect of globalisation to the present discussion is online games' potency to generate capital. Online games are a multibillion dollar industry (discussed later in more detail) that generates capital from the many millions who pay subscription fees to play, or purchase virtual items and upgrades with actual cash in order to enhance their play. Valerie Walkerdine explains that the "player is an embodied social and cultural fantasy which is at the very centre of global economies, multinational profits and the practices of playing" (Walkerdine, 2007: 137). Being at the centre of such global economies and MNCs and their profits, we can speak of the online

gamer and by extension the games she plays as subjects of political-economic theorisation. Hence if one definition of globalisation is “the process enabling financial and investment markets to operate internationally, largely as a result of deregulation and improved communications,” (Collins, 2014) online games are surely fit for study in this case. Frequently the products of MNCs, online games are global commodities developed and played thanks to improved communication technologies. This brings us to our next consideration, ICTs.

- The ICT Aspect of Globalisation

When we think of globalisation, the ability to cut across time and space via communication technologies comes to mind as quickly as do global markets. Indeed, the swarm of networks sending bits and bytes of information all around the world, the social networking tools we use to connect to new groups and people in far-flung places, and the ever growing penetration and integration of communication technologies in our everyday lives are all familiar touchstones with which we acknowledge that globalisation is effectively real and actually occurring. Globalisation pertaining to ICTs refers to the process by which the world becomes interlinked through networked connections. Similar to the political-economic aspect, it is both a process and effect: globalisation implies that people are connected through technology, and because people are increasingly connected through technology we use this as evidence to show we are experiencing globalisation. The year 2012 saw the Internet used by 2.4 billion people (Internet World Stats, 2014). While ICTs are comprised of more than the Internet, this is a powerful example of the worldwide reach and, indeed, the globalising interconnections made possible by technology. That just two years ago from the writing of this paper nearly one in every three persons *on Earth* was using the Internet, it is evident how globalisation and the Internet (representing ICTs) are closely associated to the point of equation.

ICTs pertain directly to online games. The name says it all: online games are played *online*; players connect via Internet to game servers that are located around the world and that serve as the platform where players collectively play. This technologically-produced collective play defines MMOs as a genre. Players share a broad base of knowledge—from skills and techniques to gain the edge in battle, to the lore of the game world—such that they operate together as what Henry Jenkins calls textual poachers

and fan cultures (Jenkins, 2006). Both labels emphasise that online gamers do not just passively consume games. They actively engage with each other and the games they play. They appropriate symbols and meanings native to the online game, and use these to create their own meanings. Online forum discussions, home-made pictures or videos with/about online game characters and iconography, 'game speak' (the emergent shorthand slang-language created and used by gamers), organising team play and formulating strategies to achieve goals are some of the ways that online game players produce culture. Games as a form of culture lead us to final aspect: the cultural.

- The Cultural Aspect of Globalisation

The fact that these games are global, experienced and appropriated and consumed by Korean teenagers and Icelandic 30-somethings alike, speaks to culture in a globalised context. Culture in the context of globalisation (shortened to 'cultural globalisation') has many implications. Cultural globalisation was once thought of as the spread of Western-style modernity to other reaches of the globe (Giddens 1990). Scholars like Herbert Schiller have described it as a form of imperialism—an homogenising force of capitalism expressing America's cultural domination of others (Schiller, 1976). More recently, the likes of Arjun Appadurai, Jan Pieterse and John Thomlinson have advanced yet more complex understandings of cultural globalisation. Allen and Sakamoto claim these writers argue that "what emerges through the process of globalization is not a uniform 'Global Culture', but increasing differences and complexity of locally inflected meanings due to hybridization and indigenization, which often contain conflicts and contradictions" (Allen and Sakamoto, 2007: 2). Such conflicts and contradictions are present in online gaming, as we shall see. With online gaming, it may be true that capitalism looms large, organising and engineering players' virtual fantasies, but it is also indisputable that gamers have found through online games a platform for personal expression and meaningful social activity. The technology mediating transnational capitalistic impulses also mediates innovative social connectivity and interactions—and all of these relationships are, as suggested, complex and rife with contradiction.

In summary, as a social and economic medium built on and experienced through ICTs, online games are highly relevant to globalisation. At once, they mediate social interactions and fan cultures against a background of transnational economics and the

operations of MNCs. I argue that the particular nexus of forces brought together in online gaming will serve well as an example through which to address concerns of globalisation. But exactly what concerns might MMOs help address? I will take this up in my research question, developed below.

1.1. Research Question: The Global and Local in Online Games

> *A young witch appears in a small, pastoral town. She wears very basic clothing, wields a rather unimpressive twig for her wand, and can cast only one spell. She aspires to be a great wielder of arcane witchcraft, to don rare and exotic armory, but before she treads the halls of legend she must train. She exits the pastoral town via a glowing portal—it transports her to a countryside wilderness, where roam aggressive boars and sentient mushroom monsters. She casts weak puffs of light from her wand, hardly scathing the beasts. In turn, they mob her, blocking her escape and quickly depleting her of life force. Overwhelmed, her health dwindles to zero and she dies—returning to life in the nearby town, albeit with a sizable quantity of her money and experience points deducted. Now, she must train harder and longer to make up for what she has lost…*

"LFG" is a gamer acronym that stands for 'looking for group'. It is a simple, open request made by less experienced or less powerful players to receive help from stronger ones. Yet the acronym also captures the social element of online gaming. "LFG" mediates the individual with a broader community of gamers. After a fashion, it is a request for the player to be brought out of their 'local', limited experience of the game into broader 'global' connections with others. As a global medium, online gaming promises players the ability to do exactly that.

Notions of 'global' and 'local' permeate news and entertainment media, economic theories of development and many other permutations of globalisation. They seem to have some prevailing influence over how the extraordinary changes in our world are seen and discussed. Simply put, we use 'global' and 'local' to define our experiences in the era of contemporary globalisation. If we think of globalisation as remapping our world, changing our sense of horizons and proximity and the boundaries that designate people and events, then the global and the local may work in tandem like a compass. They enable us to orient our own positions and all other features belonging to this new

map. However, unlike the static contours on a map, the forces of globalisation are fluid and always changing. ‘Global’ and ‘local’ ably accommodate and communicate the fluidity, hybridity and fluctuating nature of the flows and events shaping our world. Like the compass, they move with us, always re-orienting according to our position.

Yet similar to globalisation itself, applying ‘global’ and ‘local’ in broad strokes has become problematic: it is difficult to uniformly reflect the great diversity of situations and phenomena expressed in globalisation, a difficulty which prompts many various and sometimes contradictory and short-sighted definitions of what is global and what is local. I contend therefore that the global and the local are in much need of critical assessment. After all, what use is a compass—and the map its use produces—if its North is off? And if a group of cartographers take as North vastly or even slightly different points, then navigation for the map-readers becomes increasingly confusing and nubilous. Therefore, I aim to look at the different ways in which the global and local are understood, and assess their relative strengths and weaknesses.

With this in mind, my research proposes to investigate how the global and local may be examined and analysed in online games. These games are thought of as places, objects and/or experiences that can fluctuate between, embrace simultaneously, and transcend the global and local. I believe that in reviewing some general ideas of the global and local as they pertain to online games, we will come to know what similarities or disparities exist between different definitions of these terms, as well flaws they may contain in producing an overall picture of globalisation and society. I must acknowledge here that this essay looks only at the work of others on online games, without first-hand field research on my part. In a more extensive study I would ideally approach some investigate aspects of communication between individual players and that of the online game communities they populate. This is a limitation of my research. Naturally it will affect my paper, but I do not believe it will void its argument.

In the following essay, I aim to demonstrate that the ways other authors signify the global and local has a significant impact on the horizons, or possibilities, imagined for online games—and by extension for society in general in the context of globalisation. Examining discourse about online games in the context of globalisation can be a helpful

approach to the quagmire of competing discourses of globalisation. In Chapter 2, I provide two histories which will hopefully help non-gamers understand the aspects of the game genre I am working with. In Chapter 3, I analyse uses and implications of global and local as they appear, related to games—specifically in relation to the individual and the community in online games. Chapter 4 is an overall summary and conclusion of my essay.

Chapter 2. History

Online games are played by millions of people from all reaches of the globe. Of the RMB 60.28 billion (US 8.6 billion, accounting for inflation) video games accrued in China in 2012, 90% of that figure, or RMB 54.25 billion, represents profit generated by online gaming. The attraction of online games explains how in 2008 alone there were 170 massively multi-player online role-playing games (hereafter: MMORPGs) in existence or development in AngloAmerica (the English-speaking political-economic sphere also represented as the West) (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). Even more astounding, in 2009, there were as many as 360 large-scale online games in China (Chung and Fung, 2013). Along with a huge variety of games to play, there truly is a massive player base for these games. Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft* peaked with over 11 million active subscribers in 2008 (Statista, 2014). The potential, and size, of these MMOs is evident. Yet how did these games get here? Before delving further, I want to ground my work in two histories of online games as these are the subject of my study, but may be unfamiliar territory to some. These histories will contextualise online games in AngloAmerica and China, familiarising online games to the uninitiated reader. I first provide a condensed history of online games in AngloAmerica.

2.1. AngloAmerica

As with any subject, there really can be no one history. One might choose, as James Der Derian did excellently in his book *Virtuous War*, to plot the evolution of gaming alongside the advancing technological capabilities and research of military enterprises (Der Derian, 2009). One could also focus solely on video games' technological development, or singly on the changing reception and perception of video games in society. One might chart games' development and increasing complexity of narrative, like an historical survey of elements in literary texts. A history attending to any of these could be valid. For myself, my priority is the rise of the networked game: whence it came

and where it has advanced to. As such, the first instance of an online game may be attributed to Rick Bromme's 1969 version of the early, multiplayer spaceship shooter *Spacewar!* (Kirriemuir, 2006). The game, originally designed in 1962 by a group of Massachusetts Institute of Technology students, was programmed for the Programmed Data Processor 1 (or PDP-1)—an early computer about the size of a large refrigerator (Dillon, 2011). Bromme's version was written to be played over the University of Illinois's Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations computer network, or PLATO (Kirriemuir, 2006)[1]. PLATO was a system used to assist teachers—it was not designed specifically for games, though typical of university hackers keen on pushing limits or breaking them, games were innovated for it. As the first networked game, two players could simultaneously play *Spacewar!* from any two computers connected through PLATO. So as early as 1969 people were playing computer games together apart; networked play is nearly as old as the medium of the video game itself. While certainly important, the present form of today's MMOs draw more directly from later innovations of multi-user dungeons or MUDs. I make this distinction to clarify that the advent and development of networked games is not necessarily a linear path. This history focusses on MUDs in particular, which carried into contemporary MMOs.

There are arguably two vital points of reference to which we may trace the modern MMO. These are J.R.R. Tolkien's 1954 *Lord of the Rings*, and Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax's 1974 pen-and-paper role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons* (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008: 46-7). Tolkien's medieval-fantasy stories provided and continue to influence the lore, narratives, bestiary and background settings for fantasy games, books and other entertainment. *Dungeons and Dragons* harnessed many thousands (and eventually millions) of players' imaginations, creativity and play in ways that allowed them to actively engage with and act out characters, quests, and worlds. To play, many players gather around a game-board map which they navigate by roll of a die. Each player assumes the role of a character such as a mage or a dwarf, and each character has certain strengths and weaknesses that affect how they interact with the environment—such as being strong enough to defeat enemies or quick enough to

[1] Like other computer software, games contain code, which embodies the function and mechanics of the game. This code is literally typed out in any number of programming languages. Hence, once can say that a game is written.

escape them. One player assumes the role of the Game or Dungeon Master, who is responsible for narrating the events that play out (often in a theatrical and immersive way). *Dungeons and Dragons* draws on Tolkien's fantasy worlds and characters and also more traditional war-themed board games, which themselves were used by the military to practice strategy and subsequently consumed by a board-game playing public. Given the interest in fantasy and role-playing games at the time, adventure games for the computer were being developed concomitantly. Gregory Yob's 1972 *Hunt the Wumpus* and William Crowther's more influential *Adventure* (widely released in 1976) are two examples. In these computer-based role-playing games players navigate fantasy worlds and scenarios purely through text. Descriptions of settings and other characters (controlled/informed by the game) are relayed on the screen and the player must act and interact by typing in commands. In these games the human role of the game master is taken on by the computer.

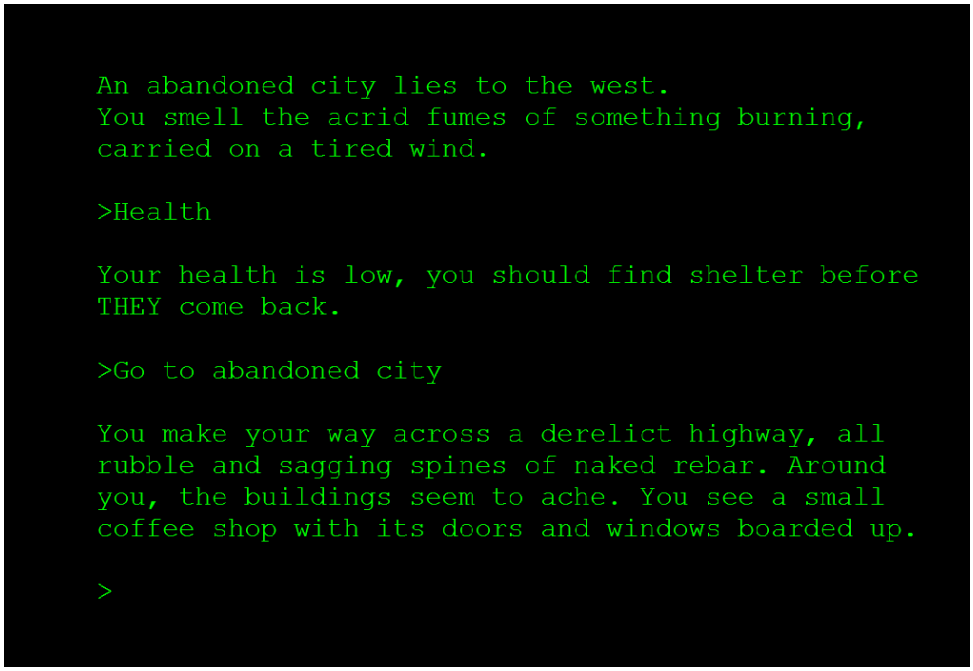

Figure 2

Shows a basic layout of a text-based adventure or role-playing game. The player inputs commands after the > sign and the computer 'responds' by revealing new objects, places, possible actions, and outcomes. © Mike Johnston.

Toward the end of the ‘70s two students, Roy Trubshaw and then Richard Bartle, developed a computer system called ‘MUD’ or multi-user dungeon. It took Crowther’s *Adventure* as its template but significantly it enabled many players to access the game, via network, and play at the same time (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). We can see a simple logic in this development: pen-and-paper role-playing games are played by many people simultaneously in the same room. Text-based adventures enable a new or different way to play, using computers. Others are not needed but nor can others join in if they want. MUDs then build in the capacity for many players to play at once, creating their own scenarios and obviating each other’s physical presence. Richard Bartle himself saw in the MUD the freedom of older pen-and-paper RPGs, when players could play and develop as one of many unique characters—they were not confined to the limited roles prescribed by the single player text adventure (Bartle in Hunsinger et al., 2010).

Throughout the 1980s MUDs were held back by the lack of widespread computer networks; in the late 1980s and 1990s graphical capabilities in computers improved, the popularity of computer networks rose, and MUDs no longer relied purely on text-based interfaces (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). In 1997 Richard Garriott released the landmark, arguably first ever MMORPG *Ultima Online*. The game was built not as a game but as a world (Bartle in Hunsinger et al., 2010). It was purchased and played by 100,000 people within the first year—a huge achievement for its time and for the first ever game of its genre. *Ultima Online* would serve as the example for many popular MMOs to come like *EverQuest* and eventually, in 2004, *World of Warcraft*, the arguable paragon of the MMORPG industry.

This history has been necessarily brief. The phenomena of online games in other places, such as Korea and China, are also fascinating and extremely important to the development of these games. Therefore, I would like to provide a brief history of online games in China.

2.2. China

In this section I aim to briefly plot the emergence and growth of online gaming in China, with special attention given to the political and economic aspects of the industry that

distinguishes Chinese online gaming from that of other regions. The worldwide popularity and success of online games has, as one might expect, not been ignored by the world's new superpower. The previously stated RMB 60.28 billion revenue of online games in China in 2012 stands as impressive evidence of this, as does the number of Chinese players of online games exceeding 120 million in 2010 (Chun, 2013). But the success of online games has not arisen in quite the same way as in AngloAmerica. Video games have always been controversial in the West, with suspicions and fears of psychological and sociological effects casting games and players in a negative light. However, a wide support base of designers, programmers, hackers and players—not to mention the keen interest of the US military, which promoted more and more advanced games and game technologies to adapt for military purposes—secured gaming's seat as worthy of development and subject to technological advances and popular consumption. Games in China have a similarly controversial history, but government reaction has gone much further to curate games than in the United States or Europe.

Keeping in mind the historical context in which they arose, Chinese games (online and off) have undergone a remarkable transformation. In the same year that *Spacewar!* was adapted for networked play in America (1969), Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966-76) was not yet half over. While rejecting the old and bringing in the new was the name of the game, so to speak, China looked a long way off from widespread penetration of networked computing and other information technologies, let alone networked gaming. It was not until the 1980s that single player computer games became available to Chinese PCs—these were primarily pirated copies of Japanese and Taiwanese games (Cao and Downing, 2008). Fears about the effect of games on youth and the implication of street arcades and game rooms in illicit activities brought gaming to the attention of the government, which eventually cracked down. In 2000, the CCP set strict regulations for the use of PC game rooms—private, Internet café-like businesses where most young Chinese played computer games—as well as banning video game consoles outright. Despite this eristical climate, online gaming made its way to China in 2001: the e-commerce company Shanda localised *Legend*, a Korean MMO, for Chinese markets. The game was a hit: in the first year a peak of 400,000 simultaneous players were recorded and Shanda made an annual profit of RMB 600 million (Nie, 2013). In spite, or more likely because of the increasing popularity of *Legend* and other PC game room

games, new-elected president Hu Jintao issued a policy entitled Section 9, 'Purify the Environment for the Young People'. Liu Chun notes that this policy indicated even stricter government regulation of online games. Chun observes,

> Section 9 consisted of two articles. Article 24 addressed the content side of computer games, stating that the government would rigorously censor computer game software and prohibit obscene, violent and pseudo-scientific titles. It also vowed to fight the invasion of malicious foreign cultural products. Article 25 reasserted previous internet cafe regulations, specifically requiring that filtering software should be installed to block harmful sites. The directive laid down the ideological foundation for the future regulation of online games, and signified a turnaround of the government's attitude towards online games from laissez-faire regulation to a more restrictive and restraining approach (Chun, 2013: 45).

While heavy-handed, this regulation did not actually amount to a decline in online game play. Rather, the government's primary concern was content—keeping foreign content on the periphery, as stated in Article 24, and keeping Chinese content at the fore. The ideological foundations Chun mentions are representative of the Ministry of Culture's political appropriation of the medium of online games as an instrument to instruct Chinese youth in nationalist and patriotic values. Of course, it didn't hurt that MMOs were extremely lucrative as well. Between the years 2003 and 2005, various sectors of the CCP such as the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) and the General Administration of Press and Publication (GAPP) touted the importance of online games, causing a shift in the government's attitude and sparking development initiatives and funding projects (Nie, 2013). Completing a full about-face, in July 2009 a cultural policy plan produced by the State Council listed online games as a cultural product of foremost importance (ibid). Today, online games are played by hundreds of millions of Chinese, and the industry is worth more than those of the domestic film and television industries combined (Chun, 2013).

2.3. Conclusion of Histories

In summary, MMOs represent a sizable piece of the games industry. In AngloAmerica, they have arrived in their modern day form from the text-based MUD systems of the 1980s. MUDs made digital the fantasy and play of table-top, pen-and-paper RPGs,

drawing inspiration from genre fiction such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. In China online gaming eked out its popularity in a tough political climate; once the value of online gaming was recognised however, the government began to embrace it, promoting online games as a paramount cultural product and entertainment form. Foreign online games are not as accessible to Chinese gamers due to government restrictions, and the MOC and GAPP's own ideological initiatives have aimed to turn Chinese online games into a platform for disseminating nationalism and patriotism. Although basic, with these preliminary histories under our belts the reader will hopefully have some sense of the forces underlying these gaming phenomena as I take the discussion towards analysis in Aspects of Global and Local in Games.

Chapter 3. Aspects of the Global and Local in Online Games

3.1. Introduction to Aspects: Identity and Community

I will remind the reader that online games have been chosen as an example of how to read and interpret different uses of the global and the local in the broader context of globalisation. But what specifically about online games should be considered? Extant scholarship on games reveals a few pertinent threads for examination. The aspects I consider are Identity and Community, which have received much attention in the study of games. The way that identity and community are formed and discussed in online games bears some resemblance to their formation and discussion in globalisation. Globalisation often implies new forms of identity and community—formulated beyond traditional boundaries of one's immediate community or prescribed national identity. Today, one's identity and community are often defined in and by global and local terms. It seems therefore relevant to consider identity and community in online games. Individually and in connection, these aspects have some relevant bearing on the discussion of what is global and what is local. Where possible, I have tried to include examples of how the global and local may be read in non-Western gaming contexts, primarily China. As the history can attest, the phenomenon and study of games are as exciting and problematic in Asia (and other places, such as Latin America) as they are in North America and Europe—often in profoundly different ways. Therefore by including non-Western views, I try to achieve a broader consideration of globalisation.

3.2. Identity

3.2.1. Introduction to Identity in Online Games

In the horizons it has expanded and possibilities it has implied, globalisation has changed how we see ourselves in the world. For starters, we can now *see ourselves in the world*—as part of a greater project than our homes, immediate communities and nations. Whether joining an international cause or maintaining worldwide relationships through social media it is possible to map our identities in totally new ways. How much more so with online games? How great are the possibilities of identity when not only the ways we project ourselves are new, but the worlds we project into are new as well? Identity in online games arguably provides a textbook example of the possibilities imagined for identity in the age of globalisation. In the following section I will explore these possibilities, as framed through the global and local. Prior to analysis I want to provide the non-gaming reader with an explanation of how identity operates in online gaming.

For all their wonder and innovation, from orcs and demons to techno-futuristic corporate space wars, online worlds may not, socially speaking, be so drastically different or alien from the physical one. On the possibilities (and probabilities) of online play, Henry Jenkins says, "[s]ome see the fantasy world as freeing them from constraints and consequences. Others see the online game as a social community that must define and preserve a social contract" (Jenkins, 2006: 217). Online worlds are subject to contestation. This is partly rooted in the dynamics of the identities assumed by the players. Whether for anarchic escapism or extensions of self-expression and communal activity, online games do offer new platforms for experimentation with identity. But the social aspect of virtual worlds still rely on codes of conduct and limitations on freedoms in order to operate; players themselves play a part in developing notions of acceptable behaviour and self-expression. In essence, one cannot simply *do anything* in an online game. Online identities are not irreverent anarchic dreams where anything is possible. They can be meaningful representations of identity to which players have legitimate connections. Indeed, there is a growing body of research discussing the effects and importance of players' connections to their virtual selves and virtual others—exemplified,

for example, in Sherry Turkle's 1995 *Life on the Screen* and Nick Yee's 2014 *The Proteus Paradox*. The consensus of proponents of the legitimacy of online identity is that players see in their avatars legitimate expressions of self. Likewise, connections to others in online games can be as valid as relationships made in the physical world (Huhh, 2009). Critically, these identities and relationships are formed willingly. That is, online identity and sociality is not history dependent. Those who are able and choose to self-express, socialise and play in online games are not necessarily limited by the social roles, communities or nationalities into which they were born. Thus, identity in online games is to some extent reminiscent of identity in globalisation. Globalisation scholar Mike Featherstone echoes this remark: "our experiences and means of orientation are seen as divorced from the physical locations in which we live and work" (Featherstone, 1996: 46). Accepting that our experiences and means of orientation are fundamental to our sense of identity, the claim here is that identity is no longer locally linked, and is now produced and projected in global terms. Here is the first implication of the global and the local that I will take up: global and local as expressions of physical space.

3.2.2. Global and Local as Physical Range

In online games as in globalisation, identities are often expressed as occurring in and especially transgressing ranges or levels of physical space. Orienting us to this relationship of ranges, the local is of course a small space, and the global naturally is a large—the largest!—one. It is a simple definition that is easy to picture: as I sit at home playing on my computer (local), my avatar is playing with others via game server in some potentially far-off place (global). According to Jean-Sébastien Guy however, when the global and local are defined as ranges, zones or boundaries of physical space, this among others is a flawed definition. He suggests that, "distances and other spatial measurements simply cannot tell us where to draw the boundary separating what is local and what is global or where the local ends and the global begins" (Guy, 2009: 2). For an example of this dilemma, Walkerdine notes that with global communication technologies and online play, "[p]ractices are at once local and global, minute in their detail and enormous in their reach. The [local] space of the club, the living room, the bedroom is also *at the same time* a global space" (Walkerdine, 2007: 138-9). The bedroom (or living room, or club, etc.) occupies a physically local—discrete—space. It also is drawn

beyond its local boundaries via the Internet—it may appear, for example, as the background in a Skype chat window on a computer screen in New Zealand. Using the range definition, we may understand that the bedroom is able to be both global and local. Yet the task of how we *delimit* its global-ness or local-ness becomes much more difficult if not impossible. The spatial transgressions afforded online gamers is a facet grounded in the centrality of the physically present local and the physically 'out there' global. As a range, the global is necessarily larger than the local. The player's bedroom is a spot of limited and isolated space whereas the global is the broadest possible expression of physical space. One reason this definition is problematic is because of the potential for online games to enable new forms of identity and self-expression. Gamers are forming increasingly complex relationships with their online selves. In his Proteus Paradox experiments, Nick Yee demonstrated not only that gamers empathised with the experiences of their avatars, feeling what they imagined their avatars 'felt,' but also unconsciously took on the characteristics they associated with their avatars' personalities (i.e. swagger, demureness, aggression, etc.) even after they had stopped playing the game (Yee, 2014). With such complexities at hand, transpiring within, without and between cyberspace the range definition of global and local does not appear equipped to show us where and how these identities occur in globalisation. Are online game identities global simply because they are projected and embodied beyond the home or game room? Do we find the local aspect of the millions of MMO avatars seated solely in the millions of flesh-and-blood players tapping away in front of the screen? These representations of space cannot account for the intimate connection (or 'Vulcan mind-meld', if you will) of players with their avatars—because we cannot use physical range to show where they occur. Thus if we are to read the global and local as expressions of physical range, we should bear in mind that they are limited in their ability to orient us adequately to where and how potential identities exist in globalisation.

In summary, the global and local as physical ranges are very hard to map out. It is too simplistic to say that our identities are physically local simply where our bodies happen to be physically located, and that the global aspects of our identities are those aspects which are projected elsewhere. This problem is reproduced in online games: it is not a matter of my local identity sitting at home playing online games while my global identity is manifested in cyberspace. Works such as Yee's demonstrate that the relationship

between player and avatar are far too intertwined to make this distinction useful. Physical ranges are not the only set of definitions for global and local, however. Closely related are global and local in geopolitical terms. Next, I examine the geopolitical global and local in the case of China.

3.2.3. China and the Global and Local as Geopolitical

Previously I examined a general case of identity in online games and its parallel to identity in globalisation. Identity however is not made nor represented in a vacuum. Throughout history, identities have been produced and have been in competition based on varying contexts and forces—religion, class, politics, geography. Political identity has been and continues to be both galvanising and divisive. As we shall see for China, the political identity of online game players is very much the project and concern of the Chinese government. In this situation, the local takes on the meaning of the political imagined community, comprised of a collective sense of national identity, and the global is politically outside this collective experience.

The history of online gaming in China I provided showed that the Chinese government has come to view online games as a potent vehicle for disseminating nationalism and patriotism. Online games provide the government with unique, near-direct access to scores of Chinese youth: in 2009, 68.6% of Chinese net users were under the age of 30, and 53% of that demographic—or 78.15 million people—were players of online role-playing games (Chan, 2009). The construction of identity in and through online games is a key consideration to the Chinese government. Rather than players resorting to virtual, fantasy worlds bearing little resemblance to contemporary life or documented history, it was and is important for the CCP that Chinese game players experience specific historical identities through online play. This fact is supported by the teeming numbers of online games that a) reproduce or reimagine Sino-Japanese military antagonisms, such as the war of resistance against Japanese imperialism in the 20th century, or b) that take for inspiration ancient/classical Chinese aesthetics and narratives. Speaking to the context of China in gaming cultures, Hjorth and Chan concur that, “in this search for identity and cultural modernity in an age of mobility and reformation of constructions of nation-state, it was important that the region [China] not deny its own history of cultural

imperialism and colonial conflicts" (Hjorth; Chan, 2009: 8-9). The Chinese government is very aware of modern contestations of identity and history as globalisation imbricates, dilutes and questions traditional national narratives. China itself has changed from a centralised socialist economy to a market economy with Chinese characteristics. So it is through platforms like online games that the government attempts to reign in the unwanted effects of globalisation (the global) on the identity of its citizens by sustaining a local (geopolitically and historically distinct) rhetoric of Chinese identity.

We are dealing here with a kind of local whom readers of Benedict Anderson will be familiar. That is, the local as imagined community. In this case the imagination extends the community to the level of nation-state. I remind readers that Anderson's hypothesis in *Imagine Communities* was, "that nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of the world's multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are *cultural artefacts of a particular kind*" (Anderson, 1983:4). Anderson continues to explain that these artefacts represent an intersection and unification of many historical forces; once unified, the artefacts can convey a wide variety of political and ideological meanings, which can be used by (and on) people across many social terrains (Anderson, 1983). For a practical analogy, the Chinese flag is a cultural artefact that signifies China's nation-ness. In principle, the flag's four smaller stars represent the four classes of Chinese society—working class, peasantry, petite bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie. These classes are symbolically brought together around the central big star, representing the Chinese Communist Party. Thus this flag as an artefact can theoretically represent Chinese nation-ness and Chinese identity to citizens anywhere in China—across varying social terrains, so to speak. Accordingly, we may understand that China has identified the Internet as a virulent possibility for the creation of its national artefacts. The preservation of a local Chinese identity through said artefacts, of which online gaming is one, is paramount to the potential crisis of its legitimacy.

Arguably, the dominant crisis of the PRC's one-party rule is maintaining its legitimacy—bestowed it by the legacy of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party—in the face of global market and China's well-documented turn to capitalism beginning with the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in the 1970s (on sustaining the socialist revolution in China, see Zhao, 2011). Many have argued that the Internet could be a factor of instability for the Chinese

government, should it usher in Western liberal democratic ideology. In fact, the Chinese government's actions on and reactions to the Internet—including online games—have turned it into an ideological tool in the way it facilitates online identity construction. Chan concurs that,

> the Chinese regime of governmentality has a direct bearing on the ways that local netizens are constructing their online identities. [Jack Qiu] identifies the two dominant tropes essential to this process of collective identification. '(1) the rise of a predominant culture of consumerism that characterizes much of the larger society and (2) the persistence of online nationalism with increasing infinity to state agenda'. (Chan, 2009: 146)

In practical terms, the government has directly influenced the types of online games that get made. Games that draw inspiration from Chinese history and literary classics—such as the aforementioned struggle against the Japanese military in the 20th century, or the famous classical Chinese narrative *Journey to the West*—exemplify this agenda.

In this project of nationalism through online games the prescribed local identity the gamer should receive and embody is positioned as the national identity. Meanwhile, the global is a subversive, destabilising force working against this, such as western characteristics of globalisation like liberal democracy and free market capitalism, which challenge the foundations of Chinese citizens' local-national identity. This is a problematic articulation of global and local. Principally based on what Scholte describes as a local/global polarisation, it is based on the idea that the

> local purportedly provides security and community, while the global houses danger and violence. The local is innocent, the global manipulative. The local is the arena for autonomy and empowerment, the global the realm of dependence and domination (Scholte, 2008: 1494).

While politically effective when portrayed in these ways, the global and local become too divisive and too simplistic if the local is ultimately designated as 'good' and the global as 'bad'. Certainly the context of Chinese online gaming demonstrates a unique case in which this rhetoric seems particularly effective. But if local identities are to be understood as national ones and globalised identities are corrupt or undesirable, then players (and citizens) cannot fully be authors of their own experience—their identities would always be measured against some scale of morality to determine how well they conform to

society; new planes of identity cannot be explored if new modes of identity formation (online games) are fundamentally constrained, and new forms of identities punished. This definition of global and local is divisive and parochial. Instead of mapping globalisation, it seeks to rejects the processes of globalisation and confine identities to limited experiences. Since China itself has, unfortunately, recently been seized by a string of terrorist attacks attributed to Uighur minorities in the western region of Xin Jiang there is evidence to suggest that the prescribed, politically local identity of the Chinese citizen (and the 'othering' of the global) is proving ineffective.

In summary, online identities, avatars, and virtual selves are not merely the instrumental forms of ethereal fantasy. Players manifest their actions through these avatars in cyberspace, transcending the global and local as physical ranges. It quickly becomes difficult to determine where these ranges ought to be drawn and how they ought to be used. Physical ranges only go so far if we seek to orient ourselves in the forces and flows of globalisation. Furthermore, I have attempted to demonstrate how the global and local operate in geopolitical terms in the specific case concerning the identities of online games China. Online games in China actively pit the local against the global, as a strategy to directly shape the online identities of players. Of course in concert, individual identities are the stuff of communities. Similar to identity there are analogous possibilities of new community formation in online games, and these communities (and their formations) are also subject to conceptions of the global and local. Thus I now turn my discussion to community.

3.3. Community

Online games such as MMORPGs are at their heart social. Interacting with other human players builds the narrative of the game world—the *collective* sense of adventure sets these games uniquely apart from single-player games. At the same time it is impossible to engage with the thronging masses as a whole. Meaningful relationships may be formed, comrades may be found, but this must-needs occur at the level of community. Communities make an integral part of online play. If an online game player announces "LFG!," cooperates with one or more others on a quest, peruses game discussion forums or reads a player-made, unofficial game strategy or walkthrough in order to play

more effectively, they are relying in part on the community aspect of online games to mediate their play. Yet these communities themselves are in practice and theory ill-defined and contested entities. Before I discuss them in relation to globalisation I will briefly review the debate around virtual/ online communities.

3.3.1. Introduction to Community in Online Games

Online communities take many forms and can fulfill several purposes. Simply defined, "[o]nline communities operate to fulfill goals in multiple online spaces" (Plant, 2004: 52). In MMORPGs the goals that multiple players fulfill together are diverse—from competing against one another for resources or in battle, or alternatively cooperating as a team to defeat a boss monster or other teams of players. Even having a simple chat can express one goal of online communities. Advances in ICTs—such as faster connection speeds, new voice chat capabilities, and even the increasing ease with which a website for discussion or other media can be built and hosted—are revamping and rewriting the way gamers organise themselves in and around games. A good definition of online game communities should embody this aspect of organisation. An accurate and workable definition of online game communities could thus be termed as the products of "the relations between players as afforded by the game, as members of a team […] who communicate to arrive at the best strategy and align their movement" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al, 2008: 152). It is a vague definition because the 'products of relations between players' can look like any number of things. And significantly, these relations and their products may not be solely confined to the game world. Sometimes in-game communications can be limiting, or players may seek to interact with others players outside of the game. This gives birth to what some disassociate from community as such and call *metaculture*: "fan sites, discussion forums, game magazines, and other places where players discuss a variety of content related to the game" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et. al, 2008: 152). To distinguish game communities and metaculture based on whether or not gamers are interacting via game play, however, may not afford the fullest description of a game community's activities. If on a fan-site a player uploads a video of his or her team vanquishing an opponent in an MMO (see http://thegirlplayswow.com/ and http://orneryraidleader.blogspot.ca/ for examples of this), or discussion between teammates emerges in an online forum regarding a particular battle, arguably the fan-

site and the discussion forum are constitutive of a game community. On the other hand, whatever the relations and interactions and wherever they take place, some fundamentally dispute labelling online game communities in terms of communities at all.

> Critics of the virtual community idea point out that it is actually underpinned by problematic assumptions about what community is; it suggests that community is simply a matter of *communication*. […] For the critics of 'virtual community', community has been stripped of its ethical dimensions. The very fact that they are formed through bonds of transient mutual interest rather than mutual obligation or proximity, makes them something other than communities. (Hand and Moore, 2006: 173)

The question of ethical commitment is valid: compared to the tight-knit social groups one imagines in the local community, online game communities can come across as hostile, impersonal, or simply inaccessible. After all, the Internet is the natural habitat of the troll[2]. While it is not my purpose to engage a broader discussion of the validity of online game communities in this essay, sufficed to say that although not perfect, players relate and interact in meaningful ways and those who look closely will not find a void of ethical commitments in what are called online game communities. Furthermore, such communities are being formulated across time and space using technologies not previously available for much of human history. We can offer our critiques and find these communities lacking compared to more traditional forms, but for now I propose we simply find them different as it is too soon to tell. It is in the context of this disputation of online communities that I aim to address aspects of global and local. Like identity, community in online games is also framed in global and local terms. Below, I will examine the terms according to their capitalistic definitions.

3.3.2. The Global and Local in Capitalistic Terms

Another set of values ascribed to the global and the local is their relation to capital and capitalism. This set of values is employed, for example, when a global corporate franchise such as Wal-Mart or McDonalds has set up in our neighbourhoods, threatening to put local shop-keeps out of business. It is also the employed when a local grass-roots

[2] Trolls: "Internet slang for people who take to the web to upset people or start arguments – are users who start fights online for their own amusement" (Bogart, 2014).

organisation takes a stand against a big corporation and its exploitive practices. In these scenarios the global fundamentally represents capitalism or capitalogic[3], and we often attach to it some sense of loss of community or exploitation of labour. In contrast, the local represents resistance to these forces—it is to be celebrated and protected. This conception creates a perverse symbiotic relationship between global and local: the local is in some way produced, typically via distinction or contradiction, in response to the global (Rao, 2011). Although online games communities most often occur in cyberspace, the penetrating forces of the global arguably effect game communities in similar ways as physical communities.

One should bear in mind that the very potentials ascribed to MMOs for communal play are also results of the imperatives and savvy of the market. Lin and Sun remind us that, "[f]rom the perspective of game companies, the community-oriented nature of multi-player online games (MMOs) is increasingly viewed as the foundation for commercial success" (Lin and Sun, 2009: 237). With paid subscription and even free-to-play games there is a capitalist agenda which operates on the promise or bet of massively multiplayers' massive financial returns. While there are legitimately creative and innovative aspects of MMO design and play, MMOs themselves may serve as sites of manipulation—especially as game companies understand that "keeping players 'hooked' online and establishing and maintaining active game communities are central to game company success, leading to the preponderance of design features and game mechanisms aimed at increasing player interaction" (Lin and Sun, 2009: 238). In this we see the perverse effects of capitalism perhaps even more explicitly than in our physical communities. Arif Dirlik points out that global capitalism sees the local as a site for manipulation—it aims to strip the local of identity and homogenise it (Dirlik, 1996). The online game community as the site of the local is arguably even more vulnerable to manipulation when it is literally created and designed by global capitalism vis-à-vis MNC ownership and investment. Online game communities embody a sense of community or

[3] Capitalogic is a Marxist term which denotes the logic of capitalism. Capitalogic implies the essential nature or logic of capital (which is taken to mean both capitalists and their capital) that propels it forward. Thus, 'capital carried across borders' does not carry with it the weight of the *idea* of capital or capitalism. 'Capitalogic carried across borders' contains both the notion of capital, as well as the spread of the organising force of capitalism and capitalism's self-reproducing drive.

local that bespeaks a conscientiousness and human engagement steeped not in consumerist imperatives, but in what we could call local sensibilities. At the same time, these communities are the prerogative of the global—their shared space, connections and play underscored by the control and motives of capitalism.

In summary, the local and global can be used to understand online gaming in terms of their capitalistic connotations. Indeed, the capitalistic frame—of local as community and community resistance to globalising capital, and global as that homogenising and manipulative capital—accurately captures what some consider the false promise of online gaming: how such fantastic ideas and worlds can be rendered so bland and unimaginative due to the machine of capitalism that focusses not on the possibilities of online communities, but on the profit they can yield. As with physical range and geopolitical polarisations we may want to seek other, more liberating definitions of global and local. Global and local as aspects of capitalism corner online game communities very tightly against a wall, with little room for free association or the promise of meaningful social connections untainted by the driving forces of capitalism.

At the last, I return to China for another example of the geopolitical aspect of global and local. Whereas in Identity I detailed the desire and potential for Chinese online games to instill nationalism and patriotism via the geopolitical global and local, in Community I provide a concrete example of how these sentiments manifest.

3.3.3. The Geopolitical Aspect of Global and Local – Online Chinese Protests.

Before continuing further, I want to remind the reader that Chinese MMOs hold a unique political dimension. Through cultural policy and connections to game companies, the CCP has successfully turned its domestically produced MMOs into platforms to instill patriotism and let players voice this patriotism (Chung and Fung, 2013). In 2006, a landmark example of such nationalistic expression in MMOs was observed in the game *Fantasy Westward Journey*. Like the name suggests, *Fantasy Westward Journey* falls in the fantasy genre; players play out a quest-and-battle fantasy adventure inspired by the narratives of the famous Chinese text *Journey to the West*. In July 2006 many players of the MMO found, in one of the government offices in the game world, a Rising Sun Flag

adorning a wall. Although the setting of the game is an ancient, fantasy China, this flag is associated with Japanese imperialism and war on the Chinese in the 20th century. The in-game flag became a catalyst for anti-Japanese sentiment, which quickly spread among tens of thousands of patriotic Chinese players. Subsequently a protest against the game designers' use of this flag was staged and on the very first day there were 80,000 protestors present—clogging up the spaces in and around the government building (Chung and Fung, 2013; Jenkins, 2006a). According to the game designers, the flag's art is based on an earlier Chinese classical painting (Jenkins, 2006a). Neither this nor the game's explicit fantasy setting deterred the players from speaking out.

These 80,000 players may not have previously shared an ethical commitment to one another, though in the context of the protest an ethical commitment was certainly being upheld. Furthermore, Anderson reminds us that community can be felt and articulated across connections with many others whom we may not even get to know—as in the case of the 'national' community (Anderson, 1983). Thus the game became a platform for a national community to congregate around a local identity—responding to the global threat or provocation of the 'outside' (Japan, in this case). Albeit in unintended ways this protest certainly marks the success of Chinese government initiatives to educate its youth in patriotism via online games. The shared sense of local identity was strong enough that the online game community collectively suspended the fact of its fictitious environment (the game world) to rally around an historically factual antagonism. I want to suggest that this community of players felt fundamentally challenged by globalisation. They refused cosmopolitan identities which would dilute their associations and heritage with the nation-state. In their show of patriotism, they rejected more basically the perceived trend that globalisation renders the nation-state redundant in favour of personal and communal relations with the wider world. And so they organised themselves in and through a collective sense of local, communal identity and for the duration of these protests they were not fantasy soldiers or mythical characters but concerned and outraged Chinese citizens.

In summary, the study of community in online games has shown us different discourses and conceptions both of community itself and of the global and the local. A persistent definition of global and local ties them to capitalism—to its dissemination or to resistance

against it. It is not erroneous to use this definition but it is problematic, as online game communities appear to have the ability to mediate meaningful relationships, but in capitalistic terms of local and global are always already manipulated. New or altered concepts of global and local able to give fuller expression to the legitimacy and possibilities of online game communities, while still acknowledging the role of global capitalism, are called for. Additionally, have established the nature of online game communities, I returned to the geopolitical global and local in the case of China to discuss the 2006 *Fantasy Westward Journey* protests as a concrete expression of local resistance against the global. I now turn to my concluding remarks of the essay as a whole.

Chapter 4. Conclusion

Readers unfamiliar with video games may have become increasingly wary by this point. Accepting games as legitimate topics of study to begin with may have be a daunting task for those who have until now simply seen games as casual entertainment and nothing more. But video games are one of many important media that mediate the forces and flows in our lives. They are sites for political indoctrination as well as resistance, they enable community and self-identity alongside ostracism and persecution. They engender new possibilities of social formation, as well as new avenues for capitalist corruption and cooptation. Online gaming is an especially potent aspect of video games: unprecedented numbers of individuals are connecting, sharing, playing—reading narratives and writing their own. Online games preoccupy nuanced, interstitial and intervallic spaces and times—spaces between spaces, times between times. As I've shown, their middling nature puts them in a unique situation as regards the global and the local. Online games are discussed as between the local and global, and yet somehow encompass them both. Indeed, Chung finds that, "[i]n an age of globalization, convergence occurs across various levels. Within global markets, economic and technological convergence operates conspicuously, while being challenged by social and cultural divergence. This is particularly the case in the global world of online gaming" (Chung, 2009: 58). The fact that Chung identifies a 'global' world of online games proves this point—for a 'local' world of online games is thus implied. In terms of physical ranges, capitalism and geopolitical imaginations I have attempted to describe how these worlds may be found and interpreted in online games, and where their definitions may be flawed or otherwise require tinkering. Online games may give new expression to identities and communities, but the discourse those potentials enter into is often problematic and not conducive to those potentials being reached. In terms of situating us in globalisation, online games have demonstrated well the interconnecting forces of capital, ICTs and culture. I hope at the very least the reader has some new found appreciation for the complexities and

possibilities of online gaming, as well as their abilities to help us explain and understand the era, processes and effects of globalisation currently upon us.

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