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The Cultural Meaning of PK

"PK" is not a formal expression in English parlance, whether British, American, or any other dialect, but can have one of several informal meanings depending on the context. For fans of soccer, it has the meaning of "Penalty Kick." For a computer database programmer, it signifies "Primary Key." Finally, for members of the still relatively small niche of so-called "hardcore" video gamers, it has come to mean "Player Kill." It is this third meaning that has become a dominant slang term in current Chinese popular culture, and underscores the extent to which video gaming has permeated a culture in which one would be unlikely to find much computer technology just ten years ago. Moreover, the term's use is not merely relegated to virtual worlds; it appears often on television, in newspapers, and on the internet. It is not only used by the Chinese youth; one might also hear it spoken by the middle-aged or elderly. Yet the violence at the core of the term's meaning truly makes such a result surprising, especially considering that there are several other terms that are less explicitly violent and that are in fact more popular among the Western gaming cliques that spawned them, such as FPS ("First-Person Shooter"), RPG ("Role-Playing Game"), or MMO ("Massively Multi-player Online"). In this light, while the popularity of PK really does serve as an indicator of the growth of the games industry in China and the general popularity of games within the Chinese culture, the term also speaks to certain social problems that China is now facing in an age of increasing media influence.

It is no overstatement to say that business is booming for the computer game industry in China. In their 2006 annual report, Niko Partners, a research and consulting firm specializing in the Chinese video game market, declared that the 27 million gamers in China helped spur a 23.8% growth in the domestic industry from 2004 to 2005, for total market revenue of $683 million. They further projected that the market will continue to grow at around 24% per year until it reaches $2.1 billion in revenue by the year 2010 (Niko Partners, 2006, p. 1). At first glance, these revenue figures pale in comparison to statistics compiled by the Entertainment Software Association regarding the American

industry. The ESA claims that 69% of American heads of households identified themselves as game players in 2005 (ESA, 2006, p. 4) and that the total American market revenue for 2005 was $10.5 billion (Crandall & Sidak, 2006, p. *i*), easily dwarfing the Chinese market penetration and revenue for the same year. However, it is necessary to remember that the Chinese currency, the RMB, traded at around 13% of the value of the American dollar during that same year (Wu, 2006), which would affect the revenue from software sales assuming any degree of pricing parity, and that the costs to play are likewise significantly lower in China than in other countries (International Game Developers' Association [IGDA], 2004, p. 13). Conversely, China's substantially larger population must also be taken into account. Nonetheless, for the same projection period until 2010, the American market is only expected to grow at 15% annually (Crandall & Sidak, 2006, p. *i*), significantly smaller than the Chinese rate. If you further consider that the Chinese market in 2002 was almost non-existent, valued at approximately only $100,000 (Van Zelfden, 2006), the Chinese figures are all the more striking.

Moreover, the figures ignore the profits lost due to rampant software piracy in China. In a country that has been called the "zero-billion dollar market" (IGDA, 2004, p. 14), it is hard to estimate the exact extent to which piracy has affected the video game industry, either for foreign producers or domestic. Yet in his congressional testimony on the matter of intellectual property protection given in 2004, Douglas Lowenstein, president of the ESA, estimated that at least 95% of the entertainment software in China is illegitimate and amounts to potential lost profits on the order of several hundred millions more (Lowenstein, 2004).

In addition to considering the magnitude of these numbers, it is useful to consider the types of games that are popular in China and that contribute to such success within the industry. So-called "casual" games, which include puzzle and board games, have come to dominate the market in terms of number of players with 17.9 million, or 62% of all game players in China (iResearch, 2006, p. 12). However, "hardcore" players, which Niko Partners identified as those players who play online more than 60 hours per week, represent 29% of all game players. For the sake of comparison, the ESA's statistics show that 61% of time spent playing games online in America is spent playing casual games, also representing a majority share. Similarly, using the definition of "hardcore games"

provided by the International Game Developers' Association that they "generally involve more complicated game controls and overall complexity in terms of gameplay or investment required to get through game [*sic*]" (IGDA, 2006, p. 6) and of "hardcore gamers" that they "typically play high-action, extremely competitive games" (IGDA, 2006, p. 9), 29% of online gameplay time in America is spent playing games that qualify as hardcore (ESA, 2006, p. 11). Therefore, while the Chinese and American statistics do not measure exactly the same domain, they clearly demonstrate that preferences in either market are comparable and further that hardcore gameplay represents a sizable portion of the total time spent playing online games in both countries.

In China, as well as many other countries, a key segment of those hardcore online games is the Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) genre. In 2005, 15.9 million, or 55% of all game players in China, played some MMORPG (iResearch, 2006, p. 13), and revenues from those games accounted for 81% of the total revenues for all online games (iResearch, 2006, p. 12). Particularly successful games in this genre within China include the Korean-made *Legend of Mir* series, the Korean-made *MU Online*, *Sephiroth*, the *Westward Journey* series, and, most recently, the American-made *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Carless, 2006; IGDA, 2004, p. 8) In fact, as of September 2006, little more than a year after the launch of the game in China (Blizzard, 2005), *WoW* enjoyed more than 3 million subscribers in that country, which surpassed the number of subscribers in America (Schiesel, 2006a).

With numbers such as these, it is no surprise that video games are beginning to exert considerable cultural influence within China. *WoW* itself has spawned a series of co-promotions with Coca-Cola that includes soft drink cans bearing the likeness of characters from the game and television commercials featuring those characters as well as the Taiwanese pop music group S.H.E. American McGee, a well-known American game designer who has recently moved his operations to Shanghai to take advantage of the burgeoning market, had this to say about the relationship between games and the Chinese culture: "I've seen more than a few Chinese TV commercials (for things like cars, phones, and food) that incorporate video game imagery, or are rendered to look like actual video games….Games *are* [emphasis in original] general popular culture in China—not just spilling over into it" (personal communication, September 18, 2006). In this respect, the

gaming culture within China is beginning to look less like that of America and more like that of its neighbor South Korea where the market is valued at $5 billion though South Korea has a population of only about 50 million (Schiesel, 2006b). Responding to a question about the differences between gaming culture in China and South Korea, McGee (personal communication, September 18, 2006) said: "I think whatever difference there might have been is quickly dissolving." Indeed, Lisa Hanson, managing partner for Niko Partners, identifies South Korea as the source for many of the current trends in the Chinese gaming industry (Van Zelfden, 2006).

Yet while China has not necessarily reached the point where game players can become superstars or multi-player game matches are broadcast on TV as is the situation in South Korea (Schiesel, 2006b), the use of PK can easily be seen as an indication of a shift in that very direction. One demonstration of its popularity is its frequent use in the popular Chinese television show, *Chaoji Nüsheng*, or *Super Girls*, which features a contest in which young Chinese women compete to become the next pop music sensation and is therefore similar in intent to *American Idol*. In that context, PK has come to signify "the knockout part of the show: after a round of singing, the competitor who gets the fewest SMS [mobile phone text messages] votes and another one who judges decide has made too many mistakes are sent to the PK Stage; one is eliminated in a one-to-one competition" in addition to its more specifically gaming-related meaning of "player killer" (CRIEnglish.com, 2006). Such usage in this particular show, a national phenomenon that earned its parent broadcasting station $12.5 million in 2005 (Xinhua, 2006a), clearly demonstrates the extent to which the term has become assimilated into the larger non-gaming culture. Moreover, the term was used extensively throughout web sites devoted to the program,[1] and *Super Girls* contestants from 2005 released an album titled *Terminal PK* after that season was finished (CRIEnglish.com, 2005a).

More generally, PK has acquired the meaning of "defeat" or simply "competition." For example, this can be seen in the ironic headline of the article "Lycra Show Joins Dreamy China to PK Super Girls Next Year?" in which the author announces the intent of two new contenders to steal *Super Girls*' popularity in the next season

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[1] See, for example, the *Super Girls* site on the popular Chinese portal web site, Sina.com. As of November 4, 2006, there were 7 distinct instances of the term at http://eladies.sina.com.cn/f/supergirl/

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(CRIEnglish.com, 2005b). In another situation, a radio broadcaster might use the term to describe the success of blockbuster movies in Beijing by implying that those movies have defeated the city (Li, 2006). Finally journalists might use the term to refer to competition between corporations such as in the headline "Zhang Yaqin goes to Beijing to 'PK' Lee Kai-fu" preceding an article on two executives from Microsoft and Google respectively that appeared in *China Business News* ("Shanghai Spells," 2005).

This association with competition has likely contributed to the absorption of the term into the Chinese vernacular. Indeed, the competitive aspects of MMO gameplay seem to be one of the chief draws for game players in China. Monte Singman, a former executive at a U.S. firm that was bought out by Shanda, one of the largest Chinese game firms, and who now runs his own company specializing in MMOs for the Chinese market, remarked that "PK is almost a must for Chinese MMORPGS." He further contends that games that might be popular in North America or Japan would not be popular in China without PK elements and that once again China is more like South Korea in this regard (Carless, 2006). PKing, in fact, seems to fulfill some psychological need in Chinese youth, at least in the opinion of Tao Ran, director of the Beijing Internet Addiction Center. He said: "Teenagers seek adventure and fulfillment in dramatic and skill-demanding games like *WoW*. If hero games do not focus on killing and domination, gamers will definitely not play them." (Xinhua, 2006c)

Despite the ostensibly negative connotation of "killing" and "domination," as the term PK has been brought into the larger general culture, it seems to have lost this negativity. In its frequent usage by *Super Girls*, there are distinct hints of playfulness, and in its usage by *China Business News*, the tone is decidedly satirical. In China, the term has lost the edge that it enjoyed at its time of conception within the game *Multi-User Dungeon* (*MUD*), which was created by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle in 1978 (Multi-User Entertainment, Ltd. [MUSE], 1999a). Bartle's company's website (MUSE, 1999b) defines PK as: "v. abbreviation of 'player killing': the concept of allowing one persona to attack and destroy another persona; n. a persona which indulges in PK in the above sense." The website then goes on to say that the term "killer" is more technically accurate than PK, where "killer" is defined as "a player who gets most fun out of causing destructive grief to other players." Such definitions do not mince words when ascribing a

negative meaning to PK, and Bartle (personal communication, October 10, 2006) further underscored this by saying, "it was a term of disapprobation." He added that, although the meaning of PK has nowadays "softened a bit" among Western game players, it still represents "someone whose character is nasty to someone else's character."

As such, it is clear that the meaning has become altered in the process of being transferred from one culture to another. Indeed, in a lecture in which Singman discussed the popularity of PK gameplay in China, he was quick to qualify PK as meaning "player versus player" (Carless 2006), a different definition entirely from Bartle's and one which would normally be abbreviated as "PvP." This disparity in meaning between its use in its original Western context and that which it has acquired in China raises interesting questions regarding the etymology of its usage within China. With the goal of discovering how this term and this particular meaning became popularized in that country, the author administered an informal survey (October 3, 2006) to a group of Chinese college students at a university of moderate reputation in the northeastern city of Harbin. Despite this informality, the results were quite clear and provided a more complete picture than originally anticipated. Foremost, an astonishing 95% of the 91 participants claimed knowledge of the meaning of PK, which indicates that PK truly has saturated Chinese youth culture.

This result is especially remarkable considering that, although 80% of the participants identified themselves as at least sometimes playing games, the average participant only *seldom* plays according to their own self-rating. Moreover, of those participants who did identify themselves as being game players, only 29% mentioned playing games that might be classified as hardcore, namely FPSs, RTSs, or RPGs. This result agrees with those provided by Niko Partners, although only 11% mentioned playing an MMORPG game. In other words, few of the surveyed students play the games in which one might classically use a term such as PK. The remaining participants either mentioned only casual games or provided no response to the question. The lack of correlation between playing games and knowledge of PK was further confirmed by the fact that only one participant was able to give approximate definitions of FPS and MMO as the answer to another question and did not give any indication that she knew the exact meaning of the acronyms. Only 7.6% of the participants could identify the meaning of

RPG. Once again, these terms are much more commonly used among Western gaming circles than PK because they represent the names of popular game genres. Moreover, these same genres are also popular in China, and the complete lack of correlation between knowledge of PK and knowledge of these terms is surprising.

Furthermore, the survey also asked the participants to judge their own knowledge of both American and South Korean culture. On average, the participants claimed to know *some things* about America, but not *a lot*, whereas they claimed to know *very little* about South Korea. This suggests that there is no clear correlation between familiarity with PK and potential familiarity with these countries' respective gaming cultures, and so it seems unlikely that the popularity of PK arose as a result of the general melding of popular culture with gaming culture to which McGee has referred. It seems instead that the popularity is just an isolated incident.

Indeed, the data further suggests that their knowledge of the term comes from still another source, and, in this case, that source is clear and not directly related to video games. 73% of the participants, regardless of whether they claimed to understand the meaning, reported that they had first heard the term on television, whereas only 7% claimed to have first heard the term while playing games. In fact, one participant stated that she had never heard the word in a context other than on TV. What is even more remarkable is that 42% specifically named *Super Girls* as the source of their knowledge of the term. Moreover, it is likely that a large portion of the responses that indicated television could have been implicitly referring to *Super Girls*, and therefore the figure of 42% likely under-represents the influence that the program has had on disseminating the knowledge of what PK means. In contrast, the only other source mentioned by more than 10% of the responses was "friends" at 17%. Considering that friends are a rather natural way with which to encounter slang, that figure seems smaller than would be expected and confirms that something out of the ordinary has contributed to the introduction of this term into common usage.

This irregularity is also confirmed by the specific definitions given by the participants. Only 12% mentioned the connection between the meaning of PK and video games. In most of those responses, the participant correctly stated that PK meant "Player Kill." In a few cases, they supplied the reasonably mistaken answer of "Person Kill." Yet

the remaining responses displayed not the smallest hint that the participant was aware that the term itself originated in video games. They merely gave definitions and examples of usage that reduce to one or more of the following three: "competition" (noun) as in "let's have a PK," "to compete" (intransitive verb) as in "let's PK," or "to defeat" (transitive verb) as in "I'll PK him." All these definitions agree with the examples found in Chinese popular culture and more specifically with its usage within *Super Girls*. Moreover, none of the students who claimed to have first encountered the term while playing video games gave the exact meaning, implying that in all cases that the students' knowledge of the term arises from contexts that incorporated the new connotations while ignoring the old.

Of course, it is understandable that few students would be aware of this more exact definition given their general lack of familiarity with video gaming culture and its corresponding terminology. In fact, the producers of *Super Girls* freely admit they popularized the term and that they took advantage of this unfamiliarity to promote their show. A representative from the show who identified himself only as Mr. Wang (personal communication, November 15, 2006) said that before the show became popular the producers of the show knew that PK was not well known by the Chinese, but that they thought it was an interesting word that could draw attention to the show and that would remind people of the show whenever it was used.

However, it still seems odd that an entire culture would adopt a foreign word into their vocabulary, with little understanding of its original meaning, and then accept a new meaning that bears only a tangential relationship to that original meaning, particularly when the original meaning is once again quite violent. Looking more closely at the other survey responses regarding the participants' first encounters with PK, that is, the ones that do not mention television or *Super Girls*, one gains insight into how exactly this transpired. In addition to the surprisingly low number of participants who gave "friends" as their response and the handful of students who mentioned "games," the remaining responses are "a magazine," "news" or "a newspaper," and, interestingly enough, "teacher." Separately, these three options do not represent a large percentage of the responses, with the most common being "teacher" at 7%. Altogether, only 11% of the

participants mentioned at least one. However, more than half of the students who correctly defined PK as "Player Killer" identified one of these as their source.

Given that those teachers themselves likely discovered the meaning in a magazine or newspaper and given the overwhelming majority who are familiar with the term through watching television, in essence, it seems obvious that the media more broadly and not just *Super Girls* has supplied PK its meaning. The students and faculty at this university in Harbin are not alone in depending on the media to define this otherwise confusing term. A 78-year old woman from Chengdu in Southwestern China was also able to correctly define PK as "player killer" in an interview and also fingered *Super Girls* as the primary source for the term's popularity. Yet she mentioned that she also had needed to consult a newspaper to learn PK's exact meaning (Ji, J., personal communication, July 27, 2006).

It is no novelty for media to influence culture. Yet in ascribing PK with its new meaning and drawing a questionable connection with the old, rather than reflecting a meaning already present in the culture the media represents, the Chinese media has controlled the entire process of popularizing the term and, as a result, its usage has not grown very naturally. Li Xing, a journalist who writes for the official Chinese National English-language newspaper China Daily echoed this sentiment in an article published in February, 2006:

> The impulse to copy and mimic is so strong that some people don't even
> bother to check and use copied words or phrases correctly. The other day,
> a DJ on a local radio station excitedly announced that since December,
> several blockbuster films had "PKed" Beijing. She used the exact English
> phrase in her narration. The phrase "PK," or player-killer, is most
> commonly used nowadays in computer games as players are out to "kill"
> or defeat enemies. She used the phrase to describe films released to attract
> viewers and vie for box office returns. (Li, 2006)

In fact, the DJ, herself a representative of the media, had used the term correctly according to the newly popularized meaning, but Li was not aware of this meaning at the time: "I wasn't really aware of the term until I heard from the very DJ who misused it. I suspected that the term really meant 'attracting a lot of viewers.' So I looked it up on the

Internet, and most cite the term as meaning 'player killer.'" (personal communication, October 4, 2006)

Ultimately, the term is confusing because it came out of nowhere for many of the people who now seek to use it. Although the students who participated in the survey are uniformly familiar with the term, they almost certainly have little understanding of the connotative meaning of PK, particularly its association with "griefing," or purposefully causing grief to others as in Bartle's definition, beyond what the media has told them. On the one hand, McGee (personal communication, September 18, 2006) had the following to say about its current usage: "Using a slang term like this and expecting others to understand it implies that you're all a part of the same 'tribe.' In China, being a gamer is something to be proud of—or at least not embarrassed of." On the other hand, however, most of the people who are now using PK are not part of this "tribe." Searching for "PK de yisi" ("meaning of PK") or "PK de lishi" ("history of PK") in a Chinese search engine yields an uncountable number of links to web discussion forums in which more Chinese not of this tribe are also trying to figure out the origin and meaning of this word. At the time of this writing, it was easy to find fresh discussion of no more than a few days old despite the fact that the original season of *Super Girls* aired more than two years ago, and the show reached mainstream popularity more than one year ago.

In these forums, fierce debate can rage over the correct origin even though the matter seems to have been officially settled long ago by the Chinese media, *Super Girls* or otherwise. For example, in one particular Yahoo forum ("PK yi ci", 2006), several members suggest "Penalty Kick" in addition to the accepted definition of "Player Kill," a few members suggest "Penalty Killing," and a few more suggest that PK actually originates from what amounts to be a curse word in Hong Kong Cantonese.[2] One member in particular seems to have fashioned himself an expert on the topic, providing all of these definition in a single lengthy entry that the other members have rated as the best answer.

This debate underscores the extent to which average Chinese find this new popular slang word very puzzling, and the discontinuity between PK with its immediate

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[2] Nicholas Yee, who researches the social aspects of gaming at Stanford University, helped the author with the Cantonese meaning of PK.

negative connotations and PK as "general-purpose competition" certainly does not help solve the puzzle. However, it is worth noting that in the surveyed students' responses regarding the usage of PK, several answers did have connotations of ultimate victory. Indeed, CRIEnglish.com's definition (2006) includes the word "eliminated." While there is a clear sense of finality to such definitions, which certainly does agree with the "Player Kill" meaning of PK, that finality is nonetheless equally present in a "Penalty Kick." Furthermore, "Penalty Kick" seems more directly related to the competitive aspects of the Chinese PK considering that one student (personal survey, October 3, 2006) mentioned that PK is often used "in a contest" when two people "have finals." If one were instead searching for gaming terms to borrow, the aforementioned PvP would be quite suitable, and Bartle (personal communication, October 10, 2006) suggested that "pwn" (pronounced "p'own") would most closely match the assumed cultural meaning. *Super Girls'* Mr. Wang (personal communication, November 15, 2006) also stated the show's producers became familiar with PK through scouring the internet and online games and not through their own substantial knowledge of hardcore games. As a result, they were likely unfamiliar with the more suitable terms.

Mr. Wang further admitted that another factor contributing to the show's decision to introduce PK was the freedom that comes with a fresh term to add whatever connotations are desired, which would allow its meaning to change as the show's needs changed. Other terms might not have had the same fluidity. For example, PvP could not be so easily expanded to include the group against group competition that is also featured in *Super Girls*. The ultimate goal of the show's producers was to find a word that they could imbue with so much new meaning that it could be used in many new contexts by as many people as possible, and that all such usage would again result in more attention for the show. This expansion in meaning was even noted by one particularly astute survey participant (personal survey, October 3, 2006) who "first saw it in senior school" when "some of [her] classmates who played computer games used this word." She then stated that she has now "heard others use this word" and that "it has an expanded meaning" although she did not indicate that she knew the original meaning.

Despite, or perhaps because of, all this ambiguity and uncertainty with respect to the meaning, the general media has continued to propagate PK while ironically

participating in a simultaneous backlash against the term. In addition to Ms. Li (2006) decrying Chinese people's lack of originality in their use of this term, other media pundits (Zhou, 2006) have weighed in on the term's usage within the country, including responding to Shanghai's 2006 decision to ban PK and other slang derived from the internet from textbooks and other published material. The appearance of PK in such articles is usually followed by a parenthesized definition, which no doubt contributes to the term's notoriety. Indeed the ban itself, which also affected newspapers, was publicized in the *Shanghai Morning Post*, which interviewed a city official who said, "on the web, internet slang is convenient and satisfying, but the mainstream media have a responsibility to guide proper and legal language usage." The *Morning Post* then went on to speculate that the city faces an uphill battle due to the popularity of the term within the media ("Shanghai Spells," 2005). Furthermore, bad press is still press, and the efforts of the newspapers appear counter-productive.

Moreover, the attention given to the term in the media corresponds to the growing attention by the media and the Chinese government towards the negative aspects of video game culture. In August 2005, Chinese officials announced a new law banning minors from playing any game that features PK gameplay. Liu Shifa from the Chinese Ministry of Culture justified the law: "Online games that have PK content usually also contain acts of violence and leads [*sic*] to players spending too much time trying to increase the power of their characters. They are harmful to young people." (Fahey, 2005) Around that time, the government also announced regulations that would require all MMORPGs to implement a "fatigue" system that would penalize game players in a move to thwart increasing amounts of game addiction. Specifically, the strength of the player's character would be halved if the player played for more than three hours in one day and dropped to a minimum level if the player played for more than five hours (Feldman, 2005). The rising awareness of these problems has also lead to solutions such as plans for a rating system (Xing, 2006) and the creation of a center in Beijing specifically for the treatment of internet addiction (Ang, 2005). Yet there is also concern that the problem is overstated. Kuang Wenbo, a professor of mass media at Beijing's Renmin University said: "As the number of the Netizens grows, the number of the addicted people will grow as well, but we should not worry about the issue too much…The young men at the age of growing up

have their own problems. Even if there was no Internet they will get addicted to other things." (Ang, 2005)

Nonetheless, the role that the media has played in dramatizing internet addiction and the evils of the information age also parallels similar developments in the U.S. Responding to the question of whether gaming addiction is a significant problem in China, Ms. Hanson answered very simply, "the press makes it a problem" (Van Zelfden, 2006). As in America, there is concern about what happens when game violence spills over into real life, and this fear has also been picked up by the Chinese media. The stories of Zhang Xiaoyi, a boy who jumped to his death in 2004 because of a professed desire to join the characters in the game *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, and of Qiu Chengwei, a man who killed a fellow player in the game *Legend of Mir III* to exact revenge for a weapon stolen in the game, were popular in the press (Cao & Jiao 2005; Xinhua, 2006b). So too were the follow up stories (Cao, 2005; Jiang, 2005; Xinhua, 2006c) in which Zhang's parents joined a class-action lawsuit against the Chinese game industry or sued *Warcraft*'s Chinese distributor directly, or in which Qiu received his death sentence.

In the stories of Zhang and Qiu, and other cases that have not been as widely reported—Zhang Chunliang, the lawyer for the class action lawsuit, found more than 700 stories of gameplay gone awry, many resulting in suicide or at least injury (Jiang, 2005)—one finds the likely cause of the success the term PK has found within the general media. In these situations, "player kill" has become something real and something to latch on to, providing a convenient word for a new fear, even if the connection has not yet been made explicit in the cases of actual death. Niko Partner's Ms. Hanson (personal communication, September 23, 2006) said: "PK games have a bad reputation in the press… [PK] evokes the imagery of the negativity associated with 'addicted' youth and gaming." In this context, the connection to the original meaning becomes clearer. As a matter of fact, in South Korea, police have already explicitly drawn the connection between the term and game-related violence and gangsterism by labeling such occurrences as "off-line PKs" (Levander, 2001). Perhaps China will soon follow suit.

Though *Super Girls* may have repurposed PK, the show itself exists only as one part of the overall media space in China. Mr. Wang (personal communication, November

15, 2006) explicitly stated that the producers were in fact aware of the violent connotations of the original meaning of PK, and that this violence was a final motivation for its use in the show. He described the competition on the show in Mandarin Chinese that translates to "fierce" and "brutal" and specified that many competitors go home "heartbroken." He implied that the attraction of using a video game reference within the show in fact largely stemmed from the commonly perceived violent qualities of games.

In this way, although the Chinese PK's connection to gaming culture is relatively indirect, its usage certainly still demonstrates the increasing pervasiveness of gaming culture within the larger culture. Although statistics indicate that the atmosphere in China has not yet completely replicated that of its neighbor South Korea or perhaps even the U.S., the seeds are there. As a result, just as these other countries are beginning to realize the broad social effects that gameplay might have, so too is China. The PK phenomenon in China is interesting especially because it simultaneously touches on many core issues, including the state of the game industry in China, the effects of mass media, youth violence, and responses thereto, which thereby provides a convenient window into the current state of popular culture in China as well as Chinese society in general.

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