British Journal of Chinese Studies, Vol. 12.2, July 2022
ISSN 2048-0601

Negotiating Chinese Youth Cyber Nationalism through Play Methods

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Abstract

In this paper, we will look at how Chinese youth perform nationalism through player-devised play methods. We argue that as young players become more politically conscious, they are negotiating their politics through play. Within these play situations, players are solidifying their individual beliefs while finding like-minded players. However, players are also establishing a nationalism that is defined not only through a set of core characteristics, but also through an active rejection of the politics embedded within western-oriented digital spaces, by playing in non-standard ways. Through transgressive play methods, players are countering hegemonic western politics present in commercial games and replacing them with their own nationalist politics through player-enforced rules, discussed through internet forums and preserved through memorial videos on online websites. We will look at two specific case studies: firstly, we will look at the Red Shirt Army, a streaming community in H1Z1, *where players acted out Chinese military superiority by flouting the four player limit originally set by the designers; secondly, we will look at the Great Socialist Production play method, where Chinese players went against the morality set in* Frostpunk*, a steampunk game by Polish developers, by arguing that greater societal prosperity was more important than "white left" moral posturing.*

Keywords: play, play methods, games, nationalism, transgressive play, politics, *H1Z1*, *Frostpunk*, Red Shirt Army

Introduction

In this paper, we will look at how Chinese youth perform patriotism through player-devised play methods in digital games. We argue that as young players become more societally conscious, they start negotiating their politics and personal beliefs through play. Within these play situations, players are solidifying these individual positions while finding like-minded players. Players are also establishing a nationalism that is defined not only through a set of core characteristics, but also through an active rejection of the politics embedded within games dominated by western politics, by playing in non-standard ways. Through innovative play methods, players combat the hegemonic politics present in commercial western-made games and replace them with their own nationalistic politics through player-enforced rules, discussed through internet forums and preserved in various multimedia forms on online websites.

We will first open this paper by looking at previous literature on online youth nationalism in China. Youth cyber nationalism has co-evolved alongside different political, cultural and technological elements over three stages in the past decades in China, each with their own representative events. Though this brief literature review, we will show that subsets of online spaces have formed identities based around performative nationalism – that is, not only is there an identity growing and being founded on a dominant patriotism, but this identity is also being brought forward outside specific online spaces, into both the Chinese mainstream as well as largely foreign-dominated digital spaces. The literature also shows how the intersectionality of youth, cyber nationalism and game space in China have significantly

increased over the past decade. The term 'youth' in our paper is a general orientation held by Chinese digital game players. In this usage, 'youth' incorporates a flexible age range mostly including those born after 1980s, as Marcella Szablewicz has identified (Szablewicz, 2020).

We will then discuss how this performative patriotism positions itself differently in games by looking at papers which discuss player-created performative practices. We will start by showing how game design embeds meaning, including political meaning, which is revealed through play. We will then analyse how players become co-designers of meaning in their chosen game spaces. We use play methods (Harrington, 2020) to show how play that diverges from designer intentions happens not only by having specific rules created through a community, but also by seeking to use that same play as a way to learn, reflect and even challenge latent meaning within games. Online youth communities create their own play, not only to reject previous politics embedded within the original game designs, but also to negotiate what it means for them to be patriotic in unwelcoming environments.

We will then look at two case studies: first, we will look at the play method devised by Douyu streamer EMoQQ (恶魔 QQ) and his Red Shirt Army (*hongyi jun* 红衣军). The Red Shirt Army devised a play method in *H1Z1* (Daybreak Game Company, 2015) where they would gather as large groups in order to dominate players outside their makeshift army. In the second case study, we will look at the simulation game *Frostpunk* (11bit, 2018) and the online youth-devised "Great Socialist Production" (*shehui zhuyi da shengchan* 社会主义大生产) play method. In this play method, youth players denigrated the western-facing morality system in the game, instead choosing to focus on a play method which emphasised hard work and sacrifice in return for a brighter in-game future.

By the end of this paper, we will have shown how nationalism forms an integral part of a subset of online youth identities, and how making play methods within previously established, rhetorically loaded game spaces provide these youth players with a space to not only make sense of their identities, but also a way to negotiate them with other players and put them to the test with what are often seen as foreign adversaries. These communities form around specific games, and the newly fashioned ways to play them. While these communities are not formal and their play methods are rarely codified (as disagreements within the case studies will show), there are often enough consistent play results for this analysis to be tenable. These stem from a collective iterative play making process which seeks a similar goal – to make sense of nationalism as a core tenet of certain cyber youth identities.

Youth Cyber Nationalism

Cyber activities of Chinese youth have proved to be a rich field for study of cultural practices and political engagements, despite their seemingly apolitical appearance as concentrated on recreational and commercial practices (Lindtner and Szablewicz, 2011; Liu, 2012; Yang, 2011). Moreover, in the last decade, scholars have observed and commented on surging online cyber nationalism, particularly in the communities built around digital game spaces and forums.

Wu Xu conceptualises Chinese cyber nationalism as "a non-government sponsored ideology and movement that has originated, existed, and developed in China's online sphere over the past decade (1994–present)" (Wu, 2007: 155). It is intertwined with a frugal patriotism, historical nationalism, and top-down ideology, but distinguishes itself by "its popularity, persistence, and independence" (Wu, 2007: 156). Wu also refers to the reactive characteristics of cyber nationalism, driven by particular events and instances. Zhang Tao (2013) outlines the evolution of "cyber nationalism" in China in two stages among Chinese youth internet users across the first decade of the 21st century. The first stage stemmed from the mid-1990s, as early netizens responded to international disputes over China's territorial sovereignty. These mostly

took the form of "Defending Diaoyu Island" (*Bao Diao* 保钓) movements by Chinese activists, in reference to territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea in 2003 and 2004. Various internet forums were formed in response and both online and offline patriotic campaigns were incubated as grass-roots patriotism. The "anti-CNN.com" internet campaigns have been one of the most significant registers of the second phase, arguably more organized than the first. The 'anti-CNN' website was launched by a Chinese university graduate in 2008 as countercriticism of CNN and other western news media for their critical coverage of the Chinese state, particularly of the Tibetan protests during the Beijing Olympics. Participants in the 'anti-CNN' website interpreted western coverage and critique of China as "a wider systematic western anti-Chinese bias" (Zhang, 2013: 79). Charles Zhang (Zhang Chaoyang 张朝阳), the founder and CEO of the Sohu internet services company, a leading Chinese web portal and internet firm, also announced a public boycott for French products in protest against the French media's sympathy for Tibetan activists (Osnos, 2008). The patriotic public outcry from the younger generations led to the emergence of the popular designation for them as "angry youth" (*fen qing* 愤青). Evan Osnos has described this Chinese nationalist voice as "neocon nationalist" (Osnos, 2008). This represented a significant change in orientation from earlier youth generations in the 80s, who were more liberal-minded and looked up to western democratic values, to the extent that some domestic critics observed that they had developed a "reverse racism" (*nixiang zhongzu zhuyi* 逆向种族主义) against their Chinese identities (Wang cited in Rosen, 2009: 361). Stanley Rosen describes youth nationalism among the post-1980s generation (*baling hou* 八零后) as multifaceted and highly flexible, as the youth expressed their political orientations in surveys as "materialistic" and "pragmatic", but were also willing to self-sacrifice in service of certain collective calls and during national disasters such as the 2008 Sichuan earthquake (Rosen, 2009: 361).

Through in-depth interviews with Chinese university students, Liu Fengshu (2012) has argued that surging cyber nationalism among Chinese youth, including game forum discussions, should be seen as bearing a "'dual' political identity". This political identity encompasses two seemingly contrasting but complementary stances: one voice adopted by youth focused on patriotism (*aiguo zhuyi* 爱国主义) as apolitical and as a naturalized moral deed rather than a form of political participation; the other reflects the actual political situation mediated through the youths' online and offline selves in a post-socialist and market-oriented authoritarian society, where citizen engagement is not encouraged and western democratic values can be labelled as anti-China (Liu, 2012: 53). As elucidated by Liu, the Chinese youth in his research "did see online nationalism as a demonstration of democracy because, they claimed, it is participatory in nature and everyone (with internet access) has an equal chance to have a voice" (Liu, 2012: 63).

At the beginning of the Chinese online digital game industry, from 2001, patriotic red themes were strong sellers, especially China's war of resistance against Japan – this includes games from the *KangRi* (抗日 *Resistance War Online*) franchise (Nie, 2013). Annie Hongping Nie identifies the phenomenon of these Sino-Japan war games as a multi-scalar showcase for Chinese nationalism, infused with both top-down patriotic propaganda led by the party-state and internet-grounded popular nationalism shared by the gaming public. Nie has also pointed out how the Chinese game industry has been incorporated by the government since the early 21st century. The Chinese gaming industry collectively capitalizes on the sentiment of popular nationalism through domestic 'red' games as economic, cultural and political capital to align with the ideological pursuits and struggles that the country is facing. Although it was not centred on player agency in their play methods, Nie's article mentioned the important role Chinese patriotic gamers played in this game franchise's early boom, and how players went

beyond the official reductionist historical narratives by creating feuds and group battles between the in-game Chinese soldiers in anti-Japanese war games which more closely resembles historical events (Nie, 2013).

The youth players in our analytical lens are a generation that have grown up amid a domestic and international discourse wherein China as an economic-political entity is significantly different from previous generations, and one in which China occupies a much more central role in contemporary global discourse. While youths are regarded as an 'informed public' with abundant internet exposure and the skills to break through firewalls, they are not necessarily aligned with western liberal values. On the contrary, many youths identify with Chinese ideological territoriality and with state-led patriotic education and its associated master narratives of the country's history and collective memories (Wang, 2008). The Chinese government launched the nationwide 'patriotic education' in 1994 to strengthen the ideological weight of the country's education system via state-proved pedagogical cultural materials. This state-initiated education is centred around the country's historical key narratives, present goals and future revitalizations. Such narratives include the 'Century of Humiliation', portraying China as a major victim of western imperialism and colonialism in the 19th and 20th century; as well as "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" as a major discourse in the grand 'Chinese dream' embodied in the current party leadership. Following these top-down ideological mouldings, Huang observed that public media discourse in China had shifted to "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122) and that the post-90s generation (*jiuling hou* 九零后) or Generation Z, who grew up in a more economically well-off Chinese society, have formed new ways of perceiving China and the outside world, with "a false sense of national superiority" (Huang, 2021: 126).

We could trace youth nationalism as it has emerged in digital game spaces to several cyber nationalist events in earlier years, performed on broad internet spaces with important digital game-related elements. One is the Diba Expedition (*Diba Chuzheng* 帝吧出征) in 2016, where huge numbers of users of the Baidu forum Diba 帝吧 launched planned trolling campaigns on the Facebook pages of several pro-democracy media and public figures in Hong Kong and Taiwan. The forum's membership, which numbered over 20m at the time, mostly consisted of young male post-90s gamers (Yang, 2019). Diba 'warriors' left large numbers of emoji with Chinese nationalist content, using the battle rhetoric of digital games as if they were in large multiplayer war games (Yang, 2019; Wang, 2019). As Yang Guobin points out, the Diba Expedition was more of "a performance of the self" as the effects and reactions from the imagined enemies were not the participants' primary concerns (Yang, 2019: 2). The patriotic slogans and images were mainly a performance for like-minded Chinese youth. Wu Jing, Li Simin and Wang Hongzhe (2019) argued that the Diba Expedition represented a new form of cyber nationalism (the third wave) with roots in internet fandom culture, transplanted into national politics (Wu et al., 2019). The Diba Expedition involved many young female netizens who were into idols and celebrity culture, such as from the popular internet novel website Jin Jiang 晋江 with its iconic pink background, hence the emergence of the term "little pink" (*xiao fenhong* 小粉红), which referred to a new type of patriotic Chinese youth (Liu, 2019). Interestingly as observed by scholars studying the Diba Expedition, the collective coordinated cyber activities were carried out under strict community-imposed rules, such as posting unified messages. The campaign thus formed a highly repetitive ritual, while any alternative personal expressions were largely fended off in order to "secure an 'overwhelming Victory'" for the goals of the patriotic expedition (Liu, 2019: 105). This emphasis on collective victory as a form of cyber nationalism is more obviously seen in Chinese e-sports discourse and communities. When the Chinese Dota 2 team Wings won The International 6 in 2016, it was widely

celebrated as a victory for the Chinese nation. Here, the century of humiliation narrative was reproduced to generate shared sentiments among players and game fans, in which the Chinese (game) victory brushed off former discrimination that Chinese players endured (Ismangil, 2018).

Finding the Right Way to Play

Game studies work has spent significant time and effort discussing what it means to play a game the right way. Earlier research has especially focused on the player's role in the game. Jonas Heide Smith distinguishes between the "active player" who is looking for play "not prescribed or predicted by the game designers" and the "rational player" who is "optimising her outcome within the game as defined by the objective goals" (Smith, 2006: 24). Espen Aarseth has discussed the difference between the implied player who finds "a set of expectations that [they] must fulfil for the game to exercise its effect" and the transgressive player who rejects the implied player for "a (perhaps illusory) way for [them] to regain their sense of identity and uniqueness through the mechanisms of the game itself" (Aarseth, 2007: 132). David Myers states that there is a difference between "good play", which is attained through mastery of the game, and "bad play" gained from transgressing the standard set method of play (Myers, 2010: 19). While approaches towards divergent play differ between these theorists, all have common threads. Firstly, they acknowledge that players overwhelmingly realise that there is an ascribed way of playing: this method is shown to players through either explicit means, where game designers instruct players or even forbid specific play methods, or through implicit means, such as rewarding specific plays and disincentivising others. Secondly, they also acknowledge that no matter how strongly these explicit and implicit means are pushed, players overwhelmingly find ways to play against these currents – whether out of curiosity, a wish to win at all costs, or even out of self-discovery.

Game design choices can encourage divergent and curious play. Rilla Khaled argues that game design can encourage critical reflection through being "less focused on product and more focused on process" (Khaled, 2018: 5). She further states that situations in games can "explicitly represent systems of beliefs, propositions and processes" and "present us with problems for which we may not have ready-to-hand or simple solutions" (Khaled, 2018: 5) The transformative potential of game design, through the chosen manners of play, is a position that is equally shared by other scholars (Flanagan, 2009; Gualeni, 2015).

Players can adopt transgressive mindsets towards previously established play, and game design choices encourage players to adopt an active player mindset towards their state in the game. The next step is to analyse how players form communities around creating divergent manners of play, expanding the communities that perform this play, and ultimately even codifying this play both for posterity as well as ease of sharing. These methods ultimately convert "bad play" into "good play", as players become productive towards a game space's ecosystem that previously resisted it. In previous work, one of the authors introduced the term "play methods" (Harrington, 2020) to look at how players form communities and create their own play by creating and upholding their own creative constraints.

The concept of play methods incorporates two ideas: firstly, it acknowledges that whenever players play, even when they are actively flouting designers' intentions, they are following self-created rule-sets. They have a method behind their play. These can be very meticulously made, as players meet in online communities to discuss and develop the best way to play for a specific purpose. There is a great deal of seriousness in playful endeavours. Secondly, it further acknowledges the earlier discussion of Khaled and Flanagan – that play can be a method for learning, even when it is done in a way that lacks academic rigour. Players

establish ad-hoc hypotheses in their play, whether hypotheses of skill or of reflection, and they use their play to test these hypotheses.

Players create their own play methods for several reasons: some players might develop a play method out of sheer curiosity for what the results might be, such as standing still for a long time in an action game. Other players develop new play methods to modify previously set goals within a game – speedrunners and e-sports players generally fit under this category, where additional parameters are added to the base rules. However, for a large subset of players, creating new play methods serves as a way to create meaning. Players sometimes inject meaning into game-spaces that might not have previously had it – players creating spell-lit vigils for lost friends in online spaces serves as a particularly touching example. However, players also create new play methods to challenge previously established meaning within a specific game: for example, Muslim players in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (2020) felt slighted that while most other global holidays are celebrated through events uploaded by the game's Japanese developers, they did not receive representation. Hence, they created play methods which replicated the morning suhoor and evening iftar meal held during the month of Ramadan, as well as the fast-ending celebration of Eid al-Fitr in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* and invited other players to join them (Ismail, 2020).

In the following two case studies, we will claim that Chinese youth players have created specific play methods both to inject meaning in spaces that under-represent them and also to challenge pre-designed meaning within these game spaces. Just like most play communities, their play methods are not codified, necessarily organised or even always congruent. However, as these play methods develop, commonalities emerge – both in the way these play methods are created and executed, but also in what they mean for the players executing them.

These two game examples have very significant common elements in negotiating players' nationalistic Chinese identities: firstly, both of our cases were made by western companies, in the USA and Poland respectively and with according hegemonic game design choices embedded inside them. Secondly, both of these games became very popular in China. While this was not completely unintentional, as the developers did include Mandarin localisation (which many bigger games still lack to this day), the Chinese to non-Chinese ratios were higher than the developers anticipated. Thirdly, both of these case studies include instances in which online Chinese youth had strong reactions to their western-oriented designs and player bases. Having two closely aligned case studies will help us more easily draw comparisons and find commonalities in how Chinese online youth sought to negotiate political ideologies within games that resisted such play through play communities.

Case Study 1 – H1Z1's Red Shirt Army

H1Z1 (2015) is an early battle royale survival game akin to *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* (2016, hereafter PUBG) and *Rust* (2013), landmark games which really pushed the genre to prominence. *H1Z1* was designed by Daybreak Games, a San Diego based company. The game peaked in popularity in the summer of 2017, at which time it had over 150,000 concurrent players from all across the world on Steam alone, including a very sizeable Chinese player base (SteamCharts, 2022).

In *H1Z1* and other battle royale games, players are encouraged to form small groups to gather resources such as guns and makeshift cars and then work to eliminate the other players in the same game lobby. The game ends when there is only one team (or the last living individuals in any given team) left. In *H1Z1*, players are allowed to form a four-player team within a hundred-player game. However, this constraint is very easily flouted by more

resourceful players who use outside means to coordinate larger groups through matching in-game clothing and pre-establishing meeting spaces on the game map.

EMoQQ (恶魔 QQ), a famous Chinese streamer on the Douyu 斗鱼 streaming platform, was one such player. He flouted the four-player team limit constraint by establishing the Red Shirt Army. While streaming, EMoQQ encouraged his viewers to clothe their avatars in red shirts and look for an *H1Z1* play lobby at the same times as he was. In an interview with the user Jiuyue (九月; Jiuyue, 2017), EMoQQ stated that at first he wanted his viewers to wear a Chinese flag shirt. However, since buying this would cost money for his followers, he instead settled on a red shirt, a free in-game choice. In addition to flouting the team limit constraint, he also added another play constraint – he implored his loyal viewers to never shoot any other players in the Red Shirt Army so that they could easily overwhelm all the other players. In any given hundred-player game, EMoQQ would often muster at least thirty people to his Red Shirt Army. Since *H1Z1* only recognises up to four players (one team) as winners, EMoQQ added one final constraint. At the end of each game, the Red Shirt Army lined up to be shot by EMoQQ, guaranteeing his individual (but their communal) victory. Unsurprisingly, EmoQQ's play sessions usually ended with the Red Shirt Army's absolute dominance, to the chagrin of other players in the same lobbies.

For some players, the Red Shirt Army play method was overwhelmingly an iterative form of play which guaranteed they would win every game – it was a form of collective cheating (Consalvo, 2007). Internet commenter Youdian taoyan wenrou de nühaizi (有点讨厌温柔的女孩子, hereafter Youdian) stated that they felt that the red shirts were overwhelmingly a front to make griefing, which means annoying other players just for the sake of it, in H1Z1 acceptable (Youdian, 2018) – before the Red Shirt Army, EMoQQ had led the "EMo Army" (lit. "Monstrous Army", *Emo jun* 恶魔军), affectionately named after him. However, as even EMoQQ stated in the earlier interview playing up conflict with foreign players led to a large increase in viewer numbers and player interest, which affirmed the performative aspect of their play (EmoQQ cited in Jiuyue, 2017). Youdian further complained that the Red Shirt Army play method sought to eliminate anyone who did not conform by wearing red even if they spoke Chinese – to the point that *H1Z1* became a sea of red shirts, as all the players who did not assimilate started quitting in groves for brighter battle royale pastures (Youdian, 2018).

However, for other players, it served as a way to express nationalism in a game that did not account for such displays of identity, especially when some players felt they were being subjected to racist and xenophobic attacks by foreign players. Some users defended the Red Shirt Army, arguing it was only intended to simply counter foreign aggression in the first place (Fei chang ta buke, 2021； acen, 2018; Wang Guanxiong, 2017), as many non-Chinese *H1Z1* users shouted insults directed against China no matter who they killed. Player acen stated that these nationalistic reactions eventually degenerated to the point where players were acting merely as "patriotic bandits" (*aiguo de tufei* 爱国的土匪), but their original intention was to show that merely that Chinese players would not take insults lying down (acen, 2018).

Playing to combat foreign aggression aligns with the non-play goals of online Chinese nationalist youth described earlier. We can locate the second and third waves of Chinese youth cyber nationalism as discussed earlier in the Red Shirt Army's play method: playing in an organized, self-sacrificial way to secure overall a Chinese victory against the 'foreign' rivals. *H1Z1* presents an interesting case as, within games, the perceived other is no longer an intangible being that is imagined to wish harm onto a core group; the perceived other is tangible, acting and actively retaliating against them as foreign threats. The threat of the perceived other is being actively legitimised through the operation of the inbuilt game goals originally set by

the designers – namely, to defeat other players outside of your pre-set player cluster (Heide, 2015; Aarseth, 2013). For the Red Shirt Army, this cluster instead turned into a makeshift national collective bound by a shirt-based standard.

These accounts of insults against China are not without their merit, although even EMoQQ himself stated that these verbal duels were common within *H1Z1* and often reciprocal (Jiuyue, 2017). Meanwhile, blogger Wang Guanxiong 王冠雄 argued that aside from wanting to stand up to a climate in which unremitting insults were directed against them, Chinese players were also not particularly used to the sandbox environment that *H1Z1* afforded. In the absence of a clearly delineated designer intentionality, players made up their own intentions. This led them to band up and play together, and incentivised inside rules which focused around displays of "enhancing national prestige" (*hongyang guowei* 弘扬国威; Wang Guanxiong, 2017) even if they often came at the expense of international players. This aligned with the previously noted online nationalist fervour, which focused on "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122).

EMoQQ was eventually banned from *H1Z1*. However, the Red Shirt Army play method that EMoQQ pioneered continued not only in *H1Z1*, but also in similar games such as the aforementioned *PUBG* and *Rust*. This trend accelerated following EMoQQ's ban, which caused a slight dip in Chinese player numbers, and *H1Z1*'s cataclysmic loss of players. After EMoQQ was banned from *H1Z1*, some of his viewers fondly reminisced on their play sessions. For example, the viewer Shenfancong 神烦葱 uploaded a compilation video on Bilibili, in which he uploaded short clips of players performing the Red Shirt Army play method (Shenfancong, 2017). Viewers were actively using "bullets" (*danmu* 弹幕), the term for Bilibil's embedded video comments, to express their gratitude to EMoQQ and the Red Shirt Army. As the bullets appear overlaid on the video itself, the screen itself was flooded with colourful comments. Some bullets expressed sympathy for EMoQQ following his ban, some expressed affection for the Red Shirt Army, which might simply have acted as a proxy for being an EMoQQ viewer and part of his online community as the next iteration of the EMo Army. However, quite a few bullets directly performed nationalistic sentiments, as similarly evidenced in previous online communal expeditions such as the Diba warriors (Yang, 2019). "China number 1" was the most commonly employed nationalistic phrase. Equally, many homophonic iterations of this phrase such as *chuan ne nan bo wan* (穿呢难波湾) and *chuan na nan bo wan* (传娜男拨玩) were scattered throughout the video.

However, there were also further internet culture phrases that found themselves prominently displayed in the video. This included phrases such as "If miracles have a colour, it is definitely Chinese red" (*Ruguo qiji you yanse, na yiding shi Zhongguo hong* 如果奇迹有颜色，那么一定是中国红).

This phrase was carried over from the *LoveLive!* community, a collective of Japanese virtual idols, which form different idol groups including μ and Aquors. As might be expected, the fan community for these virtual idols is largely made up of young male fans. While the *LoveLive!* groups are overwhelmingly virtual, forming parts of anime, manga and games, the *LoveLive!* franchise occasionally organises live shows, performed by hired singers and dancers who play the part of the virtual idols. During the Animelo Summer Live show in 2014, the stage was flushed with the μ's trademark orange hue, at which point viewers watching the even on a Bilibili livestream posted a flurry of bullets, writing "If miracles have a colour, then it is definitely orange" (*Ruguo qiji you yanse, na yiding shi chengse* 如果奇迹有颜色，那么一定是橙色). This phrase spawned many iterations. However, the aforementioned Chinese red version of the phrase has surpassed the popularity of even the original phrase. The Chinese red

iteration has made it all the way to mainstream discourse, especially during the 2016 Rio Olympics and subsequent National Day celebrations (Geng Baike, 2016). Even more recently, the phrase has been seen on CCTV (2021) and China News (2021) online news articles as a catchy phrase that acts as praise for China's technological and societal advances. However, the journey into mainstream discourse could not have happened without first gaining prominence in online youth communities, starting with the *LoveLive!* fandom and eventually moving from the idol's orange into the country's red in uploads such as Shenfancong's Bilibili video. This shows not only the cyber nationalism as it is performed in internet ecospheres, especially in games and game-adjacent spaces (Szablewicz, 2020), but how these cyber nationalistic discourses are influencing mainstream political discourse, if not mainstream politics at large.

The Red Shirt Army play method became so widespread that it not only attracted copycats within the Chinese internet sphere, but also across the globe. North American players such as Zeb (2016) turned *H1Z1* into a battleground of red vs blues (or occasionally non-reds), as EMoQQ attested in his interview. Thus the game took on a double layer of signification, as players tried to defeat the masses of red shirts. Not only were outside players trying to negate the effectiveness of the Red Shirt Army play method, they were also offering a political rebuttal, albeit a weak one, to an ideological performance. Other players such as Grimmybear (2017), as well as others (Ther01231, as shown by Bibou, 2017) responded by trying to infiltrate the Red Shirt Army instead, bringing them down from the inside, albeit with minimal success.

While Chinese players felt slighted and devised play methods in order to transform the embedded politics of *H1Z1* into something more amenable, Zeb and similar players used new play methods to maintain the designed status quo. These examples both sought to negate Chinese players' transformative play (Gualeni, 2015) by showing that it was unwelcome within the online space, but also affirmed the "dual" political identities of Chinese players (Liu, 2017) who took patriotic performative play as apolitical, but ended getting caught up in the politics of both the game world and the social world. Games are positioned uniquely in this respect, as their base rhetorical model not only invites user input, but often results in unexpected pushback. Khaled discussed how effective reflective game design encourages disruption and reflection, over comfort and immersion, as this encourages players to constantly remediate their beliefs through their play (Khaled, 2018). *H1Z1* affirmed these political identities by not only giving space for players to present these identities, but by further allowing them to survive in the face of adversity. The only way foreign players could stop the nationalistic rhetoric was by appealing to higher powers in the form of the developers of *H1Z1* to suppress the resilient voices of players such as the Red Shirt Army.

The Red Shirt Army play method bore a bit more weight than Zeb and Ther01231's counterplay methods as their nationalistic performance served as a two-tiered response to *H1Z1*'s design. First of all, the Red Shirt Army rejected the prototypical design premise established in *H1Z1*, which sought to force all players to play in small teams – as we saw earlier, some iterations of Chinese online nationalism interpret democratisation as many online voices all counting equally (Liu, 2012). This nationalistic sentiment seen as core to China's identity is spelt out much more clearly in the next case study, wherein players demonstrate this both in their writing, and also through their chosen play method. Secondly, the performance of the Red Shirt Army Play method also serves as an answer to a gaming landscape which rarely portrays China as successful, militarily or otherwise, or even as anything but an antagonist. Popular western game design rarely offers players ways to express non-American identities, especially within military settings, as noted by research on 'militainment' and the hyper-capitalistic military complex in games (Sterczewski, 2021; Höglund, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). This nationalistic response was also reflected by the popularity of anti-Japanese games discussed earlier (Nie, 2013). The Red Shirt Army play method allowed players to not only

perform a nationalistic Chinese identity, but more importantly perform it on their own terms – as protagonists, and more importantly, as winners.

Case Study 2 – Frostpunk's Great Socialist Production

Frostpunk (2018) is a game released by 11Bit Studios, a Polish game company. Unlike *H1Z1*'s rise and fall, *Frostpunk* had a very strong release showing, amassing 25,000 players in consecutive peak player counts on Steam on release in the first month. This figure fell over subsequent months. Part of its formula for success was its notably excellent Mandarin localisation. Ye notes that upon release the game was wildly popular in China. Of the 668,000 copies sold as of his article's publication, well over a third had gone to Chinese players (Ye, 2018).

In *Frostpunk*, players find themselves suffering amid a new ice age. Players take on the role of commander of one of the last few remaining human settlements. Their job is to make sure that people under their rule survive. As they play the game, they are presented with moral choices: whether to subject their workers to awful labour conditions, whether to establish a cult of personality, whether to adopt child labour in their settlement, whether dissidents should be forcefully removed from your society, and so on. The game's motif is that moral choices are hard, but they have to be made.

Success is determined by two metrics: survival and moral resilience. The first condition is straightforward – players have to make sure their settlement does not succumb to sheer cold. This is done by controlling the workers in their settlement, sending them to collect resources, produce food, maintain electricity and other such simulation-based tasks. If they do not manage to maintain their settlement, the game ends: they are given a game over screen and told that they have to start all over.

The second condition is much less clear-cut. Players are pushed towards maintaining as high a degree of high moral absolution as possible. When presented with the choice to employ child labour, players are encouraged (but never forced) to say no. When given the opportunity to install a police state that heavily penalises non-conformist actions, players are yet again nudged towards allowing more individual liberties, rather than assuming totalitarian rule. There is a moral threshold encoded in the game, generally invisible from its players until the end of the ice age. At that point, if players have not gone past the threshold, they are told that they "have not crossed the line." Meanwhile, if players skipped this moral threshold, they are given a list of the immoral choices they resorted to and told "the city survived: but was it worth it?" (*Frostpunk*, 2018). Both conditions lead to a win screen as determined by the first success metric. Additionally, both play methods allow their players to unlock achievements – badges that players can collect outside of the main gameplay loop as a metagame to allow game replayability using different methods (Boluk & Lemieux, 2017). The only difference is that taking morally questionable actions results in mild disapproval from the game designers, who through these end screens sit in judgement as to whether a player's play method was right or not.

Soon after the game's release, it was review-bombed by Chinese users. They felt that the game's secondary success condition was ill-conceived, and reeked of 'white left' (*baizuo* 白左) moral judgements. This epithet originated in Chinese internet ecospheres, as a way of speaking against western liberals (and like-minded individuals) who practice "meticulous and inhibitive norms of 'political correctness'" (Lin, 2021: 95). Zhang Chenchen states that anti-white left sentiments in the Chinese internet sphere are mainly directed at "condescending" positions that westerners, and any people who align with liberal values as a universal standard for the world, adopt and ascribe onto others. Zhang added that this consternation "becomes

particularly irritating for nationalist netizens when combined with perceptions of a rising China and a declining West" (Zhang, 2020: 106). An opinion article by Zhao Ziyun 赵子云 published in The Paper (*Pengpai Xinwen* 澎湃新闻； *The Paper,* 2018), one of the major Chinese online news platforms, summarised the political position of netizens in *Frostpunk* through the following paragraph.

> 社会主义大生产”的玩家认为，民众能否吃饱穿暖是第一位的，只要达到了这个目标，其他权益并不重要。游戏的开发者显然对此有不同意见，所以会将一些决策认定为“越界”。由此，很多中国玩家发出了嘲笑：“我们”在“你们”的游戏里，把末日变成了乌托邦，“你们白左”却还在纠结那些无足轻重的东西。
>
> "Great Socialist Production" players believe the first step is making sure the people can eat, you first have to attain this goal. Other (human) rights are not important. The game developers clearly do not have the same view, so some strategic decisions will be deemed "crossing the line". Because of this, a lot of Chinese players have derided this: "We" inside "your" game, turn Judgement Day into a utopia, while "you white left" are still struggling with these insignificant things. (Zhao Ziyun, 2018).

The Great Socialist Production, and its associated play method, stems from the Cultural Revolution slogan "Grasp Revolution, Promote Production" (*zhua geming, cu shengchan* 抓革命、促生产). It emphasises the unification of ideological goals and material production, which harks back to Wu's observation that netizens tend towards historical nationalism (Wu, 2007). Players partaking in the Great Socialist Production play method emphasised choices that promoted science and technology, even if they came with large human costs. By focusing on production above every other metric, they felt they would be better equipped to enter the post ice-age era stronger than ever. Human rights choices, such as fourteen-hour workdays, forcing children to work, and crushing revolutionary dissent were seen as not only necessary choices, but ones willingly taken. Being asked whether "it was worth it" to make these choices felt like western ideological policing to those players, rather than a worthy judgement, as by the end of the ice age their settlement had impressive technological advancements, strong productivity, and no resource shortage.

Working less than strictly necessary during the ice age's hardships were seen by this group as symptoms of white left, idealist fantasies that would leave the settlement perennially struggling even once the ice age ended. 11-Bit's designer intentionality, and its associated play method, left the settlement with weak production, primitive technology, and a society that would only just make it past the ice age finish line, all to maintain a weak premise of moral ideology. As we have seen in the previous case study, games give players a unique opportunity to not only reflect on their ideological inclinations, but to put those same beliefs to the test in an adverse arena. In *H1Z1*, the opponents were other players who went up against the Red Shirt Army and lost. In *Frostpunk*, the opponent was the system itself, instilled with loaded values that online netizens felt reeked of western consternation – and they felt that they managed to beat the system too.

This was not the only time that Chinese netizens review-bombed a game because of politics. *Devotion* (2019), designed and developed by a Taiwanese company but published by a Mainland Chinese company, is one of the more well known recent examples. After the developers placed an Easter egg which was deemed by Mainland Chinese players to be insulting to President Xi Jinping, Chinese netizens reacted so negatively that the publisher decided to withdraw the game from the Steam storefront and the designers issued a public

apology. What set *Frostpunk* apart is that the Great Socialist Production play method was a performable politics within the game itself. In *Devotion*, and even the earlier mentioned Diba Expedition, the nationalist wrath was targeted, but ultimately unproductive in displaying the success of nationalistic politics: while players were successful in taking *Devotion* off the shelves, they did not manage to show why their viewpoint was the correct one. The online users effectively resorted to browbeating the relevant parties, and their tactics were not only met with consternation by foreign users, they were actively rebuked – as Chinese users review-bombed *Devotion*, western users tried to review-boost the game back up.

In *Frostpunk*, not only was the anger targeted, but the players could show how their politics was not only successful, but clearly achieved more than the white left alternative. On western communities (such as Steam forums), there are still online guides to helping players perform better that detail the Great Socialist Production play method and therefore forgo specific moral inclinations for production. In Myers' terms, "bad play" quickly found itself legitimised as "good play" (Myers, 2010). This occurred even as the developers themselves patched the game to take into account the choices that large swathes of players were taking in the game, all stemming from these transformative politics at play.

Zhao Ziyun was not the only person to give players and their play methods a voice. The Great Socialist Production play method was shared by other netizens on different platforms. In their comments, they favoured a Chinese spirit, and decried western-oriented design choices. Just like the Red Shirt Army's community, *Frostpunk* enjoyed some mainstream cross-pollination: Weibo accounts such as the Communist Youth League's official account, shared a player-written article which also talks about the Great Production Method with the title "Hey? Have we played video games for so many years only to lose the author's intended meaning? Internet users discuss the real situation." (*Ai? Women wan le zheme duo nian de youxi, yuanlai dou shi le chuanzuozhe de benyi? Wangyou pinglun dao zhenxiang* 诶？我们玩了这么多年的游戏，原来都失了创作者的本意？网友评论道出真相; 2018). Another player BBJi (BB 姬) wrote an article provocatively titled "Chinese players in this game teach this group of idiotic foreigners what CHINA NO. 1 truly is" (*Zhongguo wanjia zai zhege youxi li jiaohui le zhe qun yuchun de laowai shenme cai shi zhenzheng de CHINA NO.* 1 中国玩家在这个游戏里教会了这群愚蠢的老外什么才是真正的 CHINA NO.1; BBJi, 2018). The title has a clear resemblance to Shenfancong's Red Shirt Army video on Bilibili which also employs the China No.1 phrase. Online communities share a lot of cross-pollination.

In the Great Socialist Production play method, the emphasis on the necessity of food as the core human right for *Frostpunk* citizens is prominent. This emphasis was explained by players like BBJi with direct references to the Chinese socialist construction period in the 1960s to 1970s, in which a "grain-first" campaign was launched nationwide to secure grain production and food security (Ho, 2003: 38). BBJi includes expressions such as "with grains in hand, the heart doesn't panic" (*shouli you liang, xinzhong buhuang* 手里有粮，心中不慌) and "eating solid food in the busy season, watery food in the slack season, eat half solid and half watery food in seasons that are neither busy nor slack" (*mangshi chi gan, xianshi chi xi, bumang buxianshi bangan banxi* 忙时吃干，闲时吃稀,不忙不闲时半干半稀). BBJi attributes both phrases directly to China's past, introducing them as "said by previous generations" (*qianbei shuoguo* 前辈说过) and from "China of decades ago" (*jishi nianqian de zhongguo* 几十年前的中国) respectively. BBJi highlights Mao's own writings in guiding the country's political struggles and material shortage in the impoverished era (BBJi, 2018). Players' attitude and justification of their performative socialist play method harks back to the tendency of cyber youth towards a kind of historical nationalism. However, invoking this socialist past is greatly reductionist and romanticising, and does not take into account the

profound human tragedy and environmental destruction caused by such political campaigns (Dikötter, 2018; Shapiro, 2001). It also ignores the historical background of the grain-first policy, which is attributed as a remedy for the deadliest famine in China between 1959 and 1961, itself caused by the country's political upheavals, especially the Great Leap Forward, in pursuit of achieving communism (Ho, 2003).

Both Zhao and BBJi also draw a direct comparison between the hard-working Chinese spirit and the hedonistic, liberal Occidental world. BBJi also uses the phrase Great Socialist Production to describe the play method, and also tie it much more directly to the Chinese spirit with phrases such as "our unassailable hard-working spirit" (*women chiku nailao de jingshen* 我们吃苦耐劳的精神), along with a general propensity to describe this chosen play method as "our" play method. On the other hand, just like Zhao before them, they describe the western players and their focus on human rights as the white left, further describing them as in thrall to "western hedonism" (*xifang xiangle zhuyi* 西方享乐主义). Their nationalistic portrayals have the same self-sacrificial leaning characteristic of this cyber youth nationalism and which was also seen at the culmination of the Red Shirt Army's performance. These shared terms, ideologies, and similarities in gameplay also confirm that while these gaming communities are not necessarily actively coordinating their play, they are reading other players' play, discussing it on different forums, and actively reflecting on the best play method to adopt in order to use games as a transformative practice (Gualeni, 2015), not only for themselves, but for anyone reading of their activities on Weibo posts, Bilibili videos and even in mainstream newspaper articles.

Readings from Chinese Youth Play Methods

In these case studies, we find common elements across the players' adopted play methods, despite the two games being significantly different in theme, scope, and execution. These are as follows:

1 **A defence against the perceived (often western) other:** As Zhang described, nationalistic netizens often felt there was "a wider systematic western anti-Chinese bias" (Zhang, 2013: 79). This sentiment was present and performed in both our case studies: the founder of the Red Shirt Army commented that their origins stemmed from a reaction to insults coming from a non-Chinese player base. This division was further propagated both by EMoQQ's in-game performances, as well as by non-Chinese players inadvertently adopting the mantle of the other by trying to counter the Red Shirt Army play method by organising against them or infiltrating them. On the other hand, in the Great Socialist Production play method, the perceived other was instead the original designers of the game itself, who cast moral aspersion on 'non-white left' play methods. The newly created play methods in both examples allowed Chinese youth to explore their nationalistic identities and politics, by reflecting on how they performed against other people in *H1Z1* and the designed system in *Frostpunk*. Most important, they reflected on how they performed against the (western) other.

2 **A focus on victory:** Huang noted that social media discourse had shifted to "self-aggrandizement instead of moderation or self-criticism" (Huang, 2021: 122). Meanwhile, Liu noted how during cyber expeditions, individual expression was denigrated as it was seen at the cost of "secur[ing] an 'overwhelming Victory'" (Liu, 2019: 105). Equally, the Red Shirt Army always played in a way that all but guaranteed their victory, as teams of four were instead extended into teams with dozens of players. Meanwhile, BBJi notes that the Great Socialist Production play method turned the in-game "ice age" (*bingqi shidai* 冰期时代) being suffered by players in the west into an

era of "central heating" (*nuanqi shidai* 暖气时代) for Chinese Netizens (BBJi, 2018). Both methods were deeply successful in guaranteeing material wins, reflecting the necessity of victory as part of the adopted discourse. This point is also especially important as it sets games apart from other media and internet ecospheres, as games' inbuilt victory systems validate such self-aggrandizement – their play method was not only nationalistic, it allowed them to also state that it was right.

3 **A sacrificial patriotism:** Rosen (2009) noted how this subset of youth was not only pragmatic, but also willing to self-sacrifice for a collective call. When led by EMoQQ, the Red Shirt Army ended every play session lined up in a row, sacrificing themselves for their shirt, as EMoQQ shot each of them down to get to the victory screen. On the other hand, *Frostpunk* players found themselves arguing that apart from the necessity of feeding their populace, every other human right was negotiable for the good of the community. Chinese socialist history and ideology were selectively invoked to justify the sacrificial price necessary for forward-looking governance. Chinese youth players in these games could be seen as substituting themselves with imagined strong-handed socialist leaders, to simulate a reductionist red socialist past within the game world.

While these player communities might not have originally had any intention of securing ideological internet victories through community organisation and actively trying to create play methods that combatted foreign aggression, we do argue that through a combination of shared interests, communal identity issues, as well as a common existence within an often unresponsive internet ecosphere, players end up discussing why they play and how they play. These discussions result in somewhat formalised play methods that carry out players' nationalistic politics and reflect the politics of and beyond game spaces.

Conclusion

In this paper, we looked at how players perform nationalistic sentiment through community-fashioned play methods. We did this by first looking at the history of Chinese cyber nationalism, then described how players create their own play methods, and then illustrated how these newly created play methods manifest as nationalistic performances in two different case studies.

We first started by discussing how Chinese youth cyber nationalism has evolved through different stages via multiple internet platforms, mostly outside of play situations in online games, but share a strong performative characteristic. We discussed how the aforementioned case studies have earlier precursors in initiatives such as the Anti-CNN website (Zhang, 2013) and the Diba Expedition (Yang, 2019). In these earlier initiatives, users performed a nationalistic identity that was characterised by a complex patriotic and nationalistic spectrum, including frugal patriotism (Liu, 2012), a focus on historically oriented nationalism (Nie, 2013), a defence against biased portraits of China and a simulated national pride (Rosen, 2009; Zhang, 2013), as well as the popular fandom transformation of national politics (Wu et al., 2019). We argued that these qualities equally came into play within the community-performed play methods. However, games gave players a way to confirm their performed politics by measuring them against game-ascribed victory conditions.

We looked at how players often create their own play methods to supplement or even counter embedded meaning within games. We first started off by discussing notions of playing the right way (Smith, 2005; Aarseth, 2007) in order to show that while designers often prescribe their potential audience with a play method, players often stray away from it for different reasons. We also described how game design itself is often embedded with meaning and critical reflection (Khaled, 2018). At times, this meaning is political, and loaded with western hegemonic biases, especially when this involves the military industrial complex (Sterczewski,

2021; Höglund, 2008; Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). If players stray from ideal play, and that design is loaded with meaning, then it would follow to argue that players sometimes move away from the 'right' play method to challenge previous meaning and create new meaning within hostile digital spaces. This has been shown through research on play methods (Harrington, 2020, Boluk and LeMieux, 2017; Van Vught & Glas, 2017).

Finally, we used this theoretical base to look at our two case studies. In the first case study, we looked at the Red Shirt Army, a collective of players originally led by the streamer EMoQQ, that wore their eponymous red shirts in the game *H1Z1*. They flouted the game's prescribed rules by teaming up in groups of larger than four and proceeded to beat anyone who was not part of their makeshift army, citing prior foreign incitement as a common motivation to rally together under the same shirt. In the second case study, we looked at *Frostpunk* and the Great Socialist Production play method, in which players focused on solving the simulation puzzle presented to them through a method with Chinese characteristics. Despite the implicit judgement placed upon them by the game designers, players persisted with their Great Socialist Production play method citing their easy path to victory as not only proof of accomplishment, but also vindication that their views were ultimately correct.

Since there were shared goals, there were often common results across their play. Seen in the analysis of the two cases, the alternative play methods devised by Chinese youth players express certain nationalistic politics, including defence against the perceived (often western) other, a focus on collective victory and a sacrificial patriotism. We argue that through critically analysing how Chinese players perform these alternative play methods in games, we may draw further discussions of the players' politics, particularly in this article, on nationalism, as well as the latent politics within and beyond the games themselves.

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