

Journal of • Virtual Worlds Research

jvwresearch.org ISSN: 1941-8477

EVE Online

December 2017 Volume 10 No. 3



Volume 10, Number 3

EVE Online

December 2017

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Volume 10, Number 3

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December 2017

To Win at Life: Tradition and Chinese Modernities in EVE Online

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Abstract

EVE Online is well-known for allowing bad behavior like scamming, stealing and betraying, and previous research has explored how that behavior is enabled and governed by the affordances of the game. Comparatively little attention has been paid to the “community norms” that are often contrasted with the developer’s management. Here, I consider the influence of culture in China on the play of *EVE*. Where the narrative of globalization suggests that the world is becoming more homogenous, anthropologists look at the micro-level to see how new forms of modernity are created. *EVE*’s (intended) single-server design, liberal economy, and radical freedom are particularly characteristic of an assemblage of global flows, and the game’s neoliberal fantasy is transformed in play.

In *EVE*, tradition is used by Chinese people to make sense of their modern situation, explaining to themselves why Chinese players play more conservatively than others. Without suggesting that Chinese players are universally or essentially different from players in the rest of the world, these differences can be at least partly attributed to the culture of modern China. I consider the lifeworld of a typical *EVE* player in China, who are over 95% young men, focused on the need to save money and provide for their family, both their parents and their potential children. Players frequently compared the conservative attitude toward money in the actual world with their own conservative play of *EVE*, or their perceived conservative play of other players.

1. Introduction

EVE Online was designed to be a fantasy world of perfect economic and individual freedom, built single-sharded to be a true virtual world, separated from the commitments of the real world. Yet, for EVE Online players in China who want to plan their day, they need look no farther than the Daily EVE Almanac, a website with diurnal predictions for the world of EVE. Players can learn whether the day is more auspicious for player-vs-player or player-vs-environment combat, how the market will perform, or whether it is a good day to abscond with their corporation's assets. The EVE Almanac is based on a traditional Chinese farmers' almanac, which a farmer might use to predict the weather or auspicious times for planting. As one player told me, "this shows the powerful influence of tradition for EVE players."

But, this is not 'tradition' in the sense of an unchanging essence of a people. This is tradition as a continuous remaking, which is nonetheless a powerful marker of belonging. The EVE Almanac serves to make EVE 'Chinese' for Chinese players. It takes something that players consider part of their cultural identity—fortune telling and numeromancy—and reforms it. It digitizes the practice, as many other fortune-telling websites do. And it makes the cultural practice specific to EVE Online. In this small way, EVE players take a modern, global practice like networked gaming, and make it part of a long regional tradition.

In this article, I examine one of the key differences in EVE play among Chinese players, who are unique in having their own server to play on separate from the rest of EVE players. This research shows how the anthropology of modernity can add to how the field of games studies conceives online game play by showing how players create alternative modernities that transform in-game play in culturally specific ways. Anthropologists have long argued that 'modernity' and 'tradition' are not monolithic ideologies that can be said to be enacted unproblematically in practice. Instead, people in the modern world make 'modernities' that are specific to their situations, and they use traditions that are not essential and unchanging but always contingent. Here, I argue that tradition is used by Chinese people to make sense of their modern situation — in particular, EVE players draw on tradition when explaining why Chinese players play more conservatively than others. I conducted ethnographic participant observation to understand the lifeworld of the typical EVE player in China, who are 98% men. For the players I knew, their lives were focused on the need to save money and provide for their family, both their parents and their potential future children. Players frequently compared the conservative attitude toward money in the actual world with their own conservative play of EVE, or their perceived conservative play of other players. In this way, we can see how tradition becomes a way for people to make sense of their modern condition, creating an alternative modernity even in a virtual world.

Where much research has been done on code and law in managing EVE's notoriously open gameplay, less attention has been paid to the origins of community norms that are contrasted to the code. The anthropology of modernity takes a closer look at micro-processes of global flows. In China especially, scholars have argued that people create alternative modernities, and that tradition is not 'lost' in the modern world, but transformed. In this paper, I hope to explain the community norms of EVE in China as a form of alternative Chinese modernity, showing how the elements of globalization, economic liberalism, and personal freedom are transformed.

Previous literature on EVE has frequently focused on the legal status of the 'bad behavior' the game is known for, like scamming, stealing, and betraying, and how it can be governed by code, management, or law. De Zwart and Humphreys (2014) draw on Lessig (1999) and Goffman (1974) to outline the several levels of framing that occur in playing EVE which serve to maintain the 'lawless' playing style. In controlling play there is the legal contract of the EULA, as well as the game rules enforced by CCP, and the code written by CCP, but there are also frames of player and character that players use to describe how they can do things in-game that they would not do in their

‘real life’. Similarly, Suzor & Woodford (2013) draw a distinction between the legal ways of resolving disputes in the game and the community norms. Craft likewise (2007) separates out the in-game norms of immoral behavior with the legal status of EVE. Bergstrom et al. (2013) argue that the EVE online player is formed by the affordances of the game — the unforgiving learning curve and poor tutorial force the new player to rely on others to learn the game, for example (see also Paul, 2016).

Where these several researchers have focused on how the code, management, and legal status of EVE have influenced play, comparatively less attention has been paid to the ‘community norms’ that are frequently contrasted with CCP’s management or the game’s terms of service. What are these norms and where do they come from? I have argued that the European¹ server of EVE has been significantly affected by the culture brought to the game by a particular group of players, the ‘goons’ of Something Awful, whose idiosyncratic project of being a ‘space asshole’ has profoundly shaped the norms of the game (Page, 2016).

In my study of the Chinese freemium game *Zhengtu*, in which the players who pay the most money are the strongest in the game, I found that players referred to the dog-eat-dog real world of modern China when justifying both the strength of the most powerful characters and the underhanded moves by which lower-powered characters could defeat them. The game became a ‘crucible for the heart’— a place where players could improve themselves in much the same way the crucible of modern China attempts to improve the quality of Chinese people (Page, 2012). Among largely male populations of gamers, other researchers have found hegemonic masculinities reflected in online game play in China (Chen, 2016; Wu, 2007). In this case, the value expressed is these young men’s duty to their families or their filial piety.

2. Filial Piety and Alternative Modernity

For my analysis of EVE Online players, the most important cultural value to consider is that of filial piety, and the ways it has been transformed as modern China ‘individualizes’ in its own peculiar way. Essentially, filial piety, or *xiao*, is the duty that a child has to their parents. In modern China, especially among my informants, this takes the form of the responsibility to care for the parents in their old age.

The character used to write filial piety is the most succinct explanation of it. *Xiao* 孝, “filial piety” includes two ideographs. On top is the top half of the character *lao* 老, meaning “old,” and the bottom half is *zi* 子, “son.” The character is commonly interpreted as meaning that the young must support the old, but one could also see it as meaning the young are burdened by the old. Or, it could mean that the family line continues downward from the young to the old (Ikels, 2004). The value of filiality has been traced through Chinese history, and accounted for in ethnographic research from the 18th and 19th centuries (Chan & Tan, 2004). One of the most important aspects of this was the care of the parents in their old age.

Earliest research suggests *xiao* began as a directive to feed one’s elders or ancestors, and later acquired the meaning of respect and obedience to parents and superiors through reinterpretation by Confucians and other thinkers (Knapp 1995). The idea in this formulation has been of great importance throughout the history of Chinese thought. It has been an important part of education, with the *Xiaojing*, Classic of Family Reverence being taught in schools from the early Han (206 BCE to 200CE) until the 20th century (Chan & Tan, 2004, p. 2). While filial piety has taken on multiple

¹ The Chinese server is known as ‘Serenity’ officially by CCP and is called the ‘national server’ or *guofu* 国服 by Chinese players. The main server is called the ‘European server’ *oufu* 欧服 by Chinese players but is officially known as Tranquility. Here I refer to each server by its physical location—European or Chinese.

varying interpretations through history, it has remained a central idea in Chinese thought and life. Filial piety has been seen as key to preserving Chinese tradition by Chinese thinkers. The relationship between a person and their parents and ancestors is a connection that goes through time, and therefore serves to create continuity from the past to the present (Chan & Tan, 2004).

We can look at EVE Online play in China as one arm of the larger process of globalization and modernization around the world. While ‘globalization’ and ‘modernity’ are recent topics, anthropologists have studied how cultures interact for a long time. The narrative of globalization suggested that the world is becoming more homogenous, but anthropologists argued that culture was not a “disappearing object” but persisted through “indigenization” (Sahlins, 1985). As a result, people form “alternative modernities” that are neither universal nor entirely particular (Rofel, 1999). Rofel, looking at modern discipline in Chinese factory work, argues that modernity is always produced in particular locations among particular networks of power and has no singular definition, contra the hegemonic example of the United States (1992). Looking at the micro- rather than macro-level, anthropologists show how the local and the global interact (Inda & Rosaldo, 2002). These low-level interactions can be called ‘global assemblages’ (Collier & Ong, 2004), and represent new problem spaces for the question of ‘how to live’ (Collier & Lakoff, 2004), and how to use technology (Rabinow, 2004). Online gaming is one such micro-level practice, where gamers can play with people from all over the world in virtual worlds that attempt to represent an alternate reality, and EVE’s intended single-server design, liberal economy, and radical freedom are particularly characteristic of this.

Modern China has undergone a series of social upheavals in recent decades, and is now typically characterized by its economic liberalization and opening to the world. Globalization, economic liberalization, and personal freedom are not universal ideas, but emerge in unique forms in practice in China. Each of these concepts has been challenged or transformed by anthropologists writing about modernity and globalization in China. Transnational economic flows that exemplify globalization become specific practices of spatial discipline in a Chinese factory (Rofel, 1992), and the gay identity can be neither wholly global nor local (Rofel, 1999). Liberal economic policies in China have been accompanied by reduced intrusion into private lives and more freedom of choice in sexual relationships but at the same time, people must balance feelings with pragmatic concerns that are particularly trenchant in the new economy (Farrer, 2002).

The recent individualization of Chinese people can be seen as a threat to filial piety, but the uncertainty of the modern market ultimately leads to greater economic reliance on the family (Yan 2010). While the emancipation of the individual as an autonomous rights-bearer has been seen as inherent to modernization, Yan argues that people in China are individualizing, but that this individualization is antithetical to neoliberalism (2009). The state has attempted to replace the family and kinship group as the most important relationship in a person’s life—e.g. by creating personal identity cards rather than household registration. People in China have become “detraditionalized” in some ways, no longer believing they owe work to their traditions. While there is pressure to be independent and individualistic, the other pressures of modern life in China force people to rely on their families for support. There is only utilitarian individualism, i.e. selfishness (Yan, 2009).

The search for a spouse is not simply a traditional ideal, but neither is it a modern quest alone; it is a self-formed youth culture. Urban Chinese youth have experienced an ‘opening up’ of sexual freedom to moral uncertainty (Farrer, 2002). In the search for a partner, there are twin narratives of the market (financial security, men with wealth, cynicism) and romantic ideas. There is “increased pressure to make personal choices, greater emphasis on money, wider social inequality and a growing consumer leisure culture” (Farrer, 2002 p.13). The search for a partner is not simply a matter of finding stability, but is also a discourse and rhetoric of sexual culture. Nor is stability

simply a matter of tradition; like romance, it has roots in presocialist colonialism, utopian socialism, and transnational consumerism.

As we will see, this kind of modern Chinese individual can be seen throughout the play of EVE Online. EVE's popularity has much to do with its free labor market, wherein players are free to pursue whatever trade is the most fun for them. This is not dissimilar from the new freedom in the real world labor market. At the same time, we find Chinese players managing the risks of playing EVE carefully, much as they must manage risks in their own precarious lives. Importantly, this is a cultural value, based on perceived risk and responsibility, rather than a rational economic calculation (cf. Guseva, 2001).

In the following analysis, I will show how worries about China's modern situation and players' filial duties affect the play of EVE Online. This demonstrates how both the traditions and modernities of players are of key importance to understanding the play of online games.

3. How to Win at Life

To understand how Chinese people play EVE, I conducted long-term ethnographic research among players in Shanghai and broadly online. I lived in Shanghai for over one year, played on the Chinese server, joined several different player organizations, and interacted with many players online from throughout the country. I also conducted in-person and online interviews and collected responses to open-ended survey questions.

The research was performed between September 2013 and September 2014, with additional interviews and a survey conducted in December 2014. The data used in this study were collected from a combination of daily fieldnotes, logs of public online chat rooms, email correspondence, personal interviews, and an online, open-ended anonymous survey. I conducted ten online and six in-person interviews, each approximately four hours long. I interviewed Mantou, the most well-known and powerful player on the Chinese server, online since he does not live in Shanghai, but the remaining interviews were with players of EVE living in Shanghai. Interviews with players were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, although players often interspersed English as well. I have translated all Chinese text and corrected grammar and spelling of English used, and noted where interviewees switched languages.

I found one of the most common complaints of the Chinese server, particularly among Chinese players who also play on the European server, is that there is not enough conflict. Chinese players on the Euro server say players on the Chinese server are too focused on making risk, farming rats or botting. They say the lack of conflict on the Chinese server is dull. Players on the European server attribute this to the legions of players who ignore the PvP game in favor of 'farming' NPC pirates or mining, which is also called being a 'carebear' (Personal interviews).

Members of CCP and the publishers likewise report lower levels of conflict on their end. Emilia, a developer of EVE in Shanghai with interest in the objectives of Chinese players, explained that

there is less conflict and there is more—and I see it in the data—there is relatively more manufacturing and science going on on Serenity [the Chinese server]...it looks like for some of the market transactions, the market transactions on TQ [Tranquility] are more about heavy war stuff, the market transactions [on Serenity] on the top twenty list of the market transactions you have skill books. (Personal interview)

Yang, a producer for EVE China publisher Tiancity, told me that they sometimes have to "provoke a war to encourage both sides to consume" and prevent market prices from rising too high.

While some differences in the two servers could be explained by the lower population or the single time zone, differences in the way Chinese players play EVE is also related to Chinese culture. In particular, the typical player of EVE is a young urban male, and the concerns of this class of people carry over into the game. Their filial duties to their parents and future families are a pressing concern, particularly given the economic situation in China.

According to an internal survey conducted by the publisher TianCity in summer 2013, EVE players on Serenity are 98% male. 57% were between the ages of 24-40, and 69% were employed. They are also largely young, single professionals who have the free time and disposable income to commit to a game like EVE. Otherwise, they are often college students with enough free time to earn in-game currency enough to buy Pilot License Extensions (PLEX) and pay for the game that way. Many players started playing in college and then continued after they graduated. The players that I met in person through the annual Fanfest in Shanghai and through the Shanghai EVE QQ group were almost universally members of this group. While there are players from throughout China that play EVE and other online games (several of the players I spoke to in Shanghai encouraged me to venture inland to find people who were more “traditional”), nearly all the players I met were urban men in their twenties and thirties.

Chinese people in this demographic are just entering adulthood having spent their youth being told what to study and how. They have practiced for the crucial *gaokao* exam to get into the best school and have likely spent a lot of time at a *buxiban* or cram school to prepare². They have gone to college focused on getting a degree that will gain them a profitable job. One player told me, “Young people are often confused because of the path they have to take. They don't necessarily choose the topic they want to study, just take the exam. They don't think about what they want to do they just do it. Then they end up in a job they don't really like and they have to come to terms with it (Personal interview).” This situation is a marked contrast to the life of a character in EVE, where any path is freely open.

At the same time, young adulthood is also the time when they get their first taste of freedom. Many EVE players are able to start playing in college because it is the first time they have the free time and free hand to pursue a complicated game like EVE for fun. According to a player, “In college it is the first time nobody is telling them what to do. They only have to pass the final exam to graduate, so they will screw around until then. They also are more free to do what they like the first two years and then the last two get ready to graduate (Personal interview).” One college student I spoke to online claimed to play EVE six to eight hours a day and he saw college as the only time he could pursue this passion with such dedication. However, the time between college and marriage is not only a time of great freedom but also high expectations, due to their filial duties.

Even within their newfound freedom, in this time in their lives, the primary concern of these players is their responsibilities to their families, both their parents and their future children. College students in China are, for the first time in their lives, responsible for their own education, but they are expected to get a degree that will enable them to find a good job. Recent male graduates are expected to find a good job and earn enough money to buy an apartment and a car to prove they are marriageable, and then to find a wife. Later in life, they will be expected to care for their parents. Therefore, at this time in their lives, these young Chinese men are experiencing, often for the first time, both the incredible pressure to live up to their parents and their society's expectations, and the freedom to choose their own path. Because I am married with a child and a job, players have told me that I have “won at life.”

² The *gaokao* (“National Higher Education Entrance Examination”) is a universal college entrance exam that is required for entrance to almost any Chinese university. To prepare, many students attend additional after-school instruction (*buxiban*, “cram school”) to memorize large volumes of facts (Kipnis 2011)

EVE players attribute these values and the pressure to live up to them to both modern times and Chinese tradition. The expectation to own a car in addition to a house (meaning an owned apartment for city-dwellers) is a modern development. Owning, rather than renting, is seen as more stable. At the same time, they complain about the burden this places on them in the modern world. One player explained in English in an online chat,

Within 20 years, housing prices rose 20 times. In Chinese custom, marriage needs a new house. Although expensive but still want to buy. All of china, some city only need 500RMB/square meter 20 year ago. In Chinese custom, need buy house. Now they all rose 20 times. I'm don't like such high prices. But the the father-in-law mother-in-law. Will tell you to buy especially when you are male. male more Difficulties. In Chinese custom male Bear all or most Prices ... Pull far let's talk eve. We are poor. In reality. Some habits to the game. When I first played, I very stingy ... I have little isk before. so we must save every cent. [sic] (Personal interview)

Several people I've spoken to have expressed incredulity at the possibility of buying a house in expensive Shanghai. According to reports from the time of my research, it would cost almost 16 years of wages for the average worker to pay off his mortgage. (Guilford 2013). But, the need to care for one's parents is considered by many players to be one of the most fundamental Chinese traditions, and they see the need for stability, savings and avoiding risk as a direct result of this tradition. When talking with them about EVE, they directly attributed their desire to save and avoid risking their possessions in-game with the pressure they are under in real life. The attraction of farming to these players is the ability to save large amounts of in-game currency. With this money, they don't need to worry about having big in-game losses or not being able to pay for game time. While farming has practical applications, like saving for expensive ships, several players told me that they have far too much money saved in-game to be practical. They say it just feels good to have a large wallet. One Shanghai player who played primarily on the European server told me that although he was taking a break from the game, he had a wallet balance big enough that he didn't need to worry about having trouble getting back into the game when he wanted to — this was an ideal situation for him.

Another player told me in an online interview:

Because China's internet access is very slow, playing on the European server from the Chinese server is several times slower. In China if you want to play the European service you will need to purchase a proxy. So playing on the European server is more expensive than the Chinese server. PLEX costs are slightly higher on the Chinese server. But on the Chinese server you can buy discounted PLEX on ebay or Taobao. Just need 45 yuan to be able to play. Pay twice the monthly fee to play the same game [on the European server]. Chinese people have limited funds for monthly entertainment. So if you can save a little you should save a little. We need savings for a house. We have less money so we choose the cheaper option. (translated from Chinese)

Playing on the Chinese server rather than the European server is also a result of cost analysis for this player. In order to play on the European server a player would need to buy a proxy. (This is only sometimes the case, as the Great Firewall blocks different kinds of traffic at different times. Some Chinese players on the European server told me they used a VPN, others reported having no problem joining the server without it. In my own experience, a VPN was required for me to log in to the European server from Shanghai.) If a player does need to buy a proxy that would add to the cost. On the Chinese server, a player can buy cheap PLEX on Taobao and play for much less.

This player immediately relates the need to play EVE for less on the Chinese server to the need to save money for a house. The player sees Chinese people as more generally impoverished, and therefore preferring the cheaper option for their “monthly entertainment.”

I interviewed one longtime EVE player, “Prof. Liu”, about these issues. He was a graduate student from a smaller northern urban area, and spoke at length about the problems facing young Chinese people.

China’s culture is very conservative. Chinese people do not know how to enjoy things. Chinese parents are desperate to save money. They do not exist for themselves, but for their children, for their children to study, get married, buy a house for them, so they keep saving money, saving money, saving money, and they are very industrious. So you see a lot of people in EVE won’t play PVP [player-vs-player] because PVP is the same as money. Chinese people think, “I want to save, save, save.” I think [Chinese players save] because of poverty, the concept of not having enough money. I think why we start saving is because we began poorer. On the one hand a family needs to withstand risks, against ... its very complicated, against the risk, they must save money. (Personal interview)

Here, the player explicitly links conservative play in EVE with conservative elements in Chinese culture. Playing PVP means that the player must risk the products of the work they have put into EVE. They must be willing to let the ship that they have spent countless hours earning in-game money for be destroyed by a stronger player – this is what is meant by “PVP is the same as money”. The way to mitigate risk is to save money.

‘Enjoyment’ or pleasure is linked to individuality. A Chinese person cannot ‘enjoy things’ because they do not exist for themselves, but for their children. One of the attractions of EVE is the individual freedom given to the player to choose their own way. Much of the enjoyment of the game comes from the ability of the player to make their own fun. This is the case for Chinese players as well as others. However, even as Chinese players pursue this individual liberty, they feel the need to control the risks to themselves by saving money and avoiding in-game combat. So, Chinese players pursue modern values, and cite tradition when they believe they fall short of the modern ideal.

At the same time, traditional ideas work with modern pressures to create the situation young men in Shanghai find themselves in,

You know a doctor in China is very expensive, houses are becoming more expensive, people are not being paid enough. For instance, take housing prices. Why are Shanghai’s housing prices so high? The population [of Shanghai] is very large, and people have a very traditional Chinese concept that a house equals a family, there are so many people who all need to buy, - many people, many buyers, so the price is getting higher and higher. (Personal interview)

The limits of space in the modern city clashes with the traditional need to buy a house before starting a family. These rising housing prices Liu also connects with the general expense of living in a Chinese city, like the cost of seeing a doctor. Modernity is not just an ideal that Chinese people can pursue in a game, but is also the situation they find themselves dealing with. The modern city and market determines their ability to fulfill traditional duties to their family. As a result, they feel pressure to save money.

Prof. Liu continued,

To save, in the case of China, it is rare for a woman to let a man rent an apartment and be willing to marry him. Maybe the woman is willing, but the woman’s parents would not agree: I would not marry my daughter to a renter, this is tradition. The main or traditional culture influences him, mainly traditional, 5000 years of history [laughs]. (Personal interview)

Where EVE was designed to be a game where players could risk everything, in China many players prefer to play conservatively, saving money and risking little. This is both a traditional and modern value: traditional in the way that players see the value as of a kind with their obligation to their families, modern in the way that they see it as part of the contemporary economic situation in China. Where players have admitted that they have no pressing need to play so conservatively,

having enough money to continue playing without financial burden, they say they simply do not enjoy playing with risk.

EVE players in China are overwhelmingly young middle-class men in urban centers. These men, college students or early career workers, are typically beginning to have personal freedom after living a youth under the tight control of their parents. So, we can understand how a game of radical freedom like EVE would be attractive. At the same time, despite the high level of freedom provided by EVE many play conservatively, preferring to save money rather than risk it in open warfare. This conservative play is reflective of cultural responsibilities toward the family, an alternative modernity assembling both modern economic troubles and traditional values of filiality.

I have argued that EVE Online, as designed by Icelandic company CCP, is an essentially modern world characterized by a liberal economy and a free and individualistic modern subjectivity. Where EVE presents a world of radical freedom, many Chinese players avoid conflict and focus on saving and stability, citing cultural values of obligation to their families. We can therefore see EVE and the play of EVE in China as an 'assemblage' of global and local, modern and traditional flows. At a low level, Chinese EVE players are forming an alternative modernity that fits in with their traditional cultural expectations.

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