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## My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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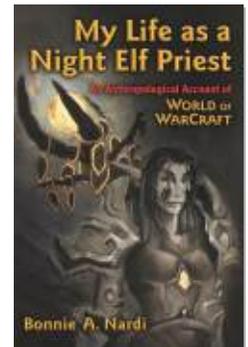
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## CHAPTER NINE

# Culture: *WoW* in China . . . and North America

In an Internet cafe in Shanghai, a nurse, age 22, has just completed a boss kill. Other characters are nearby, some dancing, some running around. The nurse, who plays a warlock, auctions off the boss's loot to the raid members, counting down 4 3 2 1, before the final price is set and typed into the chat window. Those who won an auction pay her, and take receipt of their new armor, weapon, recipe, or pattern. Everyone in the raid receives a cut of the gold collected in the auction.

In North America, if one says “China” and “*World of Warcraft*” in the same sentence, the immediate free association is typically “Chinese gold farmer.” I am puzzled by the fascination with Chinese gold farming—in our world of global capitalism, anyone can make money selling anything, so why not in a virtual game? The meme belies an inchoate sense of disturbance; far away, Chinese people have found a way to intrude into the North American economy by slipping into a virtual world (see Nakamura 2009).

The single biggest national group of *WoW* players was Chinese (Blizzard Press Release 2008). Chinese players were an overwhelmingly important market for Blizzard and a critical part of the global gaming community. Chinese people played *World of Warcraft* for the same reasons as North Americans or Europeans or Koreans, and they were employed elsewhere to make a living. There were gold farmers in China, but they were a tiny minority of players, as were their North American and European counterparts.

In the vignette, the player conducted what the Chinese called “gold raids.” She was not raiding for real money but was directing a practice I did

not observe in North America—running raids with auctions to raise game gold for individuals or guilds who needed it to purchase better equipment. Chinese players participating in gold raids were after high-end “purple” loot (loot was color coded) to empower their characters for raiding. One player explained:

When I got to level 60, my equipment was not good. I participated in some gold raids for better equipment. At that time I was covered in greens [low-end gear] so it was certain the raid team in the guild would not accept me. I joined gold raiding activities and gradually gained the purple gear.

Gold raids allowed players with sufficient gold to acquire items they wanted without having to be lucky or raid a lot. Normally, a player would have to win the roll of the dice in a raid or accumulate points for raid participation using “DKP” (Dragon Kill Points) (see Thott n.d.). The Chinese used DKP, but came up with gold raids as an alternative, adding another solution to the ever-present problem of improving performance through better gear. With gold raids, a player merely needed to have gold, and the game offered many ways to earn gold without the rigors of regular raiding.

I went to China to try to understand something of the roughly half of all *World of Warcraft* players. With my research assistants, I talked to players in Internet cafes, dormitories, and apartments. We interviewed 40 people, 34 male and 6 female. Study participants included students, a factory worker, a middle school teacher, a bank employee, a marketing supervisor, a vice president of design for a Chinese game company, and a venture capital broker. The players we spoke to ranged in age from 18 to 37, although most were in their twenties.

Study participants were acquired through the social networks of the Chinese research assistants, and by requesting interviews in Internet cafes. When possible, we asked the cafe owner or manager if it was okay for us to interview. We were never refused and were always treated cordially. We approached players in the cafes and asked if they would have time for an interview. Most said yes. We sometimes sat beside study participants and watched them play, as we did with the nurse in the gold raid. In some cases we took study participants to dinner or to a nearby restaurant for soft drinks or a snack. Interviews were audiotaped. They were transcribed and translated by the native speakers on the team.



Playing games in an Internet cafe, Beijing, Summer 2007



Bigfoot, one of two of the major mod compilation sites in China

My biggest finding in China was that, overall, Chinese players were remarkably like the North American players I studied. They liked the sociability of *WoW*, the competitive challenge, the graphics, the color. They extended the game through the use of mods. They played with friends and family.

The major difference in play between China and North America was the setting in which the game was often played—the *wang ba* or Internet cafe. In *wang ba*, players were surrounded by other players; it was a “mixed reality” of virtual and physical social interaction (Lindtner et al. 2008). *Wang ba* are the second most frequent site of computer usage in China after the workplace (CNNIC 2007), providing places to access digital technologies for millions of people. Internet cafes are popular not only in China but in Korea (Stewart and Choi 2003; Chee 2006; Rea 2009), Australia (Beavis et al. 2005), the United Kingdom (Wakeford 2003), Canada (Powell n.d.), and elsewhere.

In China, and wherever they are found, Internet cafes go a long way toward solving problems of the so-called digital divide; they offer quality computer hardware in accessible public spaces. Chinese players reported choosing *wang ba* either because they did not own personal computers or because they had low Internet bandwidth and/or low-end computer equip-



Close quarters in a dorm room in Beijing, Summer 2007

ment. *Wang ba* provided high-end equipment and bandwidth that made game play more enjoyable.<sup>1</sup>

Qiu and Liuning (2005) observed that Chinese players frequented Internet cafes not only because of the computer equipment but to meet friends and peers. We observed this social practice and also found that tight living spaces and family dynamics affected decisions about where to play. The rooms in student dormitories we visited were shared by four to eight people and could accommodate no more than a small desk and bed for each student, an area that was also used as a work space. Many young professionals in China live at home with their parents until they are married.

Small living spaces, as well as parental disapproval of game play, drew players to Internet cafes. A worker at a trading company in Shanghai explained why he played in an Internet cafe:

First, my house is tiny and it affects my parents. Second, the computer hardware at home is not as good.

These findings are consistent with those of Thomas and Lang (2007) who reported that *wang ba* “have emerged as the place for urban Chinese youth to be youth, [and], as one of the few places young urban Chinese can escape the pressures of schooling, work, and their parents.”

The social atmosphere of the *wang ba* was crucial to players’ experience. A young business professional with good equipment at home explained that he nonetheless went to *wang ba* because:

Home has no atmosphere.

Another player said:

I enjoy playing at the café because there are more people, it’s more exciting. Most of the guild activities are at night, so the people all show up late in the Internet café. I enjoy the atmosphere of people playing around me.

A bank employee said:

Sometimes, when I come to play at the Internet café, I meet people here. So these people, I would get their QQ [Chinese instant messaging system] ID to stay in touch. People who sit next to you in the cafe or I know from real life, we are more inclined to keep in touch.

Guild members sometimes met face-to-face in *wang ba* to play together. One player told us that his whole guild had developed, and played together, in a cafe. Often guild members living in the same city knew each others’ phone numbers and coordinated playtimes on the phone. Our first interview in China was with a group of five young men who had assembled in an Internet cafe to play *WoW* after work and were then planning to go to dinner together.

The interplay of the physical and the virtual was apparent when players sat next to each other engaging in both face-to-face and digital interaction. Chinese players moved between visual and social immersion online, and the social and physical context of the *wang ba*. Given the global prevalence of Internet cafes, it seems we are redefining, and reshaping, “virtual” experience into a hybrid, mixed reality of the virtual and the physical (see Crabtree and Rodden 2007; Lindtner et al. 2008).

The same dynamic was at play in North America and Europe in more limited settings. In student dormitories where LAN parties are held, and social networking software such as Facebook is utilized to organize dorm social life (Ellison et al. 2007; Lampe 2007), a merge of the physical and digital takes place. One of my first interviews for the *WoW* research took me to San Diego to visit three students who played together in their apartment. It was a shocking mess, with old pizza boxes strewn around, dirty clothes dumped in the most unlikely places, and serious grunge everywhere. Each student sat in his own room at his own computer, but they called out to one another and occasionally jumped up to go look at one another's screens.

In everyday social contexts, family members and friends may play together in the same physical space, talking and laughing while they play (Peterson 2007). So while the *wang ba* is a kind of public space not widely found in North America, some of its sociability is replicated in other settings.

Shared interest in a game provides a means by which people collaborate and socialize. In *wang ba*, players sat next to each other to talk and play:

If there is an empty seat next to a *WoW* player I go over there to sit next to him—even though it is in a really crowded area. We look at each other's equipment and have a conversation about it. Sometimes we exchange seats with other people so that we [*WoW* players] can sit closer to each other. If I am playing by myself I am bored and leave the Internet café. The people here are nice, we play together, they all live around here. We know each other from playing the game.

Notions of “cyberspace” or “metaverse” situate activity solely within the virtual context, missing the more complex experience in which a merge of virtual and real occurs. In *wang ba*, players drew on face-to-face interaction in the physical space of the café, as well as the content of the virtual world of the game to shape experience.

Although the *wang ba* had a positive social energy, we observed a somewhat higher level of wariness on the part of Chinese players than was common in North America. Every economic transaction in and around the game contained within it the potential for abuse, a potential of which Chinese players were constantly aware. In particular, the system of payment

for the game presented an opportunity for cheating that probably contributed to Chinese players' more common experience of being defrauded.

In North America, most players paid for *WoW* by credit card. In China, "point cards," which provided a certain number of hours of play, were used. Often players exchanged game gold for point cards. Sometimes the transaction went bad (in either direction). Having been cheated in a point card transaction was a common experience and came up in the interviews repeatedly. (Initially we did not know enough to ask about it; players themselves raised the topic in the open-ended interviews.)

Many players had had their characters stolen through keylogging or by other means. While North Americans also lost characters, it seemed more of a risk in China. A survey conducted by the China *WoW* Developers' Group reported that half of nearly 400 respondents had had their accounts stolen at least once (Kow and Nardi 2009). One Chinese modder facetiously remarked, "If you have not had your account stolen, you are not a real *WoW* player."

Gold raids sometimes became "black gold" raids in which a guild would recruit players from outside the guild to participate in the raid and then keep all the gold for itself. Promising to distribute the gold at the end of the raid, the raid leaders would instead immediately logoff, leaving the nonguild players empty-handed. Or an individual player would organize a pug and keep all the gold.

Chinese players fought these practices by using the General chat channel to broadcast the names of guilds and individuals who conducted black gold raids. They would also broadcast the names of players who had cheated them individually when selling point cards. After an incident in which he did not receive a point card he had paid for, one player explained:

I reported in the General chat that the person is a liar and is ripping people off. Then he [the perpetrator] logged off. I added him to my Friends List so that I can see every time he comes online and I can tell other people he is not trustworthy.

This player went on to say that if you have had a character stolen you should "go online and warn other people." He suggested creating a low-level character for this purpose.

I never saw the General chat channel on North American servers used

to report cheaters. But guild websites posted stories about players to avoid. For example, a player on the Scarlet Raven website alerted the guild about someone whose paladin character often organized pugs and rolled on gear he did not need. A second player responded to the post, saying that he had also had a bad experience with the miscreant:

I will certainly agree/confirm all of this. I ran heroic SH [a dungeon] with him and several other instances in the past. He is an amazing pally tank, but a gigantic dick.

He need rolled a piece of gear I wanted for my shaman and won, then sharded it and hearthed.

The paladin ninja-ed the shaman gear which he could not use except to transform to a shard (a component in enchantments). The gear the shaman wanted was a rare drop, not something he could hope to obtain without probably running the instance again many times. A shard, on the other hand, could be made from any piece of gear. After inappropriately taking the gear, the paladin disappeared, just as his Chinese counterparts had.

Chinese players went public in denouncing swindlers, while North Americans tended to warn guild members, suggesting the somewhat higher sense of alertness developed on the part of Chinese players.

Some players felt there was considerable cheating because of China's rapid transition to a new economy. One said:

[There is more cheating in China] right now with the quality of life, definitely more than in Europe or America. This is going on in China because Chinese people find money very important because it's just becoming industrialized. It's a little more chaotic.

While North American players bought and sold *WoW* accounts on the Internet, and there were plenty of gold-selling and power-leveling services, there appeared to be more real money/game transactions in China or at least more kinds of such transactions. For example, one guild paid for its voice chat server with gold raised by the guild, which was then sold for RMB (Chinese currency). To economize, many players earned all their play by buying point cards with game gold. Point cards generally sold

for 300 to 550 gold, although prices fluctuated and varied by server. One player said:

I got a lot of gold with my hunter character. I used it to buy point cards. For example, 400 gold for a point card. I look at it as a free game, because I exchange game gold for point cards.

Another said:

If you are clever, you can earn a point card one day in-game.

Just as *World of Warcraft* drew together and mingled real and in-game economies, it also became entangled in Chinese political realities:

Horde have a race Undead. In the past it had only bones with no flesh. Now all Undead grow flesh on their bodies which is not good-looking.

Just before we arrived in China, the Chinese government declared that the Undead race, presented as skeletal creatures, would have to be redrawn with “flesh on their bodies,” as the player noted. In addition to fleshing out the images of Undead, images of skeletons that remained after player death were replaced with large, apparently freshly dug graves heaped with brown dirt. The government action was part of an effort to “purify the Internet of anything that might affect national cultural information security or undermine the attempt to promote a harmonious society” (Dicki 2007; see also Golub and Lingley 2008).

Skeletons have no particular traditional meaning in Chinese culture, and pictures of them did not violate cultural sensibilities (although it would be disrespectful to fail to attend to the remains of a parent or close relative). The prominent graves were far more realistic and noticeable. A player who was an employee at a consulting firm said:

I am not quite clear about the reason [for the action]. Perhaps it is China’s political situation. In the past when you died [in the game] there were bones and skeletons, but now graves are used instead. What we were told is that the skeletons frustrate and scare people. But I feel graves are actually scarier.

The government's action appeared to be a reminder that its censors were monitoring the game and could alter game design to conform to a value pervasively promoted by the Chinese government: "harmony." One player explained:

It's a grave, which didn't exist before. Before . . . there used to be a skeleton. It . . . is part of the government project to introduce harmony.

Another player was more critical:

We dislike the harmony such as the disappearance of skeletons . . . It is feudal and introduced as part of the whole cultural environment in China.

It is perhaps alarming that a government would intrude into a video game to change something as innocuous to Western eyes as a skeleton. But video games seem to attract the attention of moral arbiters. Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007) analyzed the video game monitoring activities of fundamentalist Christian organizations in the United States. Such groups cannot force Blizzard to redraw game graphics, but their critical gaze and directives to their adherents share some similarities with the Chinese government's attempts to shape game content to reflect cultural ideations such as harmony.

Bainbridge and Bainbridge (2007) reported that a website called Christian Answers evaluated video games according to a quantitative scheme. Games were rated on a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best) in the following way:

Christian Rating ("Is the game anti-Christian and immoral in any way?"), Violence ("Is it violent? Does it encourage violent behavior?"), Adult Content ("Sexual encounters, nudity, or suggestive or sexually immoral material?"), and Game Play ("Is the game fun to play? High quality?")

Apart from the dubiousness of scoring games with such quantitative scales (how many body parts need appear to get the dreaded score of 1 for Adult Content?), Bainbridge and Bainbridge observed that the ratings appeared in reviews whose texts criticized games for positively valuing non-Christian traditions and which attempted to create fear around themes such as

“witchcraft” and “sorcery.” They reported the following reviews, which give a sense of the logics and rhetoric Christian critics employed to discourage adherents from playing video games.

For example, witchcraft raised red flags for Christian reviewers:

Perhaps reminded of Exodus 22:18, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” reviewers are offended by thirty-eight games involving magic and witchcraft. Even the popular Pokémon games for young children, in which the player trains cute little animals, come in for criticism: “To gain the competitive edge, a trainer must use magic potions to heal and strengthen his Pokémon, and wear magic badges to control the stronger Pokémon. In addition, the really powerful Pokémon have psychic powers and can throw curses. This bears disturbing similarities to witchcraft.”

Reincarnation was also feared. One reviewer wrote sadly that:

In *Final Fantasy VII*, instead of actually dying, characters in this world diffuse into the planet—into the “Lifestream,” where their consciousness lives on.

The suspicion with which games were viewed by those who found their appeal threatening was expressed in different institutions in China and North America, but the disapproving gaze transcended national boundaries. The activity of watching and judging was sustained in China by government officials and in North America by functionaries of conservative religious traditions. Around 40 percent of Americans identify as born-again Christians (Barna Group 2008); Christian monitoring of games is a culturally significant activity.

Players themselves may gaze with disapproval at the practices of other players. In China, many male players avoided playing female characters. They feared being called “ladyboy”—a term that connotes transvestite or transsexual. One player said:

I hate such ladyboy characters.

Another said he always played males. We asked why.

I don't know. I just dislike turning into a ladyboy. Although the game is a virtual one, a boy is supposed to be a boy and a girl is supposed to be a girl . . . Before this game, I played a Chinese game in which boys and girls could get married. If the two are both boys, I would feel disgusted.

Players repeated this theme:

Dai: My characters are all male. If I picked a female character, they would call me a ladyboy.

Guang: If you are a boy but you play a female character, others will call you ladyboy. I don't want to be called that.

Jian: It's strange to play a female. I do not like the way people look at you if you play a female character. I don't like people mistaking me for a female.

Quan: I don't like the way it feels to play a female character. It doesn't feel comfortable. I don't like the way other players look at me and talk to me then.

One male player began with a female character because he liked the way it looked. But he soon gave up:

When I was first developing my character, the female one, it was always really troublesome to explain that I am a guy in real life. The male is more natural.

A female player who played a female character said:

Sometimes people mistake me for a man and they call me ladyboy. But I don't care.

Despite the disapproval of ladyboys, some Chinese males did choose and enjoy female characters because the female characters were "prettier."

One male player said:

Sometimes I choose a female character, if it looks pretty.

He favored Night Elves.

Another player agreed:

The female Elf is the most beautiful.

Another said:

I never played a female character before. I wanted to see it. The movement is prettier.

We asked male players who played females if they sought a new kind of experience or identity. They answered as American males had.

BN: Is playing a female also a kind of experience change?

Chen: No, it is not. I am a male myself and it is not interesting if there is a male in front of me and I have to face him every day. If your character is a female, it will be more pleasing to both the eye and the mind.

Another player said that playing a female was not a problem for him because it was obvious in chat that he was male:

BN: Do people approach you differently because you are a female character?

Bao: No. They usually can figure it out by the way you chat.

Another said:

If I play a female character, I would say that I am a guy. If they ask me, I tell them.

As in North America, there appeared to be no effort to engage in gender-bending in the sense of males presenting as females. Playing a female character was simply a positive visual experience for males willing to risk being called ladyboy.

While gender-bending was no more a part of the Chinese than the North American *WoW* experience, I sensed a more sober ethos among Chinese than among North Americans. In China, ladyboys were met with moral disapproval. North American chat was full of sexual fun up to and including sexual predation. For example:

- [14:32] Mrs. Pain: I do know we have fun with the new players  
 [14:32] Mrs. Pain: that dont want to believe I am a woman  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: one of the guys I have known for awhile  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: tells them I am a sexual predator  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: looking for young boys  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: lol  
 [14:33] Dan: lol  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: and I am a man  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: and dont believe me  
 [14:33] Mrs. Pain: lol  
 [14:34] Mrs. Pain: and chippie [a player] tells new ppl we are lizbian  
 lovers

Understanding cross-cultural differences in expressions in sexually themed chat requires much more research, although it seems that discourse such as Mrs. Pain's, invoking homosexuality as a joke, would have been unlikely in China.

It is difficult to know the percentage of female *WoW* players in China. In a large Internet cafe in Beijing, we did a count. About 10 percent were female (6 out of 57). While there are undoubtedly many reasons for such a low rate of female participation, we were told that female players were less skilled at *WoW* and in particular they were poor at PvP play.

Why Chinese female players were less skilled at PvP play is a complex cultural question.

Wenjing Liang, one of my research assistants, suggested that traditional gender roles are still strong in China and displays of strength and competition are not traditionally feminine. In her words:

In Chinese traditional morality and culture, males are supposed to be active and be breadwinners, while females are supposed to be quiet and live at home. Additionally, females are more sensitive to feelings and

emotions, and they like activities such as watching movies, chatting, and shopping.

There was a marked preference for PvP among the players we talked to. Since most players appeared to be playing on PvP servers, it seems possible that *WoW* in China has been established as a masculine space in part because of its association with PvP, the more competitive, masculine form of the game. We counted the local servers available in Beijing (servers were divided regionally in China). There were 127 PvP servers and 20 PvE. We were only able to find one player on a PvE server out of the 40 we interviewed (he was visiting Beijing from Inner Mongolia). In North America, about half the servers were PvP. I have no data on whether women tended to choose them less often; further research is needed on this question.

It should be noted that there were many women in Chinese Internet cafes; the cafes themselves were not masculine spaces. Women were watching movies or instant messaging or engaged in other digital activities.

In addition to the vastly larger number of PvP servers, PvP was marked linguistically in China, referred to with the English “PK” or “player kill.”<sup>2</sup> Players reported that they enjoyed PK because of its performative challenge and interest. PvE was “boring,” a word used repeatedly in the interviews.

A male player remarked:

I think playing against computer characters is far less interesting than playing with the human brain. The competition between living players attracts me.

Another said:

One of the unique things about this game is that you can do PK, you can fight against somebody else.

Both male and female players told us that females were less skilled at PK and did not enjoy it. Qing, Mei, and Luli were female players:

Qing: In general girls don't like PK.

Mei: For girls playing PK, it is easy for them to lose a fight and be killed

because the skills of girls are really not good. My PK abilities are weak and I lose often.

Luli: Girls seldom PK with each other.

Male players in China also posited female players' generally lower level of skill at the game as a whole. A 25-year-old software engineer said:

There are some complicated controls in *WoW* so girls don't play as often.

Another said:

You can tell the difference between a male and female player by their playing style. There are probably about 10 percent that are women. Being a woman in the game, they are getting taken advantage of, because they are weaker.

A male player said, rather dubiously, of his girlfriend who played:

For female players, it is certain she is a good player, compared with other girls.

In China, the prevalence of PvP play, and its association with masculinity (akin to the masculinity of first-person shooter games reported by Kennedy, as well as Codex and Stupid Tall Hot Girl), seemed to render *WoW* less desirable to female players. Female players themselves agreed that they were less skilled at PK, and they declared less interest in it. Males felt that PvE was boring; their choice of PK was not intended to exclude women, although it may have had that effect. In North America, the greater presence of PvE servers possibly creates an opening for women since it appears that many women start playing *WoW* with a boyfriend, husband, or other family member. If more men begin to play in spaces more comfortable for women, women may be more likely to participate. This empirical question requires further data and analysis.

Of course it is not only women who come to *WoW* through members of their personal social networks. Men do, too. In China, the social experience of play seemed even more important than in North America for many

players. Thomas and Lang (2007) remarked on the unique role of *wang ba* in China, observing that the Internet cafe is one of the only places to “escape” parents and the rigors of the Chinese educational system. There seemed to be fewer opportunities for young people to socialize outside of school and home. In North America, starting in elementary school, myriad venues support such social life: sports associations and clubs (such as AYSO soccer or swim teams), church groups, after-school clubs, and even garage bands (which require garages, something absent in China). A Chinese player observed with approval that *WoW* was engineered to require collaboration:

The game requires collaboration, so we might say, why don't we go out to play together?

Another Chinese player noted that without collaboration the game cannot be played as successfully:<sup>3</sup>

In *WoW*, people who don't fit in with a group cannot get good equipment easily.

Several noted that collaboration and the competition of PK went together:

Chen: After I played *WoW* for awhile, I realized it's more meaningful than other games because of the collaboration. Even PK requires collaboration.

Liu: I like the team cooperation in battlegrounds.

Feng: I can play with other players. Anything can happen in the game. The Alliance might come in and attack you. It's exciting. I like the fact that you fight against real people and not the computer. Everyone controls his own character. You compete with each other.

A player who enjoyed raiding observed:

When raiding, there are so many people doing something together, which is very enjoyable.

One player compared Chinese games to *WoW*:

Individual heroism is more common in Chinese online games than in *WoW*. Many Chinese games focus more on the fighting between players. In *WoW*, players play together in raids and can fight against the monsters together.

Several players emphasized the team aspect of guilds, e.g.:

When joining a guild, you are not a single person but a team.

*WoW* enlivened out-of-game social life as well. One player said that he and his colleagues from work played together in the evening and that during the day at work, "We always have something to talk about." A player in Shanghai reported:

One of the people from the guild came to Shanghai recently. We all went out to dinner together and hosted him.

The sociability of *World of Warcraft* amplified the sociability of the *wang ba*, extending and reshaping it. Players shared not just the congenial social atmosphere of the cafe but an engaging virtual space that formed the basis of lively conversations and absorbing joint activity.

## Game Design and Cultural Borders

The popularity of a game designed in Southern California in a country like China, with its radically different history and culture, foregrounds the question of the power of a software artifact to organize human activity. In fundamental ways, *WoW* is *WoW* wherever it is. Were it not for language barriers, any *WoW* player could sit down and play on any server anywhere in the world. There appears to be a common core of participatory aesthetic experience that transcends national and cultural borders. The broad themes of performance, competition, visual immersion, and sociability that emerged in North America were also evident in China.

The appealing aesthetic experience of game play excited similar concerns in both cultures on the part of authorities who attempted to impose



play, we should be alert to variable cultural inflections in player experience. Such variability indicates that assumptions about virtual worlds as sites of gender-bending and flexible identities must be scrutinized with careful empirical data. There is no North American analog to the ladyboy meme in Chinese *WoW* play, with its tendency to suppress males playing female characters however much they would like to look at them. Chinese in-game economic innovations such as gold raids (and their degenerate form, black gold raids) demonstrate differential local cultural solutions to certain universal problems of the game. The Chinese “town crier” practice of denouncing unethical players in the General chat channel suggests the more pervasive fear of being cheated in China compared to North American practice, which located such matters as internal to guilds. The overwhelming choice for PvP play on the Chinese servers we examined was striking, possibly impacting female participation in *World of Warcraft* and linking to complex themes of competition, masculinity, and femininity.

In an article in *Science*, Bainbridge (2007) observed:

The present moment marks a major historical transition. Video games and computer games are in the process of evolving into something much richer, namely virtual worlds, at the same time that electronic games are surpassing the motion picture industry in dollar terms and beginning to cut into television.

*WoW*, and other social games, are emerging as global artifacts that appear to sustain, in vastly different cultural contexts, alternatives to, or displacements of, traditional media. The narcotized populace passively immersed in a spectacle of images seems to have given way, in part at least, to activity in digital worlds that create their own playful problems to be solved with cultural imaginings such as gold raids and Dragon Kill Point systems. That people behave badly in virtual game worlds, requiring player-developed social controls, is perhaps nothing more than an indication of the worlds’ status as, and footing in, real human social activity—both East and West.