Dislocated Character Affirmation
— A Case Study of Young Female Gamers' Identity in Online Games

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Abstract: What are the real intentions of young women to play online games? Can they benefit more than just entertainment? Based on a 2−year follow−up survey of a young female online gamer, this paper explores the inner experiences of a young female gamers. Findings indicate that young female Chinese gamers attach importance to the choice of characters in the world of online games and that they establish a sense of identity in virtual space through character affirmation and interactions with other gamers. For young female gamers, who are eager to temporarily escape from reality, playing online games is a positive psychological compensation and a process for building self−confidence.

Keywords: character affirmation; online games; young female gamer; identity

Online games[①] have not received much social recognition. There is a widely-perceived bias that online games can do harm to, or even severely damage a teenager's wholesome personality, psychological health, value concepts, as well as physical development. Due to such a stereotyped understanding, most related research has been conducted from a bystander's perspective. There are

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① On November 8, 2008, *Diagnostic Code of Internet Addiction* was approved by the expert panel, officially including computer games addiction into the category of mental disorder. Experts participating in reviewing this code explained, "Internet addiction refers to a type of behavioral disorder which leads to individuals' repeatedly obsessive use of the Internet. Internet addiction can bring about multiple mental and psychological issues, such as introversion, inferiority, confrontation with family members, mood disorder and even social anxiety disorder. A recent survey shows that teenagers of the 13−17 years old age group account for the largest percentage of Internet addicts in China and that over 9% of college students are addicted to the Internet." With the inclusion of computer games addiction into mental disorder list, computer games, online games in particular, once again become a social concern. It is fair to say that the introduction of that diagnostic code is a milestone event in this field, for it prompts the society to have an in−depth understanding of online gamers, particularly young female online gamers. In other words, such a diagnostic code makes it possible to have a quantitative cognition of those gamers' mentality and psychological needs. All people, including those who are for and against it, begin to take the psychological needs of those online gamers (particularly teenage gamers) into serious consideration.

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papers that generally tend to regard online games as a wrong and harmful activity and therefore try to persuade teenagers to keep away from such an activity. However, our observations show that online games are increasing and the online gamer base is expanding. In fact, coercive persuasion of teenagers away from online games is against the Chinese government's intention of making animation and games sector as a key direction for cultural content production. Worse still, it contradicts teenagers' psychological growth and personality development.

This paper attempts to explore the impact of online games on teenage girls from their own point of view and appropriately analyze the relationships between teenage girls and the online games they choose to play. Such an approach helps to correctly grasp the nature of online games and more importantly, understand teenage girls' growth in an age of modern digital entertainment.

According to *The Research Report of the Chinese Mobile Gamers* (2012) issued by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), mobile gamers outnumbered PC-based online gamers, making cellphone the first choice for online games. In China, 57.1% of mobile gamers often played online games via cellphone, while 24% prefer a PC. No obvious gender difference has been found in console games. When it comes to mobile games, however, male gamers significantly outnumbered their female counterparts. This result is basically in line with the increase of Chinese netizens over the past decade. According to *The 19th Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China* released on January 23, 2007, of all Chinese netizens, men accounted for 58.3%, and women for 41.7%. The

report also indicated that compared to 2006 there were increases in the respective proportions of female netizens, married netizens, and netizens over 35 years of age.[1] The rise of female netizens in the gender structure of Chinese netizens suggests an increase in female Internet gamers. Even so, female online gamers, particularly those belonging to the teenage group, remain passive, due to a relatively small choice of online games and limited space for them. The existing social and cultural traditions have placed young Chinese women in a subordinate role, restricting them from free communications at their own will. In this sense, our research, targeting young female gamers, helps to better understand their communication needs and psychological development from the perspectives of social structure and cultural significance. This paper[2] examines such communication needs and psychological development by conducting a case study of CICI, a teenage girl who played *Fantasy Westward Journey* from age 15 to 17.

The case study was conducted via two channels. One is the author's observation of CICI's two-year online gaming. The other is arranged interviews during the research process. Through CICI's behavior and speech, her thoughts and characters are directly observed. Though such an observation is inevitably subjective in view of observe, this paper attempts to remain true to the original figure and avoid any misgiving or concealment. Basically, the interviews were conducted in two steps. The same was also true of some questions. More specifically, the interviewee (CICI) answered questions during an interview. The next day, she would make some additional remarks if necessary. To better answer

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[1] According to *The 19th Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China* released on January 23, 2007, there were a total of 137 million netizens in China, of which 18−24 age group accounted for the largest proportion (35.206%), followed by 25−30 age group (19.7%), under−18 age group (17.2%) and 31−35 age group (10.4%).

[2] *Fantasy Westward Journey* is an online game independently developed and operated by NetEase. This online game is set in Chinese historical novel *Journey to the West* and features Q−version images.

Fantasy Westward Journey

our questions, CICI made rational analyses of her "existence" and feelings in the virtual world of online games. Admittedly, feelings are difficult to grasp precisely. Still, to a large extent, her description is a true reflection of her inner world.

1. Young female gamers' choice of characters in online games

In the world of online games, each gamer is endowed with a virtual identity. In cyberspace, the gamers' permanent identity in the real world "disappears." Because of that, online gamers can freely choose one or multiple virtual characters as they like. In this way, they acquire brand new identities in cyberspace. For both gamers and others, there is a significant difference between a virtual identity and a real one. In some cases, the two types of identities are totally opposite to each other.

The possibility to exist as a variety of new characters and establish multiple complicated identities is a notable edge of online game space. Due to gender discrimination, women still receive unfair treatment, which is criticized by feminists. By contrast, for online games, a lack of permanent identity seems to have eliminated gender discrimination in the virtual world. When playing online games, gamers can choose any identity, ethnicity, occupation or even gender they wish. In some cases, gamers can even replace their initial character with a new one. Such a shift of identity is called, in their words, "reincarnation." When gamers reach a certain level and accomplish corresponding tasks, they may be allowed to re-select their character (including ethnicity, occupation and gender) and start the game all over again. For both

the designers and operators, such a "reincarnation" model is designed to retain gamers by offering them the right of repeated character selection. For gamers, this "reincarnation" model is an interesting game of identity shift. As mentioned, they can freely select and shift an identity as they wish to experience the fun of being different characters. In this virtual world, identity can be dynamic and multiple.

In *Fantasy Westward Journey*, CICI chose to play the role of Gu Jingling (bone elf) from Mowang Village. CICI's choice of character and background was based on her own will and identity presupposition in that game. In terms of character setting, Gu Jingling is described as "an elf which transformed from an immortal white bone after absorbing the essence of heaven and earth. With a slim and graceful figure, she is strong and nimble and has great curiosity about everything in the world. She excels at fighting back against attackers with her sharp claws and magic stick." The above description can be summarized into three points. First, this character is a little devil made with vital essence. Second, in terms of personality, Gu Jingling is smart and lively and has strong curiosity. Third, she has no other weapon other than her claws and stick.

CICI's choice of this character reflected her personality in real life. An elf with a strong curiosity was in line with her mentality as a teenage girl. Still, it is Gu Jingling's changeable personality that became the decisive factor of her choice.

As mentioned, Gu Jingling is described as an elf which "transformed from an immortal white bone after absorbing the essence of heaven and earth." Evidently, there is a process of transforming from a "tangible nobody" to an "intangible somebody." To put it another way, the "white bone" is a tangible object, which, though visible, does not bear any meaningful associations. Given that, there is no significance in the very existence of this tangible immortal bone. On the other hand, an elf, though as elusive as it may sound, is often associated with the image of an angel, for which it can receive endless acclaim. Somehow, it has become a symbol of life hidden behind everything.

Furthermore, Gu Jingling is supposed to be "an elf with a slim and graceful figure, nimble movements and a strong curiosity about everything in the world." This character setting creates sufficient space for its identity extension. In fact, such a description can also apply to an individual in real life. It is just that human curiosity is under the restriction of various social norms and regulations. Besides, a slim and graceful figure and nimble movements are subjected to human physiological mechanisms. Therefore, those features cannot be fully demonstrated in real life. In cyberspace, however, gamers can keep expanding their capacity by climbing to higher game levels.

CICI chose Gu Jingling as her role in this game to keep expanding her capacity by transforming from a "tangible nobody" to an "intangible somebody." Part of her wish was impossible in real life, while some other part was artificially suppressed. For example, as an underage middle school girl, CICI faced a variety of social requirements and cultural restrictions. She did not have much to say under such circumstances. When playing *Fantasy Westward Journey*, she became Gu Jingling, a role enabling her to interact and communicate with other online gamers (i.e. "others") on an equal footing. The intention of CICI's character choice was also revealed in her conversation with us, which is to be further elaborated in the latter part of this analysis.

2. Young female gamers' sense of identity in online games

A sense of identity is developed with the awakening of individual awareness. An individual's

identity is shaped by both innate factors (genetic relationships) and acquired factors (social roles). One's identity determines one's social class, rights, interests, obligation and responsibilities. Meanwhile, it also determines one's life consciousness, values and dignity. Identity, or sense of identity, is an individual's identification and classification of his or her role in society. Such a classification is conducted within the framework of certain social categories. Also, this identity, demonstrating an individual's social mentality—a sense of belonging, is an individual's confirmation of his or her consciousness of life.[1] According to Stuart Hall, "The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not united around a coherent 'self.' Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously shifting."[2] In the virtual world, online gamers no longer work on "being the same outside and inside" or building a unified identity. Instead, they make full use of the online gaming platform to further explore their potential. A calm and mild person may exhibit a restless and violent side in the world of online games. This seemingly multiple personality is a manifestation of the online gaming platform's balancing effect. There are times when one's virtual and real identities fail to conform to each other, or even turn against each other. For example, some gamers, having released all their violence in virtual space, become even more peaceful in real life. That is the result of the balancing effect.

In the world of online games, CICI looked for a totally different identity experience and at the same time hoped to have her new identity affirmed through her interactions with other gamers.

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CICI: Back then, I had no idea of (virtual space). I just felt that it might be different from the real world. Perhaps I purely looked for something new and exciting.

Researcher: Do you feel any difference between online games and console games?

CICI: Online games enable gamers to communicate with each other and offer them a variety of roles that may be totally different from their identities in the real world.

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Researcher: Is there any difference between your interaction with online gamers and that with friends and classmates in reality?

CICI: More colloquially, you can "pretend to be someone else." You can "become" the kind of person which you cannot in real life. After all, you only communicate online. In front of you is just a screen on which you may see the image of a person. You do not actually see the real person. In a way, I think the Internet has amplified the darker side of human nature.

Researcher: The thing is, you can also pretend to be someone else on other online platforms or social media like QQ. What's so different about online gaming platforms?

CICI: In the world of online games, you can see your role, which is a replacement of yourself. However, on other online platforms and social media, you can only see words, which cannot give you the same intimacy as that of online games.

Researcher: How do you understand the darker side of human nature? Do you actually mean you do not have to follow all those rules in the real world and can do whatever you want?[3]

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① Yang, Xiaohong. (2006). *Media Discourse: Presentation of Individuals through Modern Communications*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, pp:195−196.
② Hall & Stuart. (2000). Cultural Identity and Diaspora, quoted in Luo Gang (eds.), *Culture Studies Reader*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, pp:208−222.
③ Quotes in the first interview with online gamer CiCi.

It is hard to believe such mature and rational remarks were from a teenage girl. Her remarks indicate two facts. First, this interview was done right after her playtime, for which CICI was yet to come out of that virtual world. The role she played online was still in her mind and therefore could be traced in her remarks. In other words, there was some lag in CICI's shift of identity, which implied a significant impact of her online character on her real life. Second, CICI had both the immature and unstable mentality of a young woman and the precocious temperament unique to a new generation growing up in an age of information. Just like her peers, CICI started to use computers and the Internet when she was little. Totally used to the cyber world, she regarded the Internet as part of her life.

An eager for interpersonal communication was the primary factor that drove her to online games. For CICI, solo exploration in console games was too lonely, while online games, featuring a shift of identity, was a better channel to explore herself. She did not like online forums or QQ, for such social media only offered text message service (no video). In other words, netizens on those platforms were presented in the form of fragmented text. Under such circumstances, they could not showcase their full image as a real person. By contrast, in the world of online games, they had the chance to build a more true image of themselves. She needed such an "identity" to exhibit the other side of her and express her true self. Although attributing that need to the "darker side of human nature," CICI explicitly expressed her wish to release part of her instinct restricted by reality. From this dialogue, we can infer that CICI hoped to build a new "self" of her own free will in the world of online games. To put it another way, CICI had a strong desire to acquire an identity of her own in virtual space.

Obviously, identity acquisition merely marked CICI's start of an online gaming life. More importantly, she needed a sense of identity and wanted to realize self-fulfillment. A significant part of online gamers are young female students (like CICI), who lead a plain life and lack a sense of achievement. For them, it is easier to realize self-fulfillment in the world of online games, where they can temporarily escape from the reality and upgrade themselves by overcoming some of their inherent weakness. As CICI put it, "What is the point of exposing your weakness in real life? I have the feeling that everybody online is pretending to be someone else, or someone better than oneself. In cyberspace, you can do what you cannot in real life." CICI used the word "pretend" to refer to a shift of identity online. Basically, there are two reasons for such a shift. First, it can bring about more freedom and enable gamers to get rid of pressure or restrictions and to act as they wish. In CICI's words, "In cyberspace, you can do what you cannot in real life." Second, it helps gamers to acquire social recognition as soon as possible. With a new identity and a new way of acting, gamers can expect more favorable feedback and praise. To put it in CICI's words, "Everyone is pretending to be someone better than oneself."

Girls like CICI are forced to live in a learning environment and are only judged on their academic achievements. They do not have many chances to gain extensive recognition in today's already diversified social structure. Under such circumstances, online games' virtual space, along with its feature of identity shift, brings them an equal opportunity to compete and a pluralistic assessment system. They thus have more chances of being recognized by society and relevant communities. Although such recognition only exists in the virtual world, they can gain a general psychological compensation. For most people, things like huge wealth, achievements and fame are out of reach in the real world. However, people

may find it much easier to acquire them through online games. For example, once a gamer becomes "famous" in cyberspace, he or she can receive more trust and opportunities (recognition, experience points, game currency, etc.) than other gamers. In the world of online games, the physical absence of gamers bridges the gap between male and female gamers. Competition in online games has nothing to do with their real physical condition, age, gender or identity. Online games, featuring fast and convenient information dissemination, place all gamers at the same starting point and provide them with an equal amount of resources. American scholar Sherry Turkle agreed that in the Internet era, every individual is an integration of multiple identities. She further pointed out that one's real life only showcases one human side, just like one window opened on a computer screen. Humans now establish their true identity through a shift between the real world and virtual space, and from one "window" to another.[①]

3. Young female gamers' liberation of identity in online games

Regarding online games-based virtual space and identity shift, the biggest advantage lies in their deconstruction of the "subject" concept and diversification of social culture in the virtual world. The possibility to enrich identities is a key factor for online games to attract and retain young female gamers. Such a possibility is also a major benefit that they expect to get from online games. Without a "subject," every gamer becomes an equal part of the complicated and diversified network of interpersonal relationships. This deconstruction of "subject" provides young female gamers under various restrictions in real life with something they hold dearest: Freedom. Online games create a decentralized space for fragmented information production and a platform for dispersive web-like communications. In the face of so many audio, visual and emotional impacts, all that online gamers can grasp is the already opened "window," for grand narration has lost its market.

In the real world, young women are generally restricted by rules of a male-dominated society, forced to compete with their male peers on an unequal footing. Any slight negligence can be regarded as proof of their "inferiority to men." Moreover, according to the social norms, women are supposed to exhibit their "maternal instinct" and "femininity." As the "subject" gradually falls apart, the significance of online games is diversifying and the long-term restrictions on women are loosening. In the world of online games, no clear conclusion has yet been reached on correctness, wrong doing, success or failure. It all depends on individual gamers' free choice of identity. For women, this makes it no longer necessary to compete unfairly with men and enables them to choose their lifestyle based on their own conditions and advantages. Meanwhile, they do not have to care about being compared or judged by others.

It turned out that the first interview significantly aroused CICI's curiosity. After the interview, she went abroad for study and has barely played online games since. She left the following message for the researcher on QQ.

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There is another question. Why are there so many teenagers obsessed with online games in China? This question reminds me of a saying in a Chinese film that, "This is the outcome of China's 5,000-year-long sexual repression." I am not saying that online game addicts need more sex. But nowadays, one can barely avoid

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① [The UK] David Gautlett (2004). *Web Studies*, Peng Lan, etc. (trans), Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House.

such stuff when surfing the Internet.

Online games create a virtual world where people can start their own "family." It is a pity that the Chinese education is not open enough and fails to deliver due performance. Why? Just think about it. Have you seen so many teenagers obsessed with online games abroad? Absolutely not, I dare say. With more extracurricular activities, foreign students are busy developing their social competence and prefer not to waste their time on online games. In addition, foreign teenagers are much more open than their Chinese peers. Let me show you one example.

A Chinese teacher may ask a middle-school student, "What's your plan this weekend?" Do you think it possible for that student to say, "Just hang out with my boyfriend/girlfriend?" No way. But such an answer is more common for students abroad. Online games can comfort numerous lonely souls. By playing online games, you can have your negative emotion released and grapple with whoever you like to your heart's content. At the same time, you can also make online friends[①]…

Judging from the tone of this conversation, CICI was more relaxed during the second interview, expressing herself at will. This probably has a lot to do with her life experience abroad. It can also be that her detachment from online games facilitated an in-depth reflection of her past virtual life. It is noteworthy that CICI mentioned "sex" during the conversation. Considering the actual needs of her age group (networking and social activities), it is more accurate to understand her term of "sex" as "gender needs." CICI also complained the "Chinese education is not open." What CICI really criticized was the entire education system and environment facing Chinese teenage girls (including education in school, family and society). And it should not be narrowly understood as school education. This is a direct reason for teenage girls like CICI to seek a sense of identity in the world of online games.

CICI chose her preferred "lifestyle" in that virtual world to get rid of a variety of restrictions and a unified value system in the real world. Young female gamers enjoy full freedom to select game roles and design their characteristics. Such an innovative game mode creates an ideal space for the unfairly treated groups (including teenage girls) in real life. "Online games can comfort numerous lonely souls. By playing online games, you can have your negative emotion released and grapple with whoever you like to your heart's content." Evidently, CICI found her own "gender space" in the world of online games.[②] Such a space enabled her to escape from real pressures and identity restrictions and enter an environment of free competitions and fights.

In fact, relevant clues can be traced from the gender and identity description of major characters in *Fantasy Westward Journey*. Each character in the game is the mixture of a gamer's own will and the original game setting. On the one hand, as the character is an "avatar" of the gamer, its behaviors and movements are under the control of the gamer. On the other hand, the character also bears certain pre-set features which cannot be overlooked or

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① Quotes in the second interview with online gamer CiCi.

② The abovementioned "gender space" is not the same gender space in feminist studies. With a narrower scope of denotation, the term in this paper is online games-based. Originally, this concept was proposed by a female computer gamer named Jane during a lecture on computer technology at Stanford University on April 15, 2003. According to her, in cyberspace human interaction is achieved via "avatar." There, some people work hard on pretending to be someone totally different from themselves; while others prefer to present their true self. In such a context, some gender plays have been developed, which can be very interesting. Jane interpreted the alienation and identification between avatars as a necessary tension. Based on that, she proposed the concept of "gender space." In real life, the word "gender" indicates an absolute either/or distinction; in the world of online games, however, "gender" is more of a structural term, rather than an absolute concept. Given that, she considered game gender to be a type of space, i.e. "gender space" (http://www.gamegirladvance.com/archives/2003/04/16/genderplay_successes_and_failures_in_character_designs_for_videogames.html).

deleted. Through sustained manipulation of an "avatar," gamers gradually become integrated with their "avatar." This somewhat illusory identity orientation can also exert a certain impact on gamers. To gain recognition from people online, gamers unconsciously adjust their behavior in accordance with those people's imagination, or anticipation. Right from the very beginning, the gender of a character has had an influence on gamers. Thus, it can be concluded that young female gamers do enjoy more choices when playing online games. In this regard, Sherry Turkle explored a series of network environments (including MUD)[1] in an ethnographic approach to study cyber identity. She discovered that some people were reluctant to have their real life exposed online, while most people were willing to showcase their true self or multiple sides there. She also concluded that the Internet is conducive to "psychological health" and can act as a complement for a person's psychological deficits in real life. She supported her argument with a real case in which a physically disabled gamer maintained her psychological health by playing a sound and complete character in a game.[2] In this case, the gamer's character in the game was not really in line with her real image, but was somehow part of her hidden ego. For young female gamers like CICI, in a way, the world of online games can be even truer than real life.

CICI was merely one of the numerous female gamers active in *Fantasy Westward Journey* and she was by no means the most special one. Through her, we can catch a glimpse of this young female gamer group. During her transition from a teenage girl to an adult woman, she lived in a relatively simple world without feeling much social pressure on her female identity. Even so, for women living in similar environments, they are bound to be affected by social pressures. It is just a matter of degree. One could detect a strong sense of rebellion against social norms in CICI. The rebellion has something to do with her female identity, as well as her age. For example, when playing online games, she sometimes tended to speak in a violent tone, or even swore, which was against the anticipated image of a woman in current society and did not conform to her image of a "well-behaved girl" in real life. In addition, when playing online games, she frequently exhibited her willful and naughty side, which was in fact a manifestation of her feminine consciousness. In real life, she had to study hard to gain recognition from others. In the world of online games, however, she felt less necessary to be so independent.

"During the process of interpersonal communications, middle school students are likely to have a series of psychological problems, including but not limited to being autistic and defensive, inferiority complexes, social phobias and ego-centricity. Due to those problems, they find it difficult to successfully connect with others, leaving their communication needs unfulfilled. While exhibiting all the features and conditions of human interactions in real life, online game-based communication also enables parties concerned to keep their true identity, age and even gender confidential. Disguised in a "virtual identity," some middle school students feel relaxed and pressure-free to communicate with others. In this way, they can get rid of all the stresses and anxieties of face-to-face communication and at the same time have their communication needs satisfied. This explains why online games are so popular among this age

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① MUD is an acronym of "multiple user dimension," or "multiple user dialogue." MUD is a general term referring to all interactive environments. Although MUD can be conducted in various forms, it is mostly presented in the form of online games.
② [The UK] David Gautlett (2004). *Web Studies*, Peng Lan, etc. (trans), Beijing: Xinhua Publishing House.

group.[1] Just like many female gamers, CICI did not have much interest in raising her game level, beating monsters, or winning game currency. Instead, she wanted to get recognition, cultivate a sense of identity, make friends and have fun in her dull daily life. When playing online games, she behaved more true to herself than she did in real life, because only in that virtual space could she freely express her inner desires. For most young female gamers, or most women, being recognized and cared about remains their true wish. Affected by all the inherent biases and stereotypes in real life, they feel lonely and autistic and are unable to make more friends. In other words, they can feel the unfair social norms and competition right from their early years. Thanks to the opportunity to re-select their identity, they can reverse the adverse tide in the world of online games. Therefore, they choose to hide their true identity and rely on an identity shift to fulfill their real needs in a virtual space.

Through their role in online games, young female gamers like CICI feel recognized and establish a sense of identity. However, the world of online games can only offer a temporary shelter from reality. And it is just a matter of time for online gamers to return to the real world to tackle real challenges and dilemmas. At the age of 17, CICI went abroad for further study and stopped playing online games. She explained, "Yesterday, you asked why I stopped playing online games. I thought about your question for a while and concluded that it was mainly because none of my friends do that anymore. I think playing games is all about having fun with friends. Without those friends, online games are meaningless…It is my friends' companionship that has endowed online games with significance."[2] Through her role in online games, CICI expanded her communication space and gained recognition from her peers online. However, when she could no longer get such recognition or a sense of identity there, CICI immediately noticed the dislocation between the virtual space and the real world. Given that, returning to the real world and facing reality became an inevitable choice for her. It of course needs to be noted that the online gaming experience and identity establishment helped CICI to create a balanced mind and most important of all, build sufficient confidence in addressing challenges. This is perhaps the real significance of online games.

(Translator: Wu Lingwei; Editor: Jia Fengrong)

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[1] Wang Boqun.(2008). Online Games' Impact on the Psychological Health of Middle School Students. *Primary and Middle School Educational Technology*, (3).
[2] Quotes in the third interview with online gamer CICI.