Theses and Dissertations

December 2015

Islands in the Making: National Investment and the Cultural Imagination in Taiwan

Krista-Lee Meghan Malone
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Recommended Citation

ISLANDS IN THE MAKING:

NATIONAL INVESTMENT AND THE CULTURAL

IMAGINATION IN TAIWAN

by

Krista-Lee Meghan Malone

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2015

ABSTRACT

ISLANDS IN THE MAKING:
NATIONAL INVESTMENT AND THE CULTURAL IMAGINATION IN TAIWAN

by

Krista-Lee Meghan Malone

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2015
Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Malaby

This ethnography looks closely at the Taiwanese company UrIsland, makers of Talking Island (TI) - an MMORPG to teach children English - in order to illuminate the increasingly important meeting point between technology, education, and games. At the level of national economic policy, companies like UrIsland have been at the focal point of the Taiwanese government's hopes for their tech industry. With TI, UrIsland intended to create a revolution in ESL education. Despite compulsory ESL classes many Taiwanese struggle with English, and educational experts claim that the classes stress reading and writing too much, leaving many people's listening and speaking lagging. UrIsland's founder believed TI, an immersive environment focusing on listening and speaking, could fill this ability gap and make kids eager to learn English. UrIsland hired native English speakers for most of their voice acting and used innovative voice-recognition technology to create this "native" linguistic environment, but also designed TI to make studying compelling.

The CEO was, like many high-tech company founders, charismatic, and his employees were (mostly) willing to follow him in his revolution, but UrIsland faced a major obstacle – entrenched cultural attitudes. Education has deep roots within Chinese

culture. Not only were teaching methods thought of as sacred, but Taiwanese see work (including studying) and play as mutually exclusive. This work explores the collision of three major spheres of meaning: technology, games, and education, by analyzing the ways UrIsland sought to upend some ideas while simultaneously working with other cultural expectations in order to keep TI economically viable. While this ethnography focuses on Taiwan to highlight this relatively modern interplay, this increasing point of tension is not unique to Chinese societies seeking to develop their technological infrastructures and industries, but is also found around the developed and developing world.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Doing field research and writing a dissertation are by far the two most life changing experiences I have ever had. I of course benefited from these experiences more than anyone else involved, and yet none of this would have been possible without the large support network of friends, family, and willing informants that helped me along the way. Mostly obviously, was the support and guidance I received from my adviser, Thomas Malaby, who was always engaged with my work and encouraging me and challenging me to push beyond what I thought I was capable of doing. I would also like to thank the rest of my dissertation committee, Kalman Applbaum, Ingrid Jordt, David Blundell, and Kurt Squire for their invaluable advice during this process.

Next I would like to thank the employees of UrIsland who made my research possible. As much as I would like to be able to thank these many people by name, sadly I cannot. The first person I met especially made my research and time in Taiwan possible. On the verge of running out of money and at a loss for what to do I met this person who ultimately offered me the job that allowed me to stay in Taiwan. From this start I spent the next two years with an amazing group of people who taught me about Taiwanese culture and politics, let me into their lives, befriended me, and made me a part of the company family. I am deeply grateful to everyone from UrIsland and miss them terribly.

Although doing fieldwork is the exciting part of completing a dissertation, coming home after such a long time poses its own challenges. Thankfully for me my loving and supportive mom, Donna Malone, and stepdad, Joseph Salmon, supported me

throughout the writing phase. Without this financial and emotional support this dissertation would likely still not be done.

Beyond financial issues, I also came home with culture shock, having been so enculturated to Taiwanese life over the nearly 3 years I spent there. For this it was my entire family and my friends that had to occasionally remind me how to live back in Milwaukee again, and especially my siblings, Stephen and Brittany Klug, who had no problem telling me when I was being "weird" in public.

My friends also helped in other ways. I had lost touch with much of my social network while I was away, but Lynn and Tony, whom I met after my return, reconnected me with Milwaukee's geek side and kept my glass full whenever I came to 42 to do some writing. Then there is Patrick, the author, who lent me a sympathetic ear and understanding whenever I felt the stress of writing, and Elyse who brilliantly edited part of this dissertation and reminded me to breathe in those final stressful weeks of rewrites.

Throughout this all there is one more person who has been there for me in multiple ways. Jared, who started as a friend, sat and listened to me through those weeks of culture shock and then for some reason, rather than getting out while he still could asked me out on a date instead. As my boyfriend he then patiently listened to me talk through roadblocks in my writing and constantly reminded me to take care of myself – not just my dissertation. He never complained when I didn't have time to see him, or the times I came over so tired I took a nap at his house rather than going out with him. Throughout the writing process he kept me balanced and I am greatly indebted to him for his compassion.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The End

The atmosphere in the office had been tense lately. A complete change from the cheery Silicon Valley ambiance I had come to know. In the education department we had been doing what we could and trying to redeem the months of work and half-finished projects we had had to abandon as the company changed everything – their target consumer, pay model, address, and our supervisor. Now it was late November, and I was bent over a worksheet or assessment with Molly.[1] We hated worksheets – with a passion, yet on this day the familiar din of atmospheric noise - keyboard clicks, Mandarin, English, the water cooler bubbling – created a general feeling of respite and calm. This, coupled with the repetitive task of editing worksheets, put me into a state of flow. Everyone in the office appeared focused and for the first time in a while I didn't feel a sense of urgency in the air. Even when dealing with worksheets and tension, there was something about this group of people that made every challenge seem surmountable.

Molly and I were focused intently on our work and soon became oblivious to the rest of the room. Even the sound of everyone working together in one room had become so natural to me that what happened next did not fully register as happening … or stopping. I said something to Molly, in all honesty I don't remember what. I just

---

[1] All personal names throughout this work, except my own, are pseudonyms. Company and product names, however, are all real. I originally told the company I would be anonymizing all data, but they suggested I not do that for UrIsland and Talking Island. As is custom in anthropology, and because the office was so small and tight knit, some people are represented by two names or some names are a combination of two people in order to help protect people's identities further.

remember that I spoke and in the silence it sounded so loud. Molly motioned behind me. Alex, the CEO, was standing on the edge of the workspace, which happened to be behind me and not too far away. I can't be sure how long he had been there or how long the room had been silent. Perhaps everything had been stopped for a minute and I just didn't notice. Perhaps the silence was sudden and it was just coincidence that I spoke in that very same moment.

This was serious. Alex didn't make a habit of spending a lot of time out here and he rarely addressed the company. He used too. He used to treat us with things like 雞排[2], but it had been a while since that had happened. Morale had been low lately. People were worried. The year before we had moved to a new office to save money, but word around the water cooler was that we still were not making money. Why this was so was up for debate. I had heard various hypotheses from people – often in line with whichever department they worked for. We lacked essential personnel and began outsourcing to the point that, as one person put it to me, they might as well just sell the rights.

Yet, despite this recent downturn, most of the people there wanted to be there. They still believed in Talking Island and the mission of UrIsland. Many of these people were underpaid for their skill level. They could go elsewhere, but they did not. Alex acknowledged this as he spoke. He was clearly upset and it made his tone of voice low

---

[2] A fried chicken cutlet – a snack in Taiwan wrapped in paper so that it can be eaten on the go.

and uneven. It became difficult for me to follow everything he said and I had to ask Molly to help me.[3]

Alex is blaming himself for the company's financial troubles, for being an inadequate leader and for not being able to deal with investors. Alex's dream of Talking Island was to revolutionize English language education for the Taiwanese, but the investors, he tells us, do not care. They want to focus on the Shanghai project. They want a return on their investment.

I think I hear Alex say that he is stepping down, but that can't be right. I wait the moment it will take Molly to translate. Her voice drops to an almost inaudible level. Alex is stepping down from his position as CEO. I am shocked, but I am here to do a job. This is one of those ethnographic moments an anthropologist cannot miss. I focus all of my attention on writing down everything Molly says in as much detail as possible. I scan the room during every pause to record people's reactions. My cubicle divider is just short enough for me to be able to see most of the people in the room. There is a woman on the other side of that divider crying.

Alex tries to bring some optimism into his announcement. There will be layoffs, but the Shanghai team will remain intact. He hopes they can open some opportunities for us and wants to hear that those leaving would come back for that … though he does not know if we will ever meet again. Alex looks distraught and begins to apologize repetitively. He thinks Talking Island is great, but they just could not find the right

---

[3] Molly happened to be trained in translation and partially educated in the West. She had proven herself to be not only trustworthy, but amazingly skilled as a translator.

business model for Taiwan. He asks us all to remember that, no matter what, we were a part of something great and that our game was award-winning. We may not have achieved the revolution in ESL education he was aiming for, but we did reach some students and Talking Island is not going away just yet.

Then he opens up the floor. He says we can say something or yell at him. It's okay. He will talk to us all. What follows is an outpouring of emotion rarely seen in public here. Anger, sorrow, appreciation, and pride flow as people take turns speaking. Not everyone spoke. From the looks on some faces and by the sounds of sniffling, I imagine some people couldn't, even had they wanted to. Those who do speak, however, even in pointing out weak points, still convey a sense of pride in the company. One man stands and speaks about troubles with finding a new programmer which he blames on the company's policy on bonuses. Others complain about a lack of direction due to all the changes being made not only in the Talking Island package, but also in the structure and hierarchy of the company. There is some head nodding as these people speak. Alex apologetically responds to some of the comments and the CFO responds to others by offering surface explanations of the financial dilemmas behind certain decisions and policies. No one learns anything new in these responses from the CEO and CFO, we all already knew enough of the financial situation of the company to understand. With fewer than 30 employees, UrIsland was too small for such things to be kept secret. Despite everything, this was more than a job to most of these people. We were a part of a dream, of something bigger than ourselves. This was a company with a mission beyond money. We were out to change Taiwan.

The next day I stopped outside of a bakery on my way to the office. Today was my last day at UrIsland, and so a few days before I had ordered a cake to bring into the office. I stood there staring in as I wondered whether or not I should still bring in the cake. Ultimately, in true American fashion, I decided that cake makes everything better, and I stepped up to the counter.

Because of my hesitation at the bakery I was a few minutes later than usual getting to the office, but it hardly mattered. The place felt empty. Over half the company had just been laid off, and even though that hadn't yet taken effect, many people, quite understandably, were not up to coming in to clear out their desks and tie up loose ends just yet. Under normal circumstances, it would have been appropriate for me to make an announcement as to why I brought cake and pass pieces around, but that felt somehow wrong now. Being as close to Molly as I was I told her exactly what had happened with the timing of ordering from the bakery before the layoffs, but I said nothing to anyone else unless they asked.

I was supposed to interview Alex that morning. Again, this was something I had arranged long before yesterday's speech. Alex forgot and was not in the office. Truth be told, I was relieved. I had originally intended the interview to be a quick look at how his perceptions might have changed over the almost 2 years I had been with UrIsland, but it was a whole new ballgame now. Yet, despite my newfound nervousness at the idea of talking to Alex, I felt that it would be irresponsible for me not to try and talk to him after all that had happened, so I spoke to him on the phone and arranged to meet him the following day.

I didn't stay long after speaking with Alex on the phone. There was no reason for me to be in the office. There was no work for me to do and no one was talking. A couple of people that I especially wanted to talk to were not even there. I spent some time with Molly, then slowly walked home.

The Beginning

This is the story of a dream; a dream to make an island a better place. Or perhaps it is better to say: a dream to make this island a more international place, to make it a world player. This is a nationalistic dream, an educational dream, an altruistic dream. It started on a piece of scrap paper over lunch one day. The picture on this paper is crude and will not tell the uninitiated very much about what it means, but this piece of scrap paper became the foundation of a start-up company determined to pull Taiwanese ESL (English as a Second Language) education out of what its founders saw as the darkness it had been wallowing in for years, and thereby help to propel an industry and a nation forward through difficult seas.
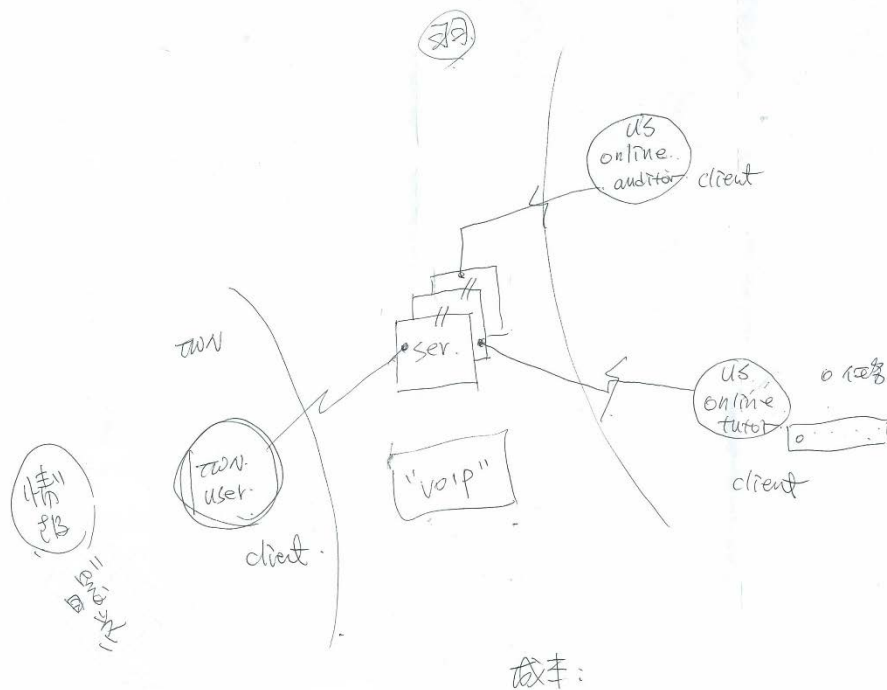
Figure 1: The beginning. The scrap piece of paper Alex drew for Mitch over lunch.

The dreamer's name is Alex and at the time he was working for one of the largest video game companies in Taiwan. He drew the scrap piece of paper while explaining to Mitch, one of his coworkers, how he was going to make a game that made a difference. Mitch was on board.

UrIsland is the company that would eventually result from this lunchtime conversation. The game that was to make a difference became Talking Island, an MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Game) to teach English, and it included most of what has now become common place in MMORPGs in general with an added layer of English instruction. Talking Island had, for example:

Character creation:

Figure 2: Character customization screen

Figure 3: Character finalization screen.

Methods of socialization:

Figure 4: Screenshot showing the six encoded means of interactions between players.

Quests:

Figure 5: When an NPC has a quest for a player they will have a question mark above their head. Once a player has completed a quest for an NPC the question mark becomes an exclamation point as seen here.

Figure 6: A quest log - player can pull up this screen in order to see all of the quests they currently have.

Maps:

Figure 7: A map showing the player quest givers in their current location.

Figure 8: This map shows the whole of Talking Island. To see a local map, such as the one above in Figure 7, the player would click the "Local MAP" button seen here in the bottom right corner.

And, of course, battles:

Figure 9: The start of a Fabo battle. As will be shown later, this was one of the players' favorite parts of Talking Island. The circles in the bottom right hand corner are the player's options, including: attack, magic attacks, defend, capture, and run away.[4]

Talking Island was relatively small compared with large commercial MMORPGs.

It had only a single shard (server) and ran on a restricted schedule.[5] These restrictions,

though made for other reasons that will be discussed further in chapter 4, had the side

effect of condensing the player base and making the world feel more populated than it

might have felt had the game run twenty-four hours a day like many other online games

do.

---

[4] Figures 2-9 are taken from an introductory packet for buxiban teachers new to using Talking Island.
[5] "Especially in large MMORPGs, separate servers (or shards) will be created in order to accommodate the larger number of people. Each server is an identical copy of the game, differing only in the players that inhabit each one," (Malone 2007, 23).

Yet, to really understand the deeper meaning behind this quest to make Talking Island, to know why this was about making a difference and not just money, one needs to understand the cultural context from which this idea grew. Taiwan is a complicated place. Officially named the Republic of China (ROC), it is recognized as an independent nation by some countries, but not many. China, officially named the People's Republic of China (PRC), claims them as a rogue province, even as they function fully independently from Beijing. These names and this situation stems from the Chinese Civil War, which in theory never ended, though the two are no longer fighting and have opened up to trade and travel with each other. Although there is a movement from within Taiwan to push for (recognized) independence, mainland China's power makes the island's ambiguous *status quo* a safer option in the opinion of many, and not everyone is in favor of independence anyway. Taiwan is also not homogenous. Locals, often depending on the history of when they or their ancestors arrived, identify themselves and others in a variety of ways, and this too plays into people's political associations. None of this has stopped them from participating in the world economy (or from trading with China). Learning English, the present lingua franca, is seen by everyone I spoke with – everyone – as necessary for economic advancement, both personally and nationally. For this reason, English education is big business in Taiwan.

English learning also has political implications for Taiwan, but most of the people I spoke with preferred not to speak about politics directly, making direct tracing of these implications difficult. Therefore, I raise Taiwan's precarious position advisedly, and for three reasons. First, even though most people did not want to discuss politics with me, they would still overtly note the language I used in referring to Taiwan, China, and the

people that inhabited both places; such as when one person said to me, "I like that you say you are studying *Taiwanese* culture." I prefer to use the names Taiwan and China because in my experiences with (non-government) people in both countries, these were the terms used (both in English and Mandarin). "The mainland" was also used extensively in everyday speech in Taiwan to refer to China. Following this logic, when I say Chinese, I mean that which comes from China – whether it be people, culture, customs, etc., and similarly with respect to the term Taiwanese, while still recognizing the two cultures share a common root in the recent past. This was the view of most (though not all) of the people I interacted with during my time in the field. Although I recognize that these words are politically significant, I make no claim to supporting any political stance in this work. Second, as in the US, education in Taiwan is politicized and English is one of the nationally mandated subjects students study. This is important to understanding the expectations the founders of UrIsland had for their business. Lastly, this political context frames a key development for the company: the expansion to Shanghai, China shortly before I left the field. While an extended treatment of Taiwan's situation is beyond the scope of this work, I will lay out as much of this political context as necessary in chapter 2 to situate UrIsland. As will become clear, due to contextualizing Taiwan in the local imagination, the government and people direct enormous national resources toward both economic development (especially technology) and towards English language education. ESL education is therefore both big business and seen as vitally important by the Taiwanese. Security looms large for this island under threat.

The perception within the company, but also from other sources, of the business of English language education, was frequently framed by citations of how much Taiwanese families spend on educating their children. I often heard it repeated that the average Taiwanese family spends upwards of 30% of their income on their children's education (in total for their education, not on English language specifically). As one might imagine, this fuels that idea that education is big business and that there is money to be made in opening up a new *buxiban*. When I tried to verify this with the national statistics offered on the government's website I found the number to be closer to 10% (Survey of Family Income and Expenditure).[6] Yet even if the actual number is closer to the latter (still a very large amount), people believe that other people are spending close to 30% of their income on education and therefore they believe there is money to be made, and this held true for UrIsland as well. Furthermore, because English is included on the national college entrance exams, children need to learn English to get into college. In addition to having a college degree, many Taiwanese claimed an ability to speak English opens up doors to employment with international companies that are often coveted jobs. UrIsland planned to cash in on this demand for quality ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction.

This was about much more than just money however. It was also about education in a place where education is both esteemed and a fraught national project; that is, this was about educating Taiwanese children. Shawn, the head of the education department, once told me that as soon as the company was making enough money

---

[6] http://eng.stat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=3417&CtNode=1596&mp=5

they wanted to offer Talking Island to disadvantaged children for free. They wanted to make a difference. Although I often heard about money troubles with the company and complaints from some employees, they nonetheless stayed and everyone I asked told me it was because here they were doing something important, something meaningful. Case in point: Molly.

Molly Doesn't Buy Happiness

"Money doesn't buy happiness" isn't a Taiwanese saying, but it fits the employees' attitudes of UrIsland. I have chosen Molly to represent this disposition not because her story is particularly different from the other employees, but because it highlights a struggle between a traditional Chinese disposition towards family pressure and the meaning of working at Talking Island for their employees.

Molly came to work for UrIsland's education department a few days after I did. While she was training I was holed up in a corner cubicle working on digital storybook supplemental materials. We were introduced briefly during this time, but other than that I barely saw her or Shawn for the next few days. Once she was settled in, she asked me to move permanently to share a workspace with her so we could more easily work together. For a time, we were the only employees, other than our boss, in the education department. She became more than a colleague or research informant - she was my friend. In addition to working together we had lunch together every day and sometimes, on those rare occasions when she did not have family obligations, we went out for dinner after work. I could not imagine the office without her.

I was never sure what Molly's title was, but this was not uncommon within the education department. We all worked on everything as our skills allowed (or learned new skills on the fly as necessary) and projects frequently changed hands as time demanded. She was an editor, personal assistant to Shawn, department supervisor, liaison, and more. The majority of our time we worked closely together on writing and editing worksheets, but we also wrote character backstories, worked on side quests, did voice over work, and developed curriculums. In addition to all this Molly also was the main point of contact with the game department and the people we outsourced to for worksheet artwork and design.

Molly is fluent in English, so fluent that I thought she was a native speaker at first. This coupled with her college degree meant her job prospects were good. Coming to UrIsland was a risk. As a newer company with financial difficulties the possibility of getting laid off seemed higher than at more established companies and the pay was not quite as good. While the monthly salaries of some of the employees, including Molly, were in line with averages from elsewhere, UrIsland did not give out any bonuses, and comparatively this was a major disadvantage.[7]

Molly had not been out of college long when she started working for UrIsland, but given her qualifications, her family thought she could do better. As Molly and I became closer, she started to talk about her family's disapproval of her job. They thought she would be better off working for a larger, more stable company. I understood. UrIsland

---

[7] I say "some" here not because the statement only applies to some, but because this was not a question that could be easily brought up and many people politely avoided answering. The lack of bonuses, however, was the same for everyone and disliked by everyone, so no one had a problem discussing that with me. Bonuses are explained in detail in chapter 3.

was a startup - always risky - and it was a game company - not exactly the Taiwanese ideal. That the company could not afford to give out bonuses did not help their reputation.[8] Molly's family was putting pressure on her to go and apply at the company her father worked for. It was a large, established company. She talked to me about this quite a bit and I could tell it bothered her. In Taiwan the practice of filial piety, the Confucian philosophy of respect for one's parents and ancestors, is highly valued. For example, when I spoke to students and asked about their majors or what they wanted to do with their lives, all their answers revolved around what their parents or grandparents wanted. Outside of her family pressuring her, Molly had no interest in going to work for the same company as her father, and so I was not worried about her leaving. We were having too much fun.

Figure 10 Fabos are pets in the game that are used for battling and questing. I will explain these more later. For now enjoy this Kongaboom.

When we had free time in between tasks Molly and I would team up in Talking Island to level our characters. After we made it into the zoo map I became obsessed with catching a Kongaboom.[9] The Kongaboom is a high level ape-like creature and I wanted one because I thought it would look cool to have a hulking gorilla following me around. We had tried several times to catch one, but it was so high level that even together we kept failing. Finally, one

---

[8] Bonuses are a staple part of salary packages in Taiwan. I will explain this in more detail in chapter 3.
[9] A Kongaboom is but one of the many types of Fabos that populate Talking Island. A Fabo is a pet, much like a Pokémon.

day in late September, just before the end of the work day, we caught a level 86 Kongaboom![10] It was so difficult and took so long that we squealed loud enough for the whole office to hear us. Already in a great mood from our victory, I was happy to hear that Molly was going to ride the subway back to Main Station (台北車站) with me that night. We weren't going out together that night, but she was meeting up with her boyfriend rather than going home, and I lived right by Main Station, so we travelled together.

As we made our way to the station I was quite chatty, as I am when excited, but Molly was more reserved than I would have expected after such an epic battle. About halfway through our commute, standing in the middle of a packed, swaying subway car, Molly said to me, out of the blue, "So … I'm leaving UrIsland." To say I expressed surprise, perhaps louder than is considered polite in public, is an understatement. In answer to my surprise she explained "all the flags" she had been throwing up to warn me – the discussions about her family's wishes, her father and the company he worked for, and all the days she took off "to run errands." As an outsider I had not picked up on the subtext. I had interpreted these conversations as her venting frustration and the days she took off from work as her dealing with personal necessities. I did not realize until this conversation on the subway that "errands" was code for going to interviews, and discussing her family's thoughts about her job was her attempt at preparing me for her eventual departure. In retrospect, I should have seen it coming, but in those moments of her subtly trying to warn me of what was coming, I just did not pick up on it.

---

[10] To put this into perspective, both of our characters were under level 40 at the time.

Molly then told me about how quitting went. Shawn and Alex both told her that she was welcome to come back if she didn't like her new job and Shawn tried bribing her with a small raise. Although he couldn't convince Molly not to take the new job, she did agree to occasionally take on projects small enough to do in her free time on a contractual basis. Interestingly, she said that Shawn also expressed concern for me. He was worried I would "flip out" and he asked Molly if he should sit at her desk for a while in case I got lonely after she left for good.[11]

At the time I didn't understand why Shawn had thought of me while Molly was quitting. He was losing a valuable employee, one that would be hard to replace, yet he thought about how the foreign researcher was going to fare. Later I would come to realize that the draw of UrIsland was not only the perceived importance of their work, but also the supportive nature of a staff that tried to look out for one another. In that moment Shawn was worried about me because I was not just the foreign anthropologist hanging around the office; I was one of his employees. This was like a family and the work here was about more than money for many of those involved. Molly promised her dad to give the job with his company a try. The agreement was that she would work there for six months, but if she hated it, she could come back to UrIsland with the support of her family (or at least without the pressure). A little more than 6 months later she was back at UrIsland sharing my cubicle once again.

---

[11] As it is in the USA, it is customary to give notice when leaving a job, so Molly continued coming to work for a month after this conversation. Furthermore, because of the freelance work she agreed to do, Molly came into the office a couple more times over the next few months.

Introduction

This ethnography looks closely at the Taiwanese company UrIsland, makers of Talking Island, in order to illuminate the increasingly important meeting point between technology, education, and games. UrIsland developed Talking Island as a virtual world (or MMORPG, much like World of Warcraft or Club Penguin) to teach English to children. At the level of national economic policy, companies like UrIsland have been at the focal point of the government's keen hopes for the Taiwanese tech industry. Like many countries in the region, Taiwan has invested heavily in developing the technology sector, and companies that push the envelope for innovation are the ideal. Yet such national projects often stand in tension with deeply entrenched cultural values, and Talking Island ultimately struggled to find reconciliation between them.

With Talking Island, UrIsland intended to create a revolution in Taiwanese ESL education. Despite 6-9 years of compulsory ESL classes (the standards were raised by the Ministry of Education to improve proficiency) many Taiwanese struggle with English, and many people, including those in the Ministry of Education, claim that the classes put too much stress on reading and writing, leaving many people's listening and speaking levels lagging far behind.[12] The classes strongly emphasize drilling, flashcards, and memorization, none of which are compelling experiences for children, and this is reflected in measurably poor outcomes in linguistic competence. UrIsland's founder believed that by creating an immersive environment, such as an MMORPG, and

---

[12] http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2011/06/20/306865/p2/Traditional-approaches.htm

focusing practice on listening and speaking, Talking Island could not only fill this ability gap, but also make kids eager to learn English. UrIsland hired native English speakers for most of their voice acting and used innovative voice recognition technology that rates player pronunciation to create this "native" linguistic environment, but Talking Island was also designed to make studying English compelling, and thus make kids want to study (in this case, play) more.

The CEO was, like many high-tech company founders, a very charismatic man and his employees were, for the most part, loyal and willing to follow him in his revolution, but UrIsland faced a major obstacle – entrenched cultural attitudes. Education has deep roots within Chinese culture, and as the locals like to say, "This is how we've done things for thousands of years." Not only were teaching methods thought of as sacred, but Taiwanese see work (in this case, the "work" of studying by students) and play as mutually exclusive by definition.

This dissertation explores the collision of three major spheres of meaning in Taiwan: technology, games, and education. This is done through analyzing the ways in which UrIsland sought to upend some of these ideas (such as work/studying and play being mutually exclusive) while simultaneously working with (rather than against) certain longstanding cultural expectations in order to keep Talking Island palatable and recognizable enough to be economically viable within the larger context of Taiwanese culture. While this ethnography focuses on Taiwan to highlight this relatively modern interplay between technology, games, and education, this increasing point of tension is not unique to newly industrialized societies seeking to develop their technological

infrastructures and industries, but can also be found around the developed and developing world.

Methodology

I did the research for this book during 2 trips to Taiwan between August 2009 and December 2012. My total time spent in Taiwan was just shy of 3 years. My first trip was about 10 months long and primarily focused on language learning and a preliminary mapping of the social gaming landscape. This trip was partially funded through a Huayu Enrichment Scholarship (教育部華語文獎學金) through the Taiwan Ministry of Education to take Mandarin classes at the Mandarin Training Center at National Taiwan Normal University (國立臺灣師範大學) for 3 months. My 2nd trip was for 2 years and it was during this time that I worked with UrIsland. This portion of my research was financed by my own hard work and dumb luck.

My main method of data collection was through the anthropological research method of participant observation. I worked in the UrIsland office alongside the people I am now writing about. While I did conduct a few structured interviews, I more often preferred to ask interview questions sporadically throughout the many informal conversations I had with the various people who agreed to participate in my research. I was introduced to everyone in the office and my purpose there as a researcher was explained. In part because of my research goals and in part because of certain talents I had to offer, the work I did for UrIsland varied greatly. I was at times a cultural consultant, editor, writer, translator, demo teacher, curriculum developer, voice actor, beta tester, and more. This gave me the opportunity to experience much, though not all,

of the production process for UrIsland, at least in the later stages (Talking Island had already been released by the time I arrived). Most of my experiences, however, were with the education department, and so this ethnography is influenced more by this department than the others.

I had no experience with the game industry before this, however I have been an avid gamer for years, of both MMORPGs and educational games, among others. I also had experience in games research as I had done my master's thesis on high end raiding guilds in World of Warcraft (2007). For this reason many aspects of Talking Island were familiar to me from day one. Lastly, I was familiar with the various social media used within the office - Facebook, YouTube, and MSN messenger most notably - and so I was already technologically prepared to interact on my informants' own terms.

With respect to language, UrIsland was interesting. Taiwan is a multilingual nation. Mandarin was still the standard for business and education while I was there, but Minnan (also often called Taiwanese by my informants) is also widely spoken, especially by those families who have been there since before 1945. Not everyone speaks Minnan, but especially in Taipei, where I was living, it was rare to find someone who didn't speak Mandarin. What makes UrIsland unique is that English was also used quite frequently within the company. From my brief experience as a corporate English instructor, I can say this was not unusual in international companies (specifically, companies that were founded outside of Taiwan), but students I had from local companies all reported rarely using English at work. UrIsland was a local start-up, not an international company. Part of the reason for English being used around the office was because the company had hired a number of current or former English teachers as

well as other bilingual professionals in connection with their main product. I am also quite certain that more English tended to be used while I was present simply because I was present. Everyone in the office spoke Mandarin, but not everyone spoke Minnan or English. For all these reasons, I estimate that Mandarin was used the most, followed by English, and occasionally Minnan. I will note here that I do not speak Minnan, but as far as functioning within the office and being able to hold conversations with people, this was not a problem – even though I naturally did miss some information because of this. Because code switching between Mandarin and English was fairly common with several people it was impossible for me to note every switch. Therefore, I do not always remember which language things were said in. For the purposes of this work, when I do remember, and when it is relevant, I note whether or not a particular conversation was conducted in Mandarin or English.

This connects to why all of the pseudonyms in this work are Western names (usually called English names regardless of the actual origin of the name). First of all, many people have English names that they use in English language classes, sometimes in business, and with foreigners in general. Because UrIsland was in the business of English education, Western names were prominently used. For example, the phone list everyone had at their desk listed everyone by their English name. Therefore, using Western pseudonyms is in keeping with the feel of my time at UrIsland. Outside of UrIsland, this trend is reversed and so I had a Chinese name, 馬琳 (Mǎ Lín), which was basically used by everyone but my coworkers.

Chapters

Technology, games, and education – the three intersecting spheres of meaning UrIsland was grappling with – are heavily laden concepts in Taiwanese culture. For this reason, this book is not organized strictly by these topics. Rather they are interwoven through four chapters that I have instead divided up – in classic anthropological fashion - via the lived experience of workflow within UrIsland. Technology, games, and education as concepts were overtly engaged by the company as they attempted to balance all three in a marketable and culturally understandable manner, but by analyzing each within the entwined context in which I experienced them, through the space, ideological debates, and expectations of the employees of UrIsland, the reader will come to a better understanding of the cultural landscape and struggles of UrIsland.

The first of these chapters, Chapter 2: Nationalism and the Cultural Imagination in Education, is the shortest. Unlike the three chapters that follow it, this one focuses more on the historical and political context of Taiwan at the time of my research rather than on what I was personally witnessing during my time in the field – though some of the information did come from conversations I had with various people. As of this writing Taiwan's identity, future, and even its statehood are contested. For this reason I draw on Benedict Anderson's work *Imagined Communities* in order to frame Taiwan's position and recent history in terms of imagined futures. Thus, I situate UrIsland within a national project of English language education focused on promoting a more prominent place in the global community for a future imagined Taiwan. Interestingly, this project holds importance to two different and oppositional imaginations of Taiwan's future – one as an independent nation, the other as a part of China.

Chapter 3: Islands Under Threat, lays the foundation of the space in which UrIsland and Talking Island existed. Starting with the macro level of the nation, I give a brief overview of recent political history as it effects national policy to this day. At the island level Taiwan functions as an independent democratic nation, but is only officially recognized as such by 22 states (Australian Dept. of Foreign Affairs & Trade website).[13] This fact was inescapable in discussions with locals about English language (ESL) education, economics, and trade with China, all of which also happen to be pertinent to UrIsland's business model. Because Talking Island is an educational online game, I also describe the ESL *buxiban* (補 習 班 bǔxíbān – 'cram school', or out-of-school extra hours of education to meet specific goals) industry, as this was UrIsland's biggest target customer, and discuss the technology sector – a focus of economic development for over twenty years as Taiwan attempts to become the "Green Silicon Island" (an environmentally responsible hi-tech powerhouse).

After the stage has been set at the national level, I move on to describing the space of UrIsland itself and the game world Talking Island. The Silicon Valley aura and playful atmosphere they consciously encouraged was reflective of the company's goals with their main product Talking Island and yet, as with the game as well, there was still a strong sense of this being a Taiwanese company. Thus this space was a unique hybrid of Taiwanese cultural norms and Taiwanese imaginings of America, again echoing the game they made. Nowhere, however, was the imagining of American culture stronger than in Talking Island itself. The game world was modeled after New York City and

---

[13] http://dfat.gov.au/geo/taiwan/pages/taiwan-country-brief.aspx

specifically designed to be American in order to create an immersive environment for learning to use English.

In the next chapter, Chapter 4: The Threat of Play, I tackle the concepts of work and play. In Taiwan education – studying, homework, etc. – is the work of students, and like all other work, it is considered mutually exclusive from play. The resulting stigma against games and gamers was a constant struggle for the company. Internally, this was not an issue. The employees of UrIsland played while working and worked while playing while creating a game that kids could play while simultaneously working on their English language skills. The problem for the company was how to show their customer base that this was possible, and this is where many disagreements arose. Through these disagreements I elucidate cultural ideas about compelling play (or fun in colloquial terms), games, and work. This is where those three spheres of meaning, technology, games, and education, become most evident.

In the final of these chapters, Chapter 5: Playing with Expectations, I look at the expectations of the various players in this story: the parents, teachers, children, and the employees of UrIsland. The stated (and oft repeated) goal of UrIsland was to create a revolution in ESL education. However, in order to remain viable they needed to walk a fine line between novelty and familiarity. Thus the company was careful to retain some cultural expectations even while upending others. Examples of this are peppered throughout the previous two chapters – such as Talking Island being designed to align with Taiwanese expectations of America and the work/play debates about parental expectations of educational materials. In this chapter I go on to analyze the construction of gender roles in Talking Island as another example of a way in which UrIsland made

their virtual world as familiar as possible to the cultural expectations of their consumer base.

After looking at outside expectations, I reverse it and look at the developers' expectations when compared to player practice. Like the Lindens' failed attempt to create an aesthetically pleasing and stylistically coherent island in Second Life (Malaby 2009, 6-7) players everywhere will do what they want and what they can. Despite imagining their game and designing their associated curriculum to be quest-driven, UrIsland discovered that players were far more interested in other aspects, such as Fabos. This discovery came as UrIsland was planning an expansion into Shanghai, China. Since this expansion required tweaking of their game-associated curriculum anyway, a dilemma arose. Do they take past player usage into account and attempt to make the curriculum more compelling by including more Fabo-related materials, or do they stick with the quest-lines in order to favor the existing educational model? In other words, do they give in to emergent player practices, or do they rework the model to encourage player conformity to the company's design?

In some respects UrIsland, with its unusual code switching in the office and focus on educational gaming through an MMORPG was itself an island on the Island of Taiwan. Perhaps then it should come as no surprise that they created an island game world. As already alluded to and will be made clear throughout this work, all of these islands were under threat and struggling to survive.

Chapter 2: Nationalism and the Cultural Imagination in Education

Introduction

In describing to people what I did while I was living in Taiwan I would often tell them that I worked for a game company that made an educational game, but I could just as easily could have said that I worked for an educational company that made games. Talking Island was the main product UrIsland offered (in fact it was their only product until they came out with Papyrus – a mobile English language game) and it was both educational and a game. Later on in this dissertation, in chapter 4, I will delve deeply into the cultural status of games in Taiwan and Talking Island's place as a game within this context. In this chapter I contextualize Taiwanese education in order to understand UrIsland's national and educational goals for Talking Island.

Education is the enculturation of the next generation, and the Taiwanese government, in all of its iterations, has been well aware of this for some time. For this reason, education has been a key topic for policy makers and a crucial part of nation building efforts. Over the years, as Taiwan went from being a Japanese colony to being under martial law after being turned over to the Kuomintang from mainland China, education – especially language education – has been continually used by the government to enforce their imaginings of what Taiwan should be. Finally, as a more open and inclusive democracy today, language continues to be an important factor in the national project as local languages become available in schools and English, the international language, gains ever more importance in the national school system.

When I speak of imagination and imaginings throughout this work I am using it in the sense first introduced by Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* stemming from his definition of the nation:

> it [the nation] is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (2006, 6) (emphasis in the original).

In the minds of citizens lives the nation, too large in the physical world to be fully known (every person, place, etc.) by any one person, each of whom nonetheless contributes to creating the idea that is that nation. Taiwan, so long under the control of foreign powers, is only recently beginning to be able to imagine itself publicly, and so its identity as a nation is still a contentious topic. To illustrate the different imaginings of Taiwan therefore, I highlight the historical roots of the two main imaginings for Taiwan's future (as a nation or a province).

As Anderson points out nations are imagined as inherently limited because "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (2006, 7). Therefore there are other nations being imagined by their own citizens. To take it a step further, these other nations are also being imagined by everyone else. Who the "other" is in this general formulation is irrelevant – everyone, every nation is an 'other' to someone and is imagined as such. In UrIsland's bid to teach Taiwanese children English they participate both in the imagining of Taiwan and of an 'other' – in this case America. Yet these imaginings by UrIsland all play a part in the national projects of Taiwan.

Throughout my time in the field and continuing as of this writing Taiwan has been working towards increasing their presence on the international stage. English language education is seen as essential to this mission and so it is no coincidence that many of the employees of UrIsland thought of Talking Island as a part of this national project. Furthermore, many of the employees I spoke with identified as Taiwanese – an identity that often also suggested a favoring of recognized and declared independence from China. This is a contentious topic in Taiwan because China claims the island as a province and there is not universal agreement on independence among the people currently living in Taiwan. Most people did not directly tell me they thought Taiwan should be independent (although a couple did) but they all made it known in other ways. Everyone approved of the framing of my research as being on Taiwanese culture and my word choice in referring to Chinese and Taiwanese people and cultural artifacts. For people like these, it is believed that growing prominence in the international arena, including economic power, will help to facilitate Taiwanese independence. UrIsland was a small company, but they were playing in a big game.

In this chapter, however, I do not discuss UrIsland or Talking Island very directly. Rather, I take this time to explicate the backdrop against which they came to be. I start with a description of the modern Taiwanese education system, then give a necessarily brief history of the island going back just over a century. I chose this timeframe, starting with the Japanese occupation, in particular because it has had the most direct effect on the current Taiwanese system and because a formal public school system was first introduced to the island under the Japanese. From there I move on to explain the ways in which language education has played into political aspirations throughout this time

period and further elucidate the perceived role of English in Taiwanese imaginings of their future. I then conclude this chapter with a look at the adoption of technology within the school system – a growing trend both in Taiwan and around the developed world.

Taiwan's Education System

Taiwan's current education system, including the national curriculum, is controlled from the top by the Ministry of Education, one of eight branches under the Executive Yuan (Ashton, 1999, 94; Chou & Ching, 2012, 67-68). Locally, there is also the Bureau of Education which is under the county-level governments and is in charge of all municipal and county schools, private primary and secondary schools, and non-national social educational institutions (such as museums, zoos, libraries, etc.), however, the Executive Yuan ultimately has the final say on all national educational policies. The position of Minister of Education is a political appointment and has suffered from a high turnover rate, with more than eleven people holding the post in last 25 years. Because the educational views of these appointees has varied and each one's tenure has been on average less than three years, there have been frequent educational reforms over the years causing confusion for parents and teachers and leading to often negative public opinions of said reforms (Chou & Ching, 2012, 67-71).

A note, before I continue, on the centralized control of the Taiwanese education system. In recent years there has been some movement towards decentralization (NCEE, 2015) however the Ministry of Education still maintains a fair bit of control. The education system is still in a state of rapid reforms and the push and pull between the

national government and local populations has escalated since my departure at the end of 2012. For an example of this see the recent student protest over history textbooks during the summer of 2015.[14]

The current structure of the public school system (based off of the American structure) is six years of elementary school, three of junior high, three of high school, and four year of college/university. Until 2014 only the first nine years, primary and junior high school, were compulsory. Before this, high school enrollment was exceedingly high anyway, but the change allows for an exam-free path to high school, and the hope is that this will reduce the extreme amount of stress connected with taking the high school entrance exam (NCEE, 2015). Because this change is so new, and my fieldwork in Taiwan ended at the end of 2012, it is too early to know what effect this change might have. While I was in Taiwan, students still had to pass entrance exams to get into high school after their nine compulsory years, and they continue to take college entrance exams, both remnants of the Chinese credential and exam system which prevails in several Asian countries to this day (Zeng, 1999; Chou & Ching, 2012, 69).

In 2001 the government designated new curriculum guidelines which called for:

seven major areas of learning: languages, health and physical education, social studies, arts and humanities, mathematics, and natural and life sciences, as well as interdisciplinary activities. Among these new learning domains, languages constitute 20 percent to 30 percent of the overall curricula, with the other 6 areas accounting for equal shares of the remainder (Chou & Ching, 2012, 89).

---

[14] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33731411

As can be seen in the above quote, language is an important area of study for the

Taiwanese, accounting for up to a third of the curriculum (languages in general account

for this percentage – including English, Mandarin, and local dialects). Because Talking

Island was a language learning game and because language education is directly linked

with the national program, this topic warrants its own section, and will be discussed after

the section on nationalism in education. In addition to these topical subjects, moral

education and socialization, heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy, is woven into

social studies classes and into the social structure of Taiwanese schools. Examples of

Confucian values still found in schools include: respect for one's elders, academic

excellence, and societal harmony, but these ideas have also been modernized to

include respect for differences (ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic) and the

environment (Ho *et al.*, 2013, 363-365; Lee, 2004, 581).

This moral education of children is also heavily present in Talking Island. The

storyline emphasizes helping people through various quests and restoring the harmony

Figure 11: In Talking Island players are socialized to be happy to help others.

that Octacomputer has disrupted. As a part of this

mission the Statue of Liberty – a symbol of freedom

and democracy – plays a key role in keeping the

peace because if Octocomputer gets his hands on it,

Talking Island will be doomed to chaos. I will discuss

the political aspects of education more in the next

section, but I mention it here because within the

curriculum, being a good citizen – whether Chinese

(as during the authoritarian regime), or Taiwanese

and democratic (as it is today) – has been a part of the imagination of moral and character education (Ho *et al.*, 2013; Lee, 2004).

Changing Nationalisms

Education in Taiwan has been under top-down control for all of recent history. The first formal education system on the island of Taiwan was established by the Japanese in 1919. There were other educational establishments before this time, such as mission schools, trade schools, and private schools, but it wasn't until 1919 that a formal and public system of childhood education was set up for the masses (Chou & Ching, 2012, 26). The purpose of education under the Japanese occupation of the island from 1895-1945 was "to assimilate the local people into Japanese culture" (Chou & Ching, 2012, 3).

In 1945, control of Taiwan was seized by the Chinese Nationalist party, or Kuomintang (KMT, Guómíndǎng 國民黨), from mainland China. By 1948, the Kuomintang was losing the Chinese civil war and the idea was to regroup on Taiwan in 1949 and take back the mainland within 3 years. The Kuomintang's imagining of the future was one of unification. In their view, Taiwan was officially considered a part of China and the Kuomintang regime was the legitimate government of China. During the period of martial law that was implemented in 1949 Taiwanese independence was not a public issue because "independence activities and even speeches to advocate independence were illegal in Taiwan" (Zhao, 2002, 223). Now under Chinese Nationalist control, the education system was redirected towards erasing the Japanese influence (including the language) from the local people. The goal of the new

government for education was to Sinicize the population – including focusing on

Chinese nationalism and culture and Mandarin language (Chou & Ching, 2012, 3). Part

of this nationalist agenda was also character education, often including resistance to

communism:

> During this authoritarian period of martial law, character and citizenship
> education curricula reflected the KMT's [Kuomintang] resistance to the ideologies
> and political practices of the Communist mainland Chinese government …
> Chiang Kai-shek stated in 1968 that character and citizenship education courses
> served the purposes of teaching students to be "human beings and good
> students" and to be "good Chinese who love their country and fellows . . . and
> appreciate Chinese values and culture (Ho *et al.*, 2013, 364).

The Confucian influence on moral education can be seen in this quote. These courses

promoted academic excellence (teaching students to be "good students") and social

harmony in respect for one's fellow countrymen. It also blatantly echoes the

Kuomintang's political agenda of joining Taiwan with China under its leadership.

The Kuomintang controlled Taiwan under martial law until it was lifted in 1987 by

Chiang Ching-ko (son of Chiang Kai-shek). Shortly thereafter, when Chiang Ching-ko

died in 1988, vice president Lee Teng-hui assumed the presidency and became the first

local Taiwanese leader of Taiwan (Tedards, 2012, li; Wachman, 2007, 5). "Except for

only a brief time before Taiwan was ceded to Japan … native Taiwanese never had the

opportunity to govern the island" (Dickson and Chao, 2002, 4). The island of Taiwan has

spent most of its last 400 years of history under the control of one external power or

another. Even though Lee was a Kuomintang member, his ascendancy was still

significant because he was not a mainlander – he was Taiwanese. He spoke Minnan

(Dickson and Chao, 2002, 4-5) as well as Japanese, Hakka, Mandarin, and English.

Over the next few years Taiwan's government quickly transformed itself into a democracy, legalizing opposition parties, most notably the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) that has held independence as their major issue. In 1996 Taiwan held its first direct election for president, and Lee Teng-hui won (Tedards, 2012, li-lii). The Kuomintang continues to exist as a political party in Taiwan, but their imagining of the future is now in flux, as they have had to come to terms with the power of the Communist regime in China and have renegotiated their ideas about when, how, and under what conditions unification with China should take place.[15]

Beginning under President Lee's terms of office, the education system of Taiwan began to shift towards a Taiwanization of subject matter; yet even while localizing education, the system continued to draw on past influences including: Japanese, Chinese, and Confucian traditions (Chou & Ching, 2012, 3). This Taiwanization process, the shift from a China-centric to a Taiwan-centric system of national symbolism, education, and discourse, was not specific to education, but rather the educational changes were a part of the broader campaign of Taiwanization (Heylen, 2012; Dickson and Chao, 2002; Corcuff, 2002). As Dickson and Chao explain, "Under Lee's leadership, Taiwan rewrote its history to orient and center around the island itself, shifting away from its past history as a part of China" (2002, 4). This has been a key part of evolving identity and politics in Taiwan. As David Blundell says,

> During the years since martial law, a Taiwan heritage movement has been underway as the people search for their own identity. It has been at the forefront

---

[15] See the Guidelines for National Unification, a copy of which can be found at https://law.wustl.edu/Chinalaw/twguide.html.

of public attention with the building of museums, cultural centers, and staged art events reminding us that 'where people live' is the basis of our political consciousness (2012, 6).

Throughout all of these administrations education has played a key role in the enculturation of the population. As Chou and Ching point out, "Education has been highly valued in Taiwan, and it has been a key item on the policy agenda of the Republic of China (Taiwan) since the Kuomintang government's relocation from the mainland to Taiwan in 1949" (2012, 26). Education is so important in fact that it is in the Taiwanese constitution that 15% of public expenditure must be in education, science, and culture (Ashton, 1999, 81). This heavy hand of politics in education has no doubt been influenced by Taiwan's continuing precarious position politically, and thus the governments of Taiwan have sought over the years to create their vision of Taiwan through the younger generations. In recent history it started with the Japanese administration imagining a Japanized colony, the early Kuomintang imagining a Chinese (and unified) Taiwan, and finally present day Taiwan, contesting their present and future in imagining an independent Taiwan.

Returning once again to Chou and Ching, "education in Taiwan has come to be one of the most influential avenues for nation building and economic development" (2012, 4). This reality is understood on various levels of society and informed the student protests I referenced above. The main concern of the student protestors was that the new textbooks promoted a pro-China view of history. At the time of this protest the Kuomintang held control of the government, and their party still holds eventual reunification with China as a possibility. Yet elections cannot be reduced to simply reunification versus independence because not only do other local societal issues come

into play, but there was also, while I was in Taiwan for the 2012 election, still people who spoke of maintaining the ambiguous *status quo* of Taiwan as being the best option for the time being. The next presidential election is January 16, 2016.

Economic development is vitally important to these political concerns, whether or not one is pro-China or pro-independence. "Because of its political vulnerability, it [Taiwan] is trying hard to be an economic powerhouse on the world stage in every way possible" (Thomas and Yang, 2013, 114). Because English is the current dominant language in international trade and relations, English language education plays a key role in this economic goal. Yet concern still remains over competing with the world in terms of social and economic development and preparedness of college grads for the future (Chou and Ching, 2012, 69). These economic concerns cannot be treated separately from the above political concerns. As Lee Teng-hui himself explains in the excerpt below from an address he delivered on 27 August 1995 at the opening session of the international conference on "Consolidating Third Wave Democracies: Trends and Challenges" held in Taipei,

> political and economic reforms are mutually indispensable; it is difficult to get anywhere by focusing on either one alone. Which equation should be solved first depends on the conditions and problems of each country. For the Republic of China on Taiwan, economic reforms clearly led the way, while political reforms just fell into place when the time and conditions were right (1995, 3-8).

Similar economic concerns are found at the individual and familial level as well. In some ways education is viewed like it is by many in America: education, especially a college degree, will lead to a better job, more money, and a better life, yet in Taiwan this goes beyond just financial concerns. "Grounded in the history of China and Chinese

cultural sensibilities, there is a sense that education may be used to climb social ladders and that education is a marker of honor, success, privilege, and status" (Thomas and Yang, 2013, 114). In short, education in Taiwan is a class marker. As Robert Marsh reports in his study of class identification in Taiwan, "Taiwanese are conscious of the distinctions between rich and poor, educated and noneducated" which appeared to Marsh as more significant to his informants that class as a designation (2003, 38). He goes on to explain, "the higher one's education, occupational status, power, and income, the more likely one is to identify with the middle or upper classes rather than the working or lower classes" (Marsh, 2003, 37).

Although class stratification never directly came up in conversation around the office, it was sometimes alluded to. Everyone in the office was college educated and stressed the importance of being educated for themselves and the importance of the population being educated for the nation. As mentioned in the introduction, some of the upper management of UrIsland talked about making Talking Island available for free to poor students in order to lift the nation as a whole through the raising of the lower class.

Thus national level goals and ideals for Taiwan, reliant on education for fruition, mirror individual level goals for the Taiwanese, and UrIsland played to both of these. On the micro level UrIsland described Talking Island as ideal for students because its focus on listening and speaking would push kids' English ability beyond reading and writing, allowing them to be able to actually use English in a meaningful way. On the macro level, around the office, some people told me about raising the fluency of English speaking ability for an entire generation of Taiwanese and claimed this would benefit the island as a whole economically.

As already noted, languages factor heavily in Taiwanese education. For the various nationalist projects over time Japanese, Mandarin, and Minnan languages have been the major contenders, but in terms of economic development, English has enjoyed unsurpassed popularity. For this reason, and because my own work was in language learning specifically, language education – with a heavy focus on English will be treated separately in the next section.

Language as a National (Economic) Project

During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, Japanese was the language used to educate children. When the Kuomintang took over the island, and thus the education system, Mandarin became the national language. As a part of the sinicization process mentioned in the last section, schools in Taiwan during the authoritarian regime strove to wipe out Japanese language and Mandarin became the language of education. To this day Mandarin remains the language of education and business, despite the localization of the education system that began with the ascendency of Lee Teng-hui to the presidency, however this process did allow for new classes in local languages.

With the new learning objectives from 2001 students were required to study three languages: Mandarin, English, and one local language. Mandarin is the language of instruction, but specific language classes are also included in primary school (not every child will be able to speak Mandarin before they start school) as well as literature classes later on. Selected local languages are required in elementary school, but become optional in junior high school. English at this time became mandatory starting in

grade 5, but this was later lowered to grade 3 in 2005 "in the hope of improving Taiwanese English proficiency" (Chou and Ching, 2012, 90).

According to Chou and Ching, reading and writing were the main focus of English education since 1968 because of a focus on getting students prepared to pass their entrance exams, but this changed in the early 2000s.[16] After this time listening and speaking gained importance alongside reading and writing, and recent trends in education favor "communicative language teaching" (2012, 90).

The reality on the ground of course is a bit messier. In order to facilitate better verbal communication, many schools try to employ native English speakers, but many also claim there are not enough quality English teachers available. As this is a subjective claim, it is impossible to verify, but there are certain trends I saw in *buxiban* education that might shed light on this issue. This list is compiled from my own personal observations from a handful of *buxiban* classrooms and from conversations with both local and foreign *buxiban* ESL teachers. This issue is complex as *buxiban* companies have different agendas or combinations thereof.

Some *buxiban* companies do not have someone on staff qualified to verify a teacher's English speaking ability during the hiring process. This occasionally leads to non-native English speakers being hired based on the fact that they look "American" (i.e., white). This appeared to be rare, but I heard of it happening and witnessed it once myself. Correspondingly, there is racial bias against potential ESL teachers of Asian and African descent, regardless of their native language. As one of my Mandarin

---

[16] Exam focused studying and teaching is not unique to English as a subject.

teachers explained, different races have different vocal structures and this affects their ability to speak certain languages. Others also mentioned behavioral concerns due to cultural differences between races (again, independent of where the person in question was actually raised).

While many *buxiban* companies prefer teachers have an ESL certificate for employment, not all do, and the pay difference is negligible at best, and so there is little incentive for foreigners to spend the time and money on this training. In fact, most of the foreign teachers I met during my stay at the hostel, for example, were fresh college graduates without degrees in education and had little to no teaching experience. Most of these fresh college graduates do not view English teaching as a viable long-term career, but rather a stepping-stone to get work experience before returning home. Therefore, turnover in a *buxiban* can be quite high. Even in the rare case of a foreigner coming to Taiwan with a teaching certificate and looking to settle there, information on how to get hired at a daytime school rather than a *buxiban* was much harder to come by.

In addition to issues in finding teachers, there was still the problem of the entrance exams at this time. Whatever other goals the government or parents may have had regarding English fluency, a college degree was still more important and the entrance exam still only tested reading and writing. This meant that there was still a heavier emphasis put on reading and writing, despite increasing inclusion of listening and speaking within Taiwanese schools and by students cramming for their exams. While I was in Taiwan the Ministry of Education announced that they were planning on adding listening and speaking components to the English portion of the exam in order to

encourage better English fluency, but they had not, as of the announcement, worked

out how that would be done or exactly when it would take effect. (See chapter 3 for

more on *buxibans*, English, and UrIsland's response to this potential change.)

I have mostly been focusing on primary education in this chapter because that

was the demographic UrIsland targeted and designed Talking Island for, however I am

going to move beyond this age group for the remainder of this section in order to

illustrate the importance of English language education for the Taiwanese. In the last

section I discussed English as necessary for Taiwan's international ambitions, yet for

this to be beneficial English language has to reach beyond primary school.

> English has been highly regarded as the de facto language in the fields of
> banking, commerce, trade, research, technology, and tourism … Furthermore, as
> Taiwan engages more centrally as a player on the global economic stage … the
> trend of studying English as a medium of communication in the business arena
> has become an increasingly important element in the education of Taiwanese
> students … learning Business English, has become a strong necessity for future
> graduates' careers (Chou and Ching, 2012,19).

In recent years, more colleges have been offering more programs taught in English,

English for specific purposes classes, and requiring students to pass the TOEIC (Test of

English for International Communication). English for specific purposes classes (such

as learning business English as mentioned in the quote above) in particular have been

popular both in colleges and through adult continuing education (such as the corporate

English classes I taught there for a time). These changes, encouraged by the

government, were fueled by the need for colleges to be internationally competitive

(Chou and Ching, 2012, 91). While TOEIC and English classes are clearly aimed at

Taiwanese students, the first part, programs taught in English, is meant to attract more

foreign students to Taiwan, with the intention of increasing the reputation of Taiwanese universities and increasing opportunities for educational exchanges for Taiwanese students as well (Mo, 2009).[17]

The employees of UrIsland were aware of all of these issues and goals. In fact many of them came up around the water cooler or occasionally in meetings. With these in mind they designed Talking Island to address the communicative needs of Taiwanese students and businesses and the future goals of the government. Additionally, they also sought to address perceived existing shortcomings in English education. For further discussion on this topic see chapter 3, especially the sections on the *buxiban* and English.

Educational Technology

As an MMORPG, Talking Island is an example of both a gamification of learning and digitalization. Later in this work, in chapter 4, I focus the entire chapter on game stigmatization to address the game aspects of Talking Island, their reception by the public, and why many at UrIsland felt there were concerns with Talking Island's classification as a game. The reason I emphasize Talking Island's gameness over its technology is that the evidence suggests that technology is more generally accepted within classrooms, thus leading credence to many employees' theory that it was Talking

---

[17] http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2009/11/08/2003457927

Island's gameness and not its technological aspects per se that were causing a conceptual roadblock in the minds of potential consumers (parents).

According to Yuen-kuang Liao experiments in computer-assisted instruction (CAI) in Taiwan began in in the late 1970s in universities. Then, in the 1980s, the government, by way of the Ministry of Education, funded projects into CAI. Although in these early stages few teachers or schools were actually involved and these early trials were considered generally unsuccessful, it does show the government's and universities' early attempts at acceptance and adoption of technology in education (Liao, 2007). Undeterred by these setbacks,

> in 1986 a 6-year plan for CAI in the schools was instituted. The specific objectives of this plan were to increase teachers' and students' knowledge of CAI, to train teachers in the development of CAI courseware, to develop and distribute a CAI authoring tool, and to institute and maintain a national database of courseware accessible to all teachers (Liao, 2007).

In the 1990s CAI gained more popularity and teachers and students began using CAI more and more as supplements to traditional teaching and studying methods. During this time the National Science Council further supported research into the effectiveness of CAI. Beginning in 2001 web-based learning and instruction gained popularity in higher education, business, and at home (Liao, 2007).

This acceptance of technology follows what I observed in relation to electronic white boards in some of the *buxiban* I visited. Not all of the *buxiban* had electronic white boards, but those that did made a point of advertising this fact. I never saw any of these boards actually being used, however, though this may be because most of my time in

47

buxiban classrooms was in my capacity as an UrIsland employee and our program was not set up to be used with this technology at that time.

I did, however, get the chance to see an electronic white board demonstration by a retailer. I went with a couple of other UrIsland employees to see this demonstration as a part of our planning for opening up a learning center in Shanghai (see chapter 5, the section titled Shanghai: Designing for a New Market for a complete explication of the Shanghai learning center). The demo was based on a proprietary curriculum package of the company selling the electronic white board and had to be purchased separately. Alternatively, a textbook publisher (or school, or anyone who wanted to) could design their own software to be used with the electronic white board.

On our way out of the demonstration I asked one of my coworkers why we were even looking at such an expense at that time considering the fact that we didn't currently have a programmer on staff and even if we did, there was not enough time to both program software for the board and write it into the curriculum before the Shanghai learning center opened. Her response, and the other coworker's agreement were telling: parents found having an electronic white board very impressive – it was a selling point – and besides, they could always figure out how to use it later.

This view was not unique to UrIsland. In my capacity as an English teacher I was once brought into a company classroom that had an electronic white board. The woman showing me to the room made a show of pointing out what the board was and informing me that I was free to use it as much as I wanted. She could not, however, tell me how to use it or even work it, when I asked. Furthermore, I was not allowed into the classroom more than a few minutes before each class and so I had little opportunity to play with

the technology and potentially learn how to work it. In the first class I asked my students

if any of them knew how to use the electronic white board, or could tell me how other

teachers used it. Most of them had never seen it used and no one knew how to use it.

Without training or applicable software I never used the electronic white board,

but that did not seem to matter to either the company or the students. In my

experiences electronic white boards were about a perception of technology in the

classroom, just as the stigmatization of games that I discuss later in chapter 4 were

about the perception of games rather than their potential usefulness or lack thereof. As

Thomas and Yang point out regrading technological education in Taiwan, "there is great

sensitivity and pressure for common Taiwanese people to access the fruits of the global

information age economy" (2013, 114). It is this pressure that lends to an easy

acceptance of technology in classrooms, regardless of how it is used, which may also

relate to Chen's observation of cyber-learning in that text-based materials - familiar to

people for their similarity to traditional *text*books - still dominated digital learning (2002,

6).

My observations with electronic white boards are just one small piece of

technology in classrooms, however, and should not be taken to mean technology has

no tangible educational benefits. In a meta-analysis of the effects of CAI on student

achievement, Yuen-kuang Liao found that CAI did have an overall positive effect on

student achievement, however he admitted further review was needed because class

size could not be isolated as a contributing factor and smaller classes by themselves

have shown to improve results (Liao, 2007). No, my argument is not about the

effectiveness or the lack thereof, but of the acceptance and perception of technology in

classrooms by Taiwanese. Although I do address technological factors of Talking Island later on in this work, these aspects were not a problem for UrIsland in selling Talking Island – a fact they themselves recognized when they experimented with selling Talking Island as "educational software" rather than calling it a "game" (see chapter 4).

Conclusion

The employees of UrIsland often referred to Talking Island as a revolutionary product. This was, for the most part, because of its gamification of English language learning. Apart from Talking Island being a game, the goals of UrIsland for themselves and for Talking Island were deeply rooted in the educational and nationalist projects of Taiwan. In this chapter I outlined this context by showing how education has been a major part of governmental policy writing and nation building for this island for over a century and under three major political systems. As I have shown, language has been politically used in various ways, such as by promoting a regime's native language or erasing the language of a former regime, such as when the Kuomintang instituted Mandarin as the national language and tried to eradicate Japanese, to establish a Taiwan in the image of the ruling party. Now a democracy and imagining itself in a more multicultural way, local languages have not only gained more mainstream acceptance, but have also begun to be required in schools. Throughout this time and continuing as of this writing, language has been a crucial component of nation building and the evolving Taiwanese identity.

That Talking Island teaches English ties it even further into Taiwan's current

national project. As the lingua franca of international trade, English is seen as vital to

the future of Taiwan not for reasons directly related to local identity (like the other

languages mentioned) but for status and economic power. English language education

fits into the national project because it facilitates greater connections for Taiwan with the

international community both economically and politically. These ties are important for

those Taiwanese who aspire to independence because they will need recognition in the

international arena in order to continue international trade and protect their sovereignty.

An increasing number of Taiwanese, especially the young, imagine Taiwan as an

independent nation with a distinct cultural identity, but in our globalized world they will

need other countries to imagine them as such as well.

The importance of English language education to an imagined independent

Taiwan does not negate its importance to those who imagine Taiwan as a part of China.

In their aspirations an economically strong Taiwan – made so by a stronger international

presence – would be better able to negotiate more favorable reunification terms. This is

especially important to this group because the China they imagine being a part of the

future is not the communist China that is currently in existence.

Against this backdrop the founding members of UrIsland saw an opportunity to

contribute to their country. Their goal was to improve English language learning and

fluency in a way they believed would account for deficiencies in the current system of

language education – including the lack of qualified teachers and teaching to the test

discussed above - as well as the increasing amount of pressure younger and younger

students faced going through the Taiwanese school and exam system. In taking part in

this national project of English education UrIsland was participating in the imagining of

Taiwan's future, a future that included democratic governance as could be gleaned from

the importance of the Statue of Liberty in the Talking Island story arch. This is however

conjecture, as the surface imagining within Talking Island is clearly focused on America;

an important distinction as UrIsland runs their learning center in Shanghai on the

mainland.

In this chapter I outlined the national and educational context in which UrIsland

was created and existed. In the next chapter I will elaborate more on English language

education in Taiwan as well describing *buxiban* – sometimes also referred to as the

shadow education system. The rest of that chapter will then fill out the rest of the space

UrIsland occupied – everyday life and the technology sector in Taiwan, before turning to

a thick description of my field site – the UrIsland office and the game world of Talking

Island.

Chapter 3: Islands Under Threat

The Every Day

It must have been close to 9 at night and it was a weekday. In my opinion it was the best time to visit the Shilin night market (士林夜市 Shìlín Yèshì), one of the largest such markets in Taiwan, and arguably the most famous. Because of its size and popularity, I found weekend nights here to be unbearable. Taipei is hot and humid to begin with - adding hundreds of people all crammed into tiny alleys was not my idea of a good time. Week nights were different. Shilin would still have a decent enough crowd to make it worth the trip, but the density of people in the market was low enough that one could still comfortably move and browse the small shops and vendors that made up the market.

My friends and I came here for the food and atmosphere. My favorites were the little Chinese sausages with fresh garlic for dinner and the local ice-cream-esque dessert called babu (叭噗 bābū). We bought dinner, and then walked over to the temple to sit on the steps and eat.[18] Sitting on the temple steps was one of my favorite downtime activities – the perfect place not only to eat without getting jostled in the crowds, but also to people watch. The little plaza (廟口miào kǒu) in front of the temple was behind the vendors and therefore also outside of the main flow of traffic.[19] There

---

[18] This is the Shilin Cixian Temple for the goddess Mazu.
(http://www.travel.taipei/frontsite/en/sceneryEnListAction.do?method=doFindByPk&menuId=1030501&scenerySerNo=2011051800000305)

[19] http://english.gov.taipei/ct.asp?xItem=72792373&ctNode=8557&mp=100002

were always other people there; this was not a place to be alone, it was a place where one could be still and bow out of the crowds for a moment without leaving the market.

Figure 12: The Shilin Cixian Temple plaza decorated for New Year's. Photo taken by the author.

The mix of people around me in the plaza was typical of what I had come to expect. There was a young family snacking, likely together at last for the first time that day. There was a high school aged couple being overly affectionate, as I had come to expect from the kids. Then there were a few other peer groups, mostly younger adults, for a total of maybe 10 people, myself included. From where we were seated on the top of the stairs near the middle, we could see the long lines of people queuing at some of the more popular food venders in front of the plaza and I wondered at the patience

Taiwanese had for such things.[20] On some nights like this strangers will try to start conversations with me, mostly in an attempt to practice English, and on some nights I will start conversations with others by commenting on something they said in Mandarin – always to their utter surprise. Not tonight however. Tonight I am with a couple of friends, so no one will venture to use any English, lest they lose face for being less than fluent. One on one the Taiwanese are among the friendliest people I have ever come to know, but in (even small) groups a strong sense of reservation seems to take over and it can be difficult to get to know individuals. My friends tell me this is due to a fear of losing face, especially for people not confident in their ability to speak in English. They say some people will be embarrassed for not being able to speak English after years of studying it school.

Losing face or damaging one's personal (or familial) reputation is a common fear for people here. It is not, however, the only threat the Taiwanese are forced to deal with. Politically, Taiwan is in a delicate position, being recognized by only a few countries, and being claimed by China. This was not something many of the people I knew wanted to discuss, even my teachers, but I came face to face with it anyway while in class one day.

Taipei is one of those cities that never seems to sleep. It is by far the biggest city I have ever lived in and so naturally I chose to live right in the middle of downtown.

---

[20] Note, more than half of my time in Taiwan, and thus at Shilin was before the renovated food court opened in December of 2011. After the opening, the lines I describe here were slightly shorter since there were now more food options elsewhere in the market.
(http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2011/12/26/2003521662)

From my window I could look out over Main Station (台北車站) the central public transportation hub for the city, and the new central bus station (once they finished building it) and I was within walking distance of several national level government buildings. I lived in the middle of the lifeblood of this young nation. There was constant noise and movement. When I first moved to Taipei I found it impossible to sleep with all the commotion. Years later, I discovered after my return home that I had acclimated to this so well I found it impossible to sleep in the silence of my parents' suburban neighborhood.

Near the beginning of both of my trips to Taiwan I attended classes at Shida (師大).[21] Shida is also near the heart of Taipei, less than 2 miles from where I lived. The campus was partially walled off and had gates that I never saw closed, but neither of these kept out the sounds of the city. It could be hard to focus in those classes sometimes – especially on the many beautiful sunny days when our teacher would open the windows to let in the fresh air. Classes were always 2 hours long. I would say that we never were let out early, but there was this one time – just once – when I got out of class, but could not leave school.

It was one of those sunny days when the nearby market was calling to me as I tried to focus on what the teacher was saying. The teacher paused. She was waiting for acknowledgement that we all understood what she was saying. I glanced sideways around the room. I had no idea what the teacher was talking about, but at least I wasn't

___

[21] Short for National Taiwan Normal University (國立臺灣師範大學). In English it is also referred to as NTNU.

the only one lost. Normally, our teacher did not allow students to translate for each other because she said it was not fair to the students who didn't speak English. This time she made an exception. A young man across from me said, in English, there was going to be a missile drill that afternoon and so class was over. In retrospect it makes sense that I didn't understand the teacher that day because "missile drill" was just not a phrase I ever thought to learn, wasn't in the textbook, and didn't come up in conversation – before today.

Unfortunately hearing the phrase "missile drill" in plain English didn't help my comprehension at all. I was not accustomed to having to worry about missiles, so I asked what that meant and what we were supposed to do. Was this like a tornado drill? Should I go to the basement? Is there a basement? I found the teacher to be less than helpful. Maybe she didn't understand my confusion. All I got out of her was that everything stops for 30 minutes (including classes) and that we can't leave campus. Then we were dismissed.

I packed up my stuff and ran out of the classroom as fast as I could. There were only 2 types of classes – 2 hours or 3 hours long – and each type had an aligned scheduled such that the halls between classes were worse than night markets on weekends. I didn't want to be stuck in the halls during a missile drill, I wanted to get outside and see what this was all about, but I had rushed for nothing. There was a mere scattering of people and no one seemed to be in a rush to get anywhere. The halls felt like being in a library. It was … weird.

When I got down to the first floor I slowed down and walked very slowly out the door. The silence from outside was eerie. I guided the door closed and nearly tiptoed

towards the closed gates of the campus for fear of disturbing the quiet. The teacher hadn't said anything about us needing to be quiet, but it felt wrong to make any noise. The school was located on a major street. Even late at night it was busy and impossibly loud. When I got to the gate I stared out onto the empty street – no cars, no pedestrians, and no venders. There was one lone police officer standing across the street, surveying the scene.

I felt like I had just woken up after the zombie apocalypse. There is no better way to describe this scene. The only difference here was that nothing was destroyed like is usually the case in the movies, though like the protagonists from zombie movies, I wondered where all the people could possibly have gone. How does a city of nearly 3 million people suddenly seem to empty out? I stayed at the gate for the duration of the drill. This may seem odd, but it was both calm and spooky at the same time. The stillness of this beautifully sunny day caused a serenity that, in a different context, would be the end of the story. Having this peacefulness, this emptiness, in a normally bustling metropolitan urban landscape however, contributed just enough creepiness to create that post-apocalyptic feel.

These two memories, the missile drill and the markets, have burned themselves into my memory. The temple steps are one of my fondest memories of Taiwan and the drill was … well, one of the more interesting ones. Both of these experiences, for me, also touched on certain imaginings I held before living abroad. We all imagine the other in some way or another. I am no exception, and neither are the Taiwanese. The otherness for me was often in the little details: the street food, a religious area used as a community space, the traditional style architecture and the beautiful sound of dozens of

voices chattering, bargaining, and selling; none of which are a part of my lived experience in my hometown back in America. But it was in the larger realities, too, such as confronting the possibility of imminent conflict, which the missile drill brought me closer to doing than I had ever come before. After nearly 3 years living in Taipei, a night on the temple steps had become quite normal to me. That night, one of my friends joked that I had gone native and then took a picture of her food with her iPhone.

In another place or in another time the iPhone on the steps of an ancient temple might seem incongruous, but in Taiwan, this was normal. Taiwan, not unlike other places in Asia, is a concatenation of traditional and modern. In Taiwan's case, the keeping of many Chinese traditions is not only cultural, but political. The conscious effort put into preserving Chinese heritage is linked with their history of immigration from China and the currently ruling party's history in the Chinese Civil War. The Kuomintang government fled from the Communists in 1949 and set up shop in Taiwan. An estimated 1-2 million mainland refugees came with them, forming the last major wave of migration to the island (Brown 2004, 9). Yet, this move led to a stalemate in that civil war as the KMT continued to claim to be the legitimate government of China for many years (and was recognized by the US government until the 1979). Keeping alive the "real" Chinese culture was a part of making this claim. But, the KMT is not the sole political party of Taiwan and not everyone agrees with this emphasis on Chinese culture. For some this preservation speaks more to an acknowledgement of historical roots, while in the present they prefer to focus on a fused Taiwanese culture – that amalgamation of aborigine, Japanese, and Chinese cultures that has evolved on the island.

This national effort to keep alive the "real" Chinese culture does not preclude modernization. In fact, coming from a small city in the US Midwest, Taipei – the capital city of over 2.6 million people (Taipei City Government Website)[22] – in some ways felt more modern than home (the city government was implementing city-wide Wi-Fi while I was there and expanding the subway system out into the suburbs) even as it felt more traditional (family run shops, local markets, and temple processions were all still common). For me, as well as for many others, this was true on a daily basis. Take my typical day: I rode the subway to a video game company, ate food from street vendors, worked on educational materials that had to straddle the line between technological innovations and a centuries old Confucian legacy, navigated a paternalistic social space, ate dinners on the steps of old temples in the middle of night markets and then at the end of the day went home to a building that was very reminiscent of the former Japanese occupation to watch cable shows piped in from all over the world. Even the building I lived in showed traces of what I saw of Taiwanese modernization elsewhere. Much of the space had been redone in order to convert the building into a hostel, including renovations such as metal security doors on some of the lower floors. Further up, however, some rooms still had their original raised wood floors, shoji (sliding paper doors) and wooden patterns in the walls indicative of older Japanese styles. While this is clearly not a universal "typical" day for all Taiwanese, it is not that far off from the reality for many people. In fact, the government actively promotes their burgeoning high

---

[22] In conversation most people sited Taipei's population as 5 million, however according to the official government website the population of Taipei proper is 2.6 million (as of the end of 2013). According to the official New Taipei City government website (New Taipei city surrounds Taipei) their population is around 4 million, which may be why everyone I spoke with said the population was 5 million. Long story short, it's a densely populated capital city.

technology industry even while trying to conserve the island's heritage. This coupled with the extremely high value placed on education, and thus a large industry for education, means that even while working I was still doing so as a part of industries employing thousands of other people on this tiny island.

As alluded to from my typical day, UrIsland, being an educational game company, straddled the boundary between two of Taiwan's most important industries: high technology and education. The Taiwanese view technology as the future and education as the foundation, and this can be seen at various levels from the programs the government promotes (such as the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI)[23] and the Institute for Information Industry (III)[24] which I will describe later in this chapter) to the way people talk about their education, careers, and children. This is why I was so easily able to get a job as a corporate English instructor – many Taiwanese continue to take classes throughout their lives in order to keep or advance their jobs. But taking classes is not just about working, people also take classes in fashion, applying make-up, cooking, and other life skills, because it is through education that the Taiwanese better themselves and their families. I would have imagined (before I came to know UrIsland) that these two, education and technology, would therefore go hand in hand, but that was not always the case, and this is complicated by the third industry UrIsland was a part of – digital games. In fact UrIsland struggled with Talking Island's identity as an MMORPG while I was there; and this was apparent from my first meeting with

---

[23] ITRI, Taiwan nonprofit organization for applied technical research and services.
[24] III, NGO supporting development and application of information industries and information society in Taiwan.

Shawn, who introduced me to Talking Island as "educational software." While much of this was due to the stigmatization of games in particular (of which I will go into more detail in chapter 4) it was also due to cultural concepts about proper education – which was sometimes at odds with Taiwan's technological (or economic or political) aspiration to be the Green Silicon Island.

In order to understand the cultural landscape in which UrIsland existed one needs to understand a bit about both the education and technology industries in Taiwan, both of which are of national importance. In this chapter I will set the national level stage (technology, games, and education), the company stage (the space of UrIsland), and the game stage (the logic and world of Talking Island) in order to explicate the cultural world of UrIsland. This is about how the Taiwanese imagine themselves, their nation, their future, and the other – in this case America - as well. Since education is the foundation, I will start there. I will be focusing on a subset of *buxiban* (補習班 bǔxíbān – cram schools) because that was the target consumer for Talking Island for most of the time I spent at UrIsland. After that I will move on to discuss Taiwan's high technology sector both in general and in relation to digital games (initially dismissed) specifically. Once this foundational context is clear the rest of the chapter will focus on UrIsland specifically and their game world Talking Island.

A National Obsession with Education: *Buxiban* & English

Buxiban, or cram schools as they are commonly called in English, are after-school private schools, and constitute a remarkably large industry in Taiwan. This industry arose during the Japanese colonial era (1895-1945) in response to entrance

exams. As Kangmin Zeng states in *Dragon Gate*, "exams are the only cause and raison

d'être of the vast cram industry," (1999, 202). In the early years the focus of many

buxiban was on high school and then college entrance exams, but by the time I was in

Taiwan there were *buxiban* classes for all ages, elementary through adult continuing

education. The industry has also seen substantial growth in more recent times. "In

2001, Taiwan had 5,891 registered cram schools," and by 2011 that number rose to

over 18,300, "with 15,248 schools centered on traditional school subjects like Chinese

and English language, and sciences" (Chou & Yuan, 2011, p. 15).

　　While some *buxiban* will offer classes in several subjects, others will specialize

on particularly popular subjects to study, such as English. Also, they are not necessarily

only for children. Adults in Taiwan often continue to study certain subjects with English

again being a popular choice. For my purposes here, however, I will be focusing on

those that teach and/or specialize in ESL education to elementary and middle school

students as that is the target demographic of Talking Island. Furthermore, 84% of

buxiban enrollment is, like Talking Island's target demographic, elementary and middle

school children (Chou & Yuan, 2011).

　　Although students do still study at *buxiban* for the purpose of cramming for

entrance exams, and despite this historical connection between the exam system and

the rise of *buxiban*, the breadth of topics and demographics of students leads me to find

the connotation of the English term cram schools inadequate for conveying the reality of

buxiban in Taiwan. For one thing, the very young children (as young as 3 years old in

one case I came across, but more often no younger than 5) have so many years before

such exams that it would stretch the term's meaning to consider them "cramming" and

the adult students are obviously past all such exams. Second, the breadth of subjects

offered by *buxiban* goes well beyond what is covered in the standardized entrance

exams.

In another respect, however, students are "cramming" *buxiban* classes into their

day. An average middle school student's regular school day will be from about 7 am to 5

pm (Chou 2007, 366). From there, some students will go home for dinner, but many will

go straight to a *buxiban* where they may stay for as little as an hour, or as late as 9 pm.

When speaking with young adults, many of them expressed anger over their memories

of this time and more than one vowed to me they will never send their own children to a

buxiban. Slightly older adults, those with children, had a slightly different viewpoint.

While still not happy with all the hours they had to spend in various schools, they

nonetheless sent their own children to a *buxiban* because they saw it as the only way

for their kids to keep up. The rationale was that if everyone else was sending their kids

to a *buxiban* then if they did not their child would end up last in class. As Jonathan

Courtenay says in *Culture & Competition - A study of Supplementary Education in

Taiwan* (2013, 178),

> … the choice to participate in supplementary education [is] the default choice for
> parents and children, so that it is no longer seen as something 'supplementary' at
> all. Instead of being forced to rationalize reasons for asking children to attend
> extensive hours at anqinbans[25] and *buxibans*, it is rather that parents need to
> come up with convincing reasons for not sending their children to extra classes.

---

[25] An *anqinban* is similar to a *buxiban*, but rather than offering structured classes, the focus is on helping
very young children with their homework and offering them supervision after school until their parents get
out of work. Some schools will offer both *anqinban* and *buxiban* services.

Even so, many also recognize the increasingly high amount of stress this is causing for

Taiwanese children. According to one Taipei newspaper, *The China Post* (Soong 2011):

> 12.7 percent of students suffer from fatigue, with those in junior high school experiencing more stress. Furthermore, 35.9 percent of the students reported they often felt "exhausted and drained" after a day of school, 21.9 percent regarded schooling as "a heavy burden," and 19.4 thought the stress was "beyond their physical and mental load." Special attention should be paid to the fact that 14 percent of students claimed that they have experienced somatization problems, including insomnia, headaches, stomach aches, pains in the body, and change in dietary habits, due to academic stress. Also, 6.4 percent indicated that they have considered hurting themselves as a result.

English language is a mandatory subject and has been on the entrance exams

for quite some time. These exams were, however, written exams. There was no oral

component. Like educational systems elsewhere, many schools focused on teaching to

the test, and as a result, verbal proficiency in English Language lagged behind written

ability for many Taiwanese. I witnessed this first hand with Taiwanese friends and

coworkers who could communicate quite well in English via MSN (text chat) but who

could not have a face-to-face conversation with me in English.

This shortcoming in ESL education in Taiwan, along with the common knowledge

of how stressful education and exams are, was part of the inspiration for Alex's idea to

create an MMORPG focused primarily on listening and speaking. The original idea was

to sell Talking Island as a supplement to the reading-and-writing heavy mandatory

classes students were taking. Naturally, the founders of UrIsland were not the only ones

to notice this deficiency. Later on, when the MoE (Ministry of Education) announced it

was considering adding listening and speaking components to the high school entrance

exam,[26] many at UrIsland became optimistic that this could only help the business. After all, if 'teaching to the test' was to continue being a prime motivator for where parents and *buxiban* spent their money, then putting listening and speaking on the test – the specialization of Talking Island – certainly could not hurt. Furthermore, by creating a game, children would be able to relax and have fun while studying this extra component rather than adding more stress and work.

I mentioned above the perception that *buxiban* attendance is necessary for student success and that *buxiban* offer a wide variety of subjects, but some subjects are viewed as more important than others. The most basic way to determine this is to look at what subjects are mandatory and on entrance exams, and English language is one such subject. English is the *lingua franca* and has gained even more importance internationally as the language of the Internet. The ability to speak English is also considered by many to be essential to professional advancement later on both for individuals and for corporate entities. To further the level of English among Taiwanese, in 2000 the MoE pushed the start of mandatory ESL classes 4 years earlier, to 3rd grade, to begin by 2005 (Lan et al 2013, 24) (MoE website). It should be noted, however, that municipalities can and do also have their own standards and so in some places students start even earlier (Lan et al 2013, 24).

The importance of English language as a subject/skill went beyond the exams as well. As an example, I briefly worked as a corporate English instructor in Taiwan and

---

[26] See the Taipei Times article, MOE proposes testing for English listening, speaking from 8/5/10 (http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2010/08/05/2003479649 - accessed 5/23/15) for an example of the conversation that was being had in the media.

one of the international companies I was sent to contracted with the adult *buxiban* I

worked for because they were transitioning their entire company to using English

exclusively. I was told the transition was being made to both speed up and smooth out

communication. Although these classes were a struggle for some, they were considered

a benefit because the company was highly esteemed and was considered to have an

excellent work atmosphere, i.e. these were respectable careers and most of the

employees wanted to remain employed here.

It may seem from what I have said thus far that education in the Taiwanese

context is only about "keeping up with the Joneses," and while this is true to some

extent (as demonstrated by parents' perceptions of class rank and employment

advancement) it is not the full story. This is also about education, which is highly

esteemed in Taiwanese culture, in part because of their Confucian heritage. This will be

explored in depth in chapter 4.

Taiwan's Technology Sector

> When Chen Shui-bian was running for President in the late 1990s, he and his
> Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) chose the slogan 'Green Silicon Island' to
> symbolize what they stood for and hoped to achieve if they came to power in
> Taiwan…The 'silicon' stood for the silicon chip, the basic electronic device on
> which Taiwan's highly successful information technology economy was based
> (Williams & Chang 2008, 1).

Taiwan's government has been encouraging the technology sector in one way or

another since the 1970s. In more recent decades, as can be gleaned from the above

quote, technological progress has been coupled with environmental concerns. While

this idea of a 'Green Silicon Island' was still strong during my time in Taiwan, I focus

here on the technology and not environmentalism because this did not come up as an issue in my work with UrIsland.

Taiwan's government has had a direct hand in building up its high-tech industry from the start. One way they have done this is through public R&D institutes, such as the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI), founded in 1973. As Breznitz describes the process of this public-private relationship,

> the state's research agencies acquire a technology from abroad, absorb it and improve it, and then spin off private companies to spur the industry. Second, after private industry has emerged, the industry and state settle on a new division of labor in which the state's role is to locate, absorb and infuse the industrial system with new technologies, and to assist private firms with their own advanced R & D projects (2005, 159).

Looking specifically at the integrated circuit (IC) design sector (one of the more successful sectors for Taiwan's high-tech industry) this led to the creation of 225 IC design companies by 2002 (Breznitz, 2005, 161) and by 2008, Taiwan's TSMC was the 4th largest manufacturer of semiconductors in the world.

A few years after the founding of ITRI, in 1979, the Institute for Information Industry (III) was founded. This was meant to do for software what ITRI had done for hardware, but it did not have the same level of success (Breznitz, 2005, 169). In part, this was due to III's agenda, which differed significantly from that of ITRI, and because III competed with private companies almost as much as it assisted them (Breznitz, 2005, 170). Interestingly, III had no interest in game development even though "[u]ntil 2000–2001 the video games sector was deemed by many in both the private and public sector to be the most successful sector of the software industry in Taiwan," (Breznitz, 2005, 172). Despite this early success, the game industry would soon fade as the cost

of development skyrocketed and they were overtaken by South Korea (Breznitz 2005, 172). A government official from one of Breznitz's interviews summed it perfectly, "Nothing much is happening with on-line games. We basically did nothing; we do not even have a budget. We have to admit that a lot needs to be done with software and digital content. However, we [the government] still think that Taiwan's future is more in hardware" (173). The government may feel that way, but game industry professionals disagree. Casually talking with various employees at the Taipei Game Show, some people lamented (or grudgingly admitted) that South Korea and Japan were now so far ahead of Taiwan in terms of their game industries that it may be impossible for Taiwan to catch up. Most, however, did not phrase this in terms of catching up, rather they spoke about the global economic impact of digital games, and their popularity in Taiwan, and saw this as an opportunity to make money, whether or not they overtook any other country in market share.

That III did not want to get involved in game development was not surprising to me in light of some of the interviews I conducted. Games are so stigmatized in Taiwan that someone in the upper management of one of the largest game companies in Taiwan once told me that they do not play video games – unless they need to for work – and that their family disapproved of their employment – though they were becoming more accepting now that this employee had moved so far up the company ladder.

UrIsland, on the other hand, had a couple of benefits while entering this industry. First, UrIsland was founded after the government and others in business began to realize how lucrative the digital game industry can be. Despite earlier disregard for the industry, in October of 2002 the government "specifically targeted on-line games as one

of the more promising digital content sectors," III however, was still not interested and

little happened in this regard thereafter (Breznitz 2005, 172). All of this, it bears noting,

unfolded despite the earlier independent success of the game industry. Although

actions, in this case money flow, did not change at this time, the rhetoric was beginning

to change – and continued to do so throughout my own experiences in Taiwan, thus

suggesting the promise of an improved national context for UrIsland. This was one sign

of the growing acceptance (albeit slowly) of games in Taiwan that I will talk about in

chapter 4.

Furthermore, Talking Island was educational, and so they had the benefit of

being a part of that industry as well as the software industry. In fact, UrIsland did benefit

directly from this later landscape. During my first meeting with Shawn he told me that

Talking Island had won a couple of awards and a government grant of NT$10 million.[27]

Unfortunately, straddling the game and education industries also caused problems for

UrIsland when it came to marketing to the public.

All of this - education, English language, and the economy (technology sector) -

are inescapably part of the national conversation I was hearing during my time in

Taiwan. Inside of the UrIsland office, employees were not overtly making these

connections in their conversations with me (usually) but the phrasing people used and

the points they chose to emphasize echoed the political conversations of daily

newspapers and late night social debates. *Were buxibans too much for young kids?*

Was the industry saturated? How can lagging English proficiency be rectified? Can

---

[27] This is close to US$330,000 depending on exchange rate fluctuations.

Taiwan's game industry catch up with the likes of Japan and South Korea? Should it?

Therefore, even though UrIsland, at the most basic level, was just trying to make it in the world, they could not escape the national and cultural conversations of the time.

Working in a Dream World – UrIsland

Although these political issues naturally affected UrIsland, they were not a part of the revolutionary discourse of their aspirations for Talking Island. As mentioned before, Alex was a charismatic leader and the employees of UrIsland had bought into his dream. Everyone I interviewed at the company spoke very highly of Talking Island and the revolutionary way in which children could learn to use English through it. The space of UrIsland was consciously aligned with an imagined idea of Silicon Valley and what a game company is (even in my own imagination – as I have never actually set foot in a Silicon Valley office) thus creating a feeling that the employees were doing something cutting edge. At the same time, however, UrIsland was not trying to be an *American* company. They took those aspects of Silicon Valley culture they saw as beneficial and integrated them into locally recognizable business practices, thus creating a unique hybrid of Taiwanese office and high tech industrial cultures.

This atmosphere was created through the physical office, the use of that space, and employee interactions (especially through social media). The office was bright and open with space to play and work.[28] Many employees decorated their spaces with

---

[28] By the end of my research the company had gone through three different locations, but for this analysis I will mainly be focusing on the second location for two reasons. First, this is where they were when I first met Shawn (the very first contact I made at UrIsland) and so I never saw nor do I have any solid

figurines, games, and pictures from Talking Island and other games. Most of the employees worked in the middle open area allowing for frequent discussion and collaboration. Some of the higher-level management had enclosed offices along the sides of this space, architecturally reinforcing the company hierarchy. This hierarchy was in line with standard business practices and traditional Chinese ideas of authority, with most decision making being made from the top down, yet in encouraging a more Silicon Valley ethos, the senior management often made a point to make it known they were still available to the rest of the company.

Thus the office space of UrIsland, on a physical and atmospheric level, was a conscious mix of an imagined Silicon Valley ethos and local norms, starting with the neighborhood. It was located in a posh neighborhood on the 15th floor of a typical looking office building. This was not 信義區 (Xìnyì qū - the area where Taipei 101 is located - at this time, the most expensive district in Taipei) but this was impressive for a start-up and was chosen for that very reason. Although I was impressed during my first visit, I checked with one of the employees to insure my impression was not colored by my existence as a broke student all these years, and she confirmed my impression, "oh yeah it was upper class! … all the rich people live there, you can tell by the environment … spacious and clean, very comfy … that's why the rent was so high." Although I was not around for their move to this location, I was told that part of the reason for moving to this office was for the prestige.

---

information about their first location. Secondly, because the move to the third location was made out of financial necessity and not because anyone felt the second location was inadequate or undesirable.

The inside of the office was bright and spacious. Most of the area of the office was a large open concept area with cubicle-like divisions that defined workspaces more by department than individual employees. Some of the department heads also shared this space, working closely with their teams on a daily basis. Many people's personal spaces were decorated with video game and comic book figurines, posters, stickers, and in some cases, the books or games themselves. The more internationally recognizable examples of these were from Pokémon, the Final Fantasy series, and Hello Kitty. In addition to such geeky decorations were family photos, small toys, promotional knickknacks, stuffed animals, and pop culture images, such as the picture of the Wonder Girls (a South Korean pop band) I saw in the game department. The use of this area in this way gave the office a very warm and egalitarian feel.

This organization of space was not foreign to Taiwan, but the details were. Other offices I visited had cubicles that employees decorated, but the difference between these other places and UrIsland was that in those other companies' spaces employees were mostly sectioned off in their own cubicles, and these were less colorful, and had far fewer toys, games, and comic books (if any). UrIsland was simply more playful than other business spaces I saw. This playful atmosphere was further supported by the promotional banners, cut-outs, and other items used for demos and sales calls that were sometimes left out in plain sight, because they all were advertising UrIsland's product - a children's game.

This playful decoration of space was not accidental, but encouraged, as I found out one day when Lindsay asked me why I did not decorate my space at all. In truth I had not thought about it until she asked and told her so. Then, being ever the
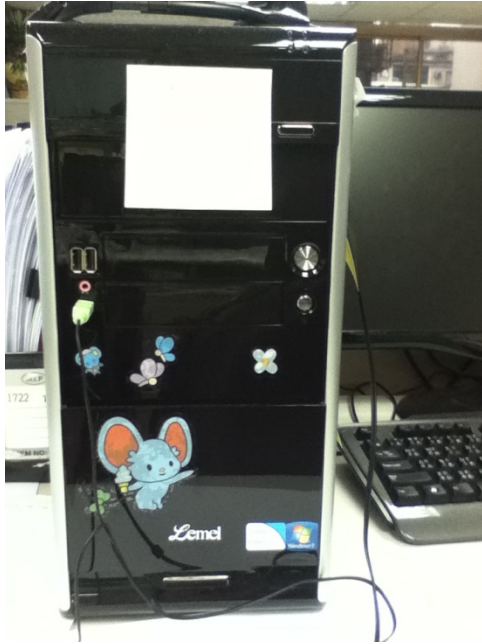
Figure 13: My first attempt at decorating my space. I got these stickers from one of the other employees.

researcher, I asked her if it mattered. "Yeah," she said, "it looks like you don't want to be here, like you will leave soon. I think maybe you just won't come in one day and we'll never see you again." That certainly was not the impression I wanted to give off (especially the first part about not wanting to be there) so I asked her for suggestions. We started that day by asking around the office for extra stickers anyone might be willing to give me. By the end of that day my desk still looked sparse, but over the next two years, with a little help from my coworkers, I ended up with a space I felt was worthy of being an employee of a Taiwanese game company.

Figure 14: Further attempts at fitting in at UrIsland. This picture is my space from before UrIsland moved offices. As a side note, I have no idea where the dog came from. It just appeared there one day and no one claimed to have put it there.

Employees were not just encouraged to decorate the space in such a way, but to also use it as a play space. I spent most of my first two weeks in the office playing Talking Island, for example, because as Shawn said, I cannot expect to work with and study a game that I do not know. Talking Island was not the only game played however, and I quickly learned this was encouraged by at least two of the managers because they felt the employees could learn from these other games. (This will be covered in the next chapter.)

The entrance to the office led to this open area, the brightness of which could easily distract from the few doors along the walls. Behind these were storage spaces, conference rooms, and offices for some of the higher management including the CEO, CFO and the head of the education department. Whereas the open area gave an impression of equality in the middle, the side offices set those employees apart as they were removed from the daily socialization of the majority of the employee base.

As with any social space there was a fair amount of water cooler chat that ranged from mundane small talk about the weather to pressing work issues. Naturally, my presence had some effect on this and so casual discussions about cultural differences and Mandarin, Taiwanese, and English language also commonly arose. These topics likely would have come up anyway given the nature of Talking Island, but my presence, as a native English-speaking American, lent an authority to my views in regards to discussions of English and America and a naiveté in regards to local traditions. Due to proximity, it was more likely for these chats to arise among the people who worked in the open area. The woman sitting next to me, for example, often felt free to share random thoughts (or YouTube videos) as they crossed her mind, but to share them with

our boss Shawn she would have had to walk over to his office and knock on his door – hardly appropriate or convenient. Although Shawn was an amicable person, his workspace being removed from ours made him less familiar to us than we were to each other. When UrIsland moved offices to a smaller space, Shawn had to share a space with the rest of the education department and quickly became more integrated into the group. Although he was still the boss and regarded as such, the level of intimacy significantly increased after the move.

The new office had the same basic layout as the last one, only smaller. The company downsized for financial reasons, and although I recognized a few benefits to this smaller and more intimate space – such as Shawn working in closer proximity to the rest of the education department – the move was hard on company morale. It was said among the employees that the company was not turning a profit before the move, but the act of relocating seemed to open a floodgate of negativity. This was about a year before I left UrIsland, and although the mood of the office necessarily fluctuated during this time, the high level of optimism from before the move never quite returned. Rather the focus of hope turned to opening a flagship learning center in Shanghai as UrIsland's saving grace. (This nomenclature, saying "learning center" rather than "*buxiban*" was significant. They wanted to distinguish their game based school from more traditional *buxibans*, just as they had earlier preferred the term "educational software" over "game.")

As mentioned above, the layout of the new office was quite similar to the old office and so there were still a few employees (albeit less than before) with private offices. Alex had one of these offices, although when he was out, the rest of us

sometimes used the space as a meeting room. Despite having a removed workspace, Alex made noticeable efforts to be visible and accessible to the employees of UrIsland. For example, shortly after moving into the new location Alex came over to me one morning to show me an animated fly-through video presentation of what he was planning for the Shanghai location. He would also occasionally accompany employees visiting *buxibans* and buy snacks for the entire office. On most days, however Alex was either working in his office or in meetings both on or offsite, not mingling in the middle open area.

The extent to which Alex was removed from the pulse of the company is difficult to ascertain, but in the speech he gave to the entire company on the day before my last day with UrIsland (the mise-en-scène from the beginning of this book) he acknowledged this as one of his shortcomings. After the outpouring of surprise, criticism, and affection that followed Alex's invitation to employees for their thoughts, Alex responded to some of what he heard with surprise himself – at the issues he said he did not know about. It would have been impossible for him to know of all the little grievances within the company, and yet I wonder how different this would have been had he not had a separate office.

Whatever disagreements some people may have had over the way the company operated, from the start of my time with UrIsland, employees made a point of telling me all about the benefits of working there. Some of these reasons were more formal, such as the lack of mandatory overtime, a veritable hallmark of Taiwanese business, while others were more informal, such as Alex's habit of occasionally treating the entire office to a late afternoon snack. Even when discussing a shortcoming of employment at

UrIsland, people were often quick to point out that it was still better than working anywhere else. One example of this was bonuses.

I mentioned bonuses before while talking about Molly's departure from and return to UrIsland, but now I will fill out the picture of why this was such an issue. There are traditionally three times a year that bonuses are given: Chinese New Year, Dragon Boat Festival, and Moon Festival. The bonus at the New Year is the biggest. Everyone I spoke with about this agreed on these three; however, a few people also reported that the two smaller bonuses were being phased out due to a downturn in the economy. The New Year bonus, however, was still very important and was considered a part of one's salary.[29] UrIsland did not give out any bonuses, but they would, as soon as they could, and in the meantime, Alex told his employees they could come to him for help if they needed.

When I asked a couple of employees about this they said it was worth the wait because nowhere else would be as fulfilling or fun, and nowhere else do the people care so much about each other. There was also the draw, for employees, of UrIsland's main product, Talking Island. Many of the employees believed strongly that Talking Island was a great product. Even when I heard debates about certain perceived shortcomings of the game, these focused on how to improve the game that everyone agreed had great potential.

---

[29] To put the financial impact of bonuses into perspective, the smallest New Year bonus I heard of was equal to one month's salary.

Talking Island (Game World)

The open concept layout of the UrIsland office was designed to promote a high level of sociability much like an MMORPG. At any given time people were working individually or cooperatively on projects, just as players did the same working through Talking Island quests. Like the office, Talking Island had both text and voice chats built into the game (in the office MSN messenger was prolific in addition to face-to-face communication) and an atmosphere that blended work and play until the two concepts were nearly impossible to separate. The blending of work and play was the explicit goal of Talking Island, and although I never heard this definitively stated as an ideal for workflow within the office, in practice it was encouraged by at least some of the employees and managers. Even so, this mirrors Linden Lab's ideas about technology and authority which were ideals applied to both their office and their product, Second Life (Malaby 2009, 57).

UrIsland designed the basic mechanics and layout of Talking Island to suit young children and contribute to the educational purpose of the game, but nonetheless would be familiar to anyone with experience playing an MMORPG (see Figure 15 below). Talking Island has a graphical user interface (GUI), gamemasters (GMs - in MMORPGs these people act as moderators and customer service representatives within the game), questlines, and non-player characters (NPCs) that form the core of and facilitate player progression through the game. There are protagonists (the Superkids) the players help and antagonists (Octacomputer and his henchmen) the players fight. Yet throughout the game nothing is accomplished without practicing English.

Talking Island is a very colorful world and the GUI is no exception. The world and GUI were both designed to look like a cartoon and everything is accessible using either the mouse or by voice command. This was done not only to appeal to young children, but also to make the world understandable and navigable by them and to force speaking practice while playing (the software only recognizes English).

Figure 15: (Screenshot taken from Talking Island's Facebook page.) As mentioned above, this layout should be familiar to experienced gamers. There are player statistics in the top left corner, a mini-map with buttons accessing items, quests, and other information in the top right corner, social and other game function buttons in the bottom right corner and a text chat plane in the bottom left. The avatar in the middle is accompanied by a pet called a Fabo in this world.

The above picture happens to be of an OF (GM) but a screenshot of a player would not look noticeably different. In Talking Island the GMs are called Online Facilitators, or OFs for short, and are designated by the title "OF" above their name. The OFs play and level their avatars which they choose from the same modeling options the players have to choose from making them familiar and approachable. The most divergent aspect of Talking Island from other MMORPGs is the OFs. The OFs perform all of the customer service functions a player would expect from a GM, plus they act as in-game English tutors and mentors for the children. Therefore, Talking Island players have much more interaction with the OFs as opposed to players of other MMORPGs who are likely only to encounter a GM when something has gone wrong.

Because the OFs are teachers in addition to GMs, players will sometimes come to them for help with quests. In their basic form, Talking Island quests resemble questlines from other games. Players interact with designated NPCs that will tell them a short story or introduce the player to some aspect of the overarching storyline/questline while giving the player some task to perform. The tasks are not difficult, but players sometimes need help because the quests and dialogues are all in English.

In addition to the tasks the NPCs are assigning the players, there are keywords, phrases, and sentences highlighted within the dialogue that become a part of the

Figure 16: The WBU for "a kangaroo."

player's "Music Book." These highlighted words, phrases, and sentences are called WBUs (Word Bank Unit – pronounced u-bu). The Music Book is an interactive vocabulary list of the WBUs players have come across thus far. Using the voice recognition software (called SR) built into the game, players must repeat each WBU seven times. This repetition is spread out within the game by requiring players to repeat WBUs at certain points within the dialogue and during Fabo battles. In this way, players do the work of rote memorization without the tiring experience of sitting down to memorize vocabulary lists.

Figure 17: A cropped screen shot of the SR. When a player needs to repeat an WBU, an WBU and the microphone shown here pop up in the middle of the player's screen. The big red button on the mic is an on/off switch the player must press before speaking. The large number 3 is a countdown. If the countdown gets to zero the player fails.

Figure 18: The SR meter - the stars fill up based on how well the player pronounces the selected WBU. In addition a phrase of encouragement also appears to the left of the meter. On the right are some of the other phrases will show up next to the meter.

In keeping with the atmosphere of Talking Island, the WBUs and Fabos are just as colorful and sprightly as the rest of the world. Each WBU is also a digital flashcard that is shown to the players every time they need to repeat it. Players are asked to repeat algorithmically chosen WBUs during Fabo battles, quests, some mini-games,

and sometimes, by the OFs. Players can also go into their Music Books, found next to

the mini-map, and choose WBUs to practice. The Music Book is named as such

Figure 19: The Music Book. The tabs across the top open up the "chapters" and the pentagons open up the quests in that chapter. The notes on the scale represent all of the WBUs for that quest. The blue note denotes an WBU the player has completed by repeating it 7times. The two notes that say "new" underneath have not yet been attempted.

because the inside looks like a book of sheet music. The WBUs are grouped by quest

and chapter and are represented as notes on a staff. This use of musical notation also

helps to distinguish the Music Book from the overall organization of the game which was

designed to mimic a book.

Figure 20: The bubble next to this player tells him that he has an WBU that he has not yet attempted. In the Music Book, this would be one of the notes that say "new" underneath it. A player can have multiple bubbles at a time and these will follow the player until he clicks on it and repeats it. Not all WBUs will result in a bubble because the game will require some WBUs to be repeated immediately, depending on when the WBU is introduced to the player.

There is more to the game mechanics and basic design of Talking Island than I have thus far described, including a deeper explanation of how language learning and promotion was coded into the game (which will be covered later), but my intention here was merely to introduce enough mechanics to make the world – the fantasy reality of Talking Island understandable. What is anthropologically and educationally striking about Talking Island for this chapter focused on spaces is its attempt to create an American space.

America in the Taiwanese Imagination

Figure 21

UrIsland sought explicitly to create an "American" space in the game, as part of an attempt to offer the players an immersion experience beyond language learning that would enculturate them in certain respects to American public life as they imagine it. The company used three aspects of game design in order to make the space feel "American": NPCs, the environment, and a number of quests. With the company base in Taiwan and parts of the production outsourced to South Korea, however, this "American" digital public was largely made without input from those with immediate experience of it (although a handful of U.S. citizens were employed at various times during the latter stages of the game's development). As a result, some of the aspects of the "American" digital public put forth in the game

reflected common Taiwanese stereotypes of American life and collided with lived experience in America as many there would report it. When questioned about these misalignments, people within the company were sometimes aware of them, but chose to include them anyway in order to maintain the "American" feel for their Taiwanese customers.

Talking Island was modeled after New York City because, I was told, it is what people imagine when they think of America, and they designed the game to look American to give the players the best possible immersion experience outside of studying abroad. UrIsland recognized that communication goes beyond vocabulary and grammar and that kids needed to be exposed to Americans and American culture in order to successfully interact with them. America was chosen in large part because the northern American accent is considered the easiest to understand by most Taiwanese, and because of America's predominance in international relations.

Environment

As mentioned earlier, Talking Island is modeled after New York and in fact, the Mandarin name for the game, 紐約說話島, literally translates to "New York Talking Island." Some of the maps are even laid out in nearly the same configuration as the streets and buildings within certain areas of New York. For example, the Times Square Map, while much less congested than the actual Times Square does contain several recognizable landmarks such as the large toy store on the corner of Broadway. Other landmarks include the Charging Bull statue, parodies of several popular fast food chains

(such as WoDonalds), the New York Stock Exchange, and the Statue of Liberty. Note –

many of the screenshots I have included in this section and others look empty because

they were taken on the private employee server. The public server the children played

on were in fact more populated. The reason I had to take screenshots from the private

server was due to the age restrictions on the game which will be discussed in chapter 5.

Figure 22: The toy store in Times Square.

Figure 23: A screenshot of the Charging Bull Statue. A sign for one of the fast food parodies, WoDonalds, is also partially visible to the left of the bull.

Although traveling within the game is much easier and faster than traveling in New York, the designers used physical world travel methods to name the portals by which players can jump from map to map, thus mimicking public transit. For example, if I want to go from Times Square to Central Park I need only find a subway station and I can be instantly transported to a subway station in Central Park, but if I want to go to see the Statue of Liberty I need to take the ferry. This takes a common game mechanism and turns it into a teaching point about public transportation.

Figure 24: A trainman and a portal - 2 of the various transportations methods in Talking Island.

The choice of New York City for this game makes sense due to the city's worldwide fame and numerous landmarks. I also learned that for many people New York is America, and this was explicitly stated as one of the main reasons for choosing it. Although it was never explicitly stated by anyone, Talking Island, though representing America on the surface, also appears to mirror Taiwan subtextually. Liberty Island (Ellis Island), Talking Island (Manhattan) and Taiwan – all islands under threat – and all, in some ways, exemplars of democracy. It should be noted however that none of these political ideas are overtly expressed in the game, which focuses on teaching players about day to day life. The environment of Talking Island is not particularly interactive, so it is really through the quests that players learn about the different areas of New York City (not inclusive) and the names of famous landmarks.

NPCs (Non-player Characters)

I came to learn that there is a rather clear idea in the Taiwanese popular imagination of what an American is: blonde hair, blue eyes, white skin, and bigger in both height and width than the average Taiwanese. Although the people there do

Figure 25: Apple Brother

understand that there is a lot of variation in the appearance of Americans, this stereotype nonetheless survived as descriptive of the average American.

The NPCs in Talking Island reflect this idea. The majority of characters are white with a few token minority characters introduced through the main quest-line. Most of the characters also speak with an accent from the northern United States, again, with the exception of a couple of token characters from the southern US, and at least one character that is an immigrant. I want to note here that what I have said about the appearance of the NPCs is not a result of the self-identification phenomenon as reported by Amy Shirong Lu in regards to anime characters.[30] Although the animation style used in Talking Island is reminiscent of the anime style, Shawn confirmed that the look and sound of the characters in the game were intentionally made to reflect Taiwanese expectations of Americans.

Figure 26: Samantha, one of the few African American characters in Talking Island.

Figure 27: Lily Lee, an immigrant from Asia.

---

[30] In her article *What Race Do They Represent and Does Mine Have Anything to Do with it? Perceived Racial Categories of Anime Characters* Lu discusses Own Race Projection or ORP, the tendency of some audiences to project their own race onto anime characters. In the case of Talking Island, this study does not relate, but I bring it up to assuage any concerns that I, as a Caucasian, had projected my own race onto the characters as doing so would have undermined the argument I am making in this section.

That the NPCs in Talking Island reflect what the Taiwanese see as American people was furthermore seen to have educational value in the eyes of the company. As Shawn explained, by having the kids interact with American characters they will grow more accustomed to them and thus less afraid of actual foreigners. The fear of English and of foreigners was an issue for many people in Taiwan. A large part of this was because of a fear of losing face for not being able to speak English, but part of it was also that many people were simply not accustomed to interacting with Western people regardless of language barriers. This was especially true of children, and I happened to have made a few cry myself. Yet even when not making kids cry, my presence always elicited curiosity.

UrIsland also believed that the NPCs needed to look "American" in order to support the immersion experience of Talking Island. Their reasoning was that if the NPCs did not look American, it may have detracted from the American feel that was UrIsland's goal for this game. The setting for the game was New York City and so the characters needed to be internally consistent within this reality as the Taiwanese imagine it. Even when players are not interacting with a given NPC these characters need to look natural in the environment. The designers feared that if they made the demographic of characters to look or sound like anything other than this imagined stereotype (say, like the reality of the diverse population of New York City) they would be risking a violation of aesthetic distance for the players and a questioning of educational efficacy by parents and educators.

Quests

Much of what players are exposed to in the beginning quests has to do with game basics. This is typical of MMORPGs as the players need to learn how to function within the game world. As is the case with transportation, these game play aspects are used as teaching points in English vocabulary and American culture. Main quest 1 introduces players to the Superkids, the protagonists of Talking Island, and main quests 2 and 3 introduce the players to the care of their Fabos (like pets) which get hungry and thirsty after battling.

In main quest 1 players meet four Superkids and learn that the Superkids protect the Statue of Liberty. They also learn that there is a monster. This is the beginning of the overarching goal of Talking Island. Later on, in quest 5, the players are asked to join the Superkids in defeating this monster, called Octacomputer, and protecting the Statue of Liberty. Although the historical significance of the Statue of Liberty is never taught within the game, it quickly becomes clear that it is an important monument. Fabos want to be near it, Octacomputer wants to destroy it, and calamity will ensue if anything happens to it.

Figure 28: Octacomputer, the archenemy of Talking Island, wants to destroy the Statue of Liberty.

Figure 29: Superkids Numbers 4 & 1 and an WBU about the Superkids' quest.

In main quest 2 the players are introduced to vendors by being asked to go to Uncle Hot Dog and buy a hot dog for Superkid Number 12. In this quest the players also learn that they will need to feed their Fabos. After completing the task they are reminded "Fabos eat food to get power." Main quest 3 is similar in that the players are asked to go buy something for the quest giver. This time, they are asked to buy a Coke and then reminded, "A Water Fabo likes to drink Coke." Through this quest they learn
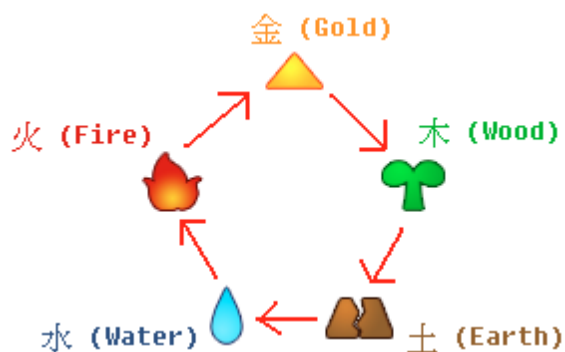
Figure30: A diagram representing the five types of Fabos. The arrows between the types show which types are stronger or weaker against others. For example, the arrow going from water to fire shows that water is strongest against fire and fire is weakest against water.

that there are different types of Fabos and that the different Fabos want to be fed different items. For example, water type Fabos prefer drinks such as Coke. Although I recognized both Coke and hot dogs as American cultural tropes, I questioned Shawn about these quests for other reasons. Throughout the game there are reminders for players to stay healthy and

92

active, and yet here they are promoting the consumption of Coke and hot dogs, two unhealthy foods. I was simply told that this is what Americans eat and that both of these terms came up in their list of the most commonly used English words.

Later on in the game, once kids have game play and storyline basics mastered, they get a more direct lesson in American culture with the introduction of Uncle Sam. They learn that Uncle Sam always wears red, white, and blue and that these colors stand for bravery, kindness, and doing the right thing, respectively. Players are then asked to pass three tests, proving that they possess these qualities. After each of the tests, the players receive a flag of the corresponding color. (So, after proving they are brave they receive a red flag and so on.) At the end of this quest, Uncle Sam says, "You have the red flag because you are brave. You have the white flag because you are kind. You have the blue flag because you always do the right thing. Now, you are like me." The message here is clear. Uncle Sam is the personification of the USA and so the qualities of Uncle Sam are those of America and Americans.

Conclusion

In summation, Americans are mostly blonde, live in or frequent New York City, speak with a northern accent and are brave, kind, and always do the right thing. No, people realize that this is not true. Most know that this is a stereotype, but how real does a game have to be? How much can a child, growing up with only Hollywood to tell them what America is like, be expected to understand about the diversity of the real USA. What is the real USA?

The main goal for Talking Island is to teach English in an immersive environment and to introduce children to American culture. The game does this. If any of these kids visit New York in the future there will be a few surprises waiting there for them, but they will know more having played Talking Island than they likely would have otherwise. The designers of Talking Island did not create this image of America in the Taiwanese imagination. They simply made it into a game in an attempt to bring forth something positive from it.

I suggest that these aspects of American culture were chosen not only because they are seen as representative of America, but because they highlight the ways in which the West differs from the East. This was an exercise in the othering of America. Taiwanese see themselves as deeply and fundamentally different from Americans. Whereas Taiwanese describe Americans as brave, they describe themselves as not so. The Statue of Liberty, a symbol of inclusion welcoming all immigrants, stands for the USA, while Taiwanese describe their own country as more homogenous. Interestingly, Taiwanese only described their own country as homogenous in comparison to the USA. Otherwise, people there made distinctions between Mainlanders (people from China who came during or after the civil war), Taiwanese (people from mainland China whose families settled on Taiwan before the civil war – though some younger generations born on Taiwan are starting to identify as Taiwanese also), Hakka, and the various aborigine groups. Other (non-Chinese) immigrant groups never came up in conversation, but are present.

In this chapter I explored how game design makes possible the digital architecture of imagined public spheres, and the circumstance by which nationalized

digital publics can be produced in this global context, drawing on cultural imaginings of the other. The idea behind Talking Island was to create a better way to learn English because the ability to speak English in Taiwan is considered by many to be a huge asset when on the job market, and crucial for the country to enhance its presence on the international stage.

I also introduced UrIsland, the people and place that made UrIsland, and the national context that gave rise to their founding and aspirations. Like Talking Island the game, UrIsland fused Western and Eastern ideas of the workplace. In keeping with standard business practices and traditional Chinese ideas of authority, UrIsland had a clear hierarchy with most decision making being made from the top down, and the workflow ranged from mundane grinding to bursts of productivity as deadlines came and passed, and this was reflected in how the space was organized and used. In between these bursts, however, employees were encouraged to play games (sometimes Talking Island, sometimes others) not a usual occurrence in the Taiwanese business world. Furthermore, overtime was kept to a minimum and (due to financial difficulties) bonuses were not given, both practices constituting sharp breaks from Taiwanese business norms.

In addition to straddling this Silicon Valley ethos and Taiwanese business norms within the office, the company also had to navigate between the education and technology industries of Taiwan while further negotiating Talking Island's identity as a game. Some of this negotiation can be seen in the marketing strategies presented to the public – whether Talking Island was refered to as a "game" or as "educational

software" and some of it played out between the game and education departments as they both strove to maximize its potential.

Chapter 4: Julie's Question

It was one of our slower days. I had finished everything I had to do and was now at the point in all of our projects where I could do nothing but wait for other people to get back to me, so I logged into Talking Island and began to leisurely make my way through a few quests. I was in the Museum of Modern Art, Quest 10, looking for the artist of a certain painting. An NPC named Gaby tells me Vincent is the artist and that he is on the second floor, but before I can leave this conversation, an WBU pops up and I have to repeat the phrase "on the second floor."

I failed. I laughed. I thought it was funny that the SR did not recognize my speech. I repeated the phrase three more times, each time pronouncing the words slower and more deliberately, but in the end, I still failed.

Thankfully, I am not a perfectionist when playing games, so I just moved on. I go up to the second floor and find Vincent, but as it turns out, he is not the artist. Vincent thinks David is the artist and sends me to the third floor to find him, but again, another WBU pops up. This time the phrase is "on the third floor." I am certain the problem with the last WBU was the word 'floor' so I pronounce that word as clearly and loudly as I possibly can. I fail again.

Up until this point I had gotten nothing but perfects on all of my WBU attempts, which I expected to happen because I am a native speaker of English. At this point, I could have just laughed it off and continued on looking for the artist – it was Picasso by the way – but I was determined to find out what pronunciation of "floor" was considered

correct by the SR software. So I opened up my Music Book, where I could practice any WBU I had already come across and tried pronouncing the word "floor" with variations of the way "oo" sounds in other words such as "book" and "bloom" – which, at least in my Midwest accent, all sound different. By this point, however, the pressure was on because some people in the office had noticed me repeating these phrases over and over and decided to come see what I was doing.

Everyone got a good laugh out of watching the American fail at the WBU challenge. A couple of people tried the phrases out for me … and passed. When others, people who spoke English as a second language passed, I got a little frustrated. I wondered how this might feel to children playing in school, in front of their peers. I could explain this away as a glitch in the SR software, because English is my first language, but a Taiwanese kid would not have the same authority to do so. In the end, I apparently never learned to say "floor" – as in ever. Because WBUs get repeated occasionally during various points in the game, the word "floor" did pop again during my travels in Talking Island, yet never, did I ever succeed.

Introduction

Shortly after we became acquainted Molly started introducing me to games such as Cut the Rope, Line Pop, and Angry Birds on her iPhone. At this point, I had still never owned a smart phone and so everything was new to me. One of my favorites was Plants vs. Zombies (PvZ). In between projects or while waiting for the printer I would borrow Molly's iPhone. One day while I was playing PvZ at my desk, Shawn – the head

of the education department – walked up behind Molly and me so quietly that I did not notice him until he was right behind me. (On the other hand, maybe I was just so engrossed in the game that I would not have noticed a freight train coming up behind me.) By reflex, I hid the phone and Molly stifled a giggle. This is a game company, she informed me, and we might learn something from the competition.

PvZ is not what I would call an educational game, yet Molly justified time playing it as something that could be learned from. Does that make PvZ educational software? Talking Island was sometimes alternately referred to as educational software or a game – are these two labels so diametrically opposed? What is a game? What makes something educational? Are compelling entertainment and rigorous education mutually exclusive? As a scholar I expect such theoretical questions and debates to arise in academia, but I was admittedly surprised when I realized these questions were being actively debated within the video game company I was working with. Despite the goal of this company to revolutionize English language education through online gaming, there was internal disagreement surrounding the gamification of the learning process.

My first two weeks at the UrIsland office I spent playing Talking Island, to familiarize myself with the world. During this time I created a character (avatar) whose appearance I was able to customize and then set off to explore Talking Island. As with many MMORPGs, I was limited in where I could roam as a level 1 character, but I quickly powered through the first third of the main quest line and had a Fabo home full of Fabos by the end of this 2 week period. (My speed is not indicative of average playtime – I am a native speaker of English and that made a big difference.)

After my time familiarizing myself with Talking Island I began to work with other employees on a variety of projects. In a team of 1-4 people, depending on the task, I translated instructions, wrote side quests, and advised the game department on holiday related objects and customs for special events, just to name a few of the projects I was a part of during my time with UrIsland. Occasionally, during our downtime, I would team up with one or two of my coworkers in the game in order to capture higher level Fabos, complete team quests, or level up our Fabos through fights.

Seven months into my research with UrIsland, while alone in an elevator with Julie, a member of the game department, she asked me if I thought Talking Island was a game. I was completely flabbergasted. My first thought was that maybe I had misunderstood her, maybe my Mandarin wasn't as good as I thought. I asked her to repeat the question, but then there it was again, 遊戲 (yóuxì game). I knew that the marketing team sometimes avoided using the word "game" because of the stigma associated with games, especially with online games and among parents. In these contexts they would instead call Talking Island educational software as Shawn had when he first introduction me to Talking Island, but I had never personally questioned whether or not Talking Island was actually a game. It took me a moment to wrap my head around the question Julie had just asked me. Finally, I responded that I did in fact think Talking Island was a game because it had all of the common elements that I had come across in other MMORPGs. Julie considered my answer for a moment then pointed out that it was not fun … or at least not as fun as she would like it to be, and that sometimes there was too much emphasis placed on learning.

This conversation was a turning point for me in my research of UrIsland. Before

this day I had never questioned that Talking Island was a game and I had assumed that this was true for everyone else in the company as well. This was, for me, the fundamental basis of what this company was trying to accomplish. The main goal of the company, as repeatedly stated to me, was to create a revolution in English language education by making the process more effective and fun for young children. Alex chose an MMORPG game-world as the medium to do this because it could offer not only an immersive environment for those who could not afford to be educated abroad, but also a playful one so that kids would want to learn and practice English. That someone who had spent years in the game department herself would question the very nature of this product, by this time roughly 6 years in the making, made me wonder. Was her question somehow due to the continuing struggles between the game and education departments regarding the Talking Island package? Or is this somehow a sign of changing cultural conceptions of games and education?

In this chapter I look at Taiwanese ideas about work and play and show that deep-seated beliefs about the mutual exclusivity of these two (despite being seemingly linked as the story about Sam will show) are starting to wane. In part this is happening as games, especially digital games, grow increasingly –though not yet totally – acceptable. Yet even with hints of these changing tides on the horizon, UrIsland still stood at the forefront of bridging the gap between games and education.

Before delving into the specifics of UrIsland and Talking Island, however, I will start by making clear what I mean by "work" and why studying, the work of students, should be included in this theoretical debate. This working definition is based on the way in which Taiwanese regard education, which is similar to the way in which they talk

about work. Because UrIsland is intimately tied up in the work versus play debate, I use some field examples from outside of UrIsland in order to illustrate the predominant landscape outside of this organizational island.

After establishing this baseline I come back to Julie's question, starting with justifying why I define Talking Island as a game and as an MMORPG specifically. Yet Julie's question wasn't really about definitions, and so from there I turn to a deeper analysis of her question. Julie was concerned about Talking Island being a successful game in light of all the offline materials being added to the Talking Island package – a clear rejection of what game researchers call the magic circle theory – or the idea that play and games exist in a space set apart from ordinary life.

By 'Talking Island package', I mean the digital game itself (the MMORPG Talking Island and all activities that take place within that world) along with all the offline peripherals, such as worksheets, exams, and lesson plans that were created especially for *buxiban* customers. This is not an emic differentiation. In the office, saying "Talking Island" most often referred to the game, but sometimes was also used to refer to the entire package. When discussing offline materials specifically people most often named individual components (like worksheets) or talked about the curriculum. I am making this distinction here for purposes of clarity because this chapter is elucidating an entanglement of definitional and processual debates, often, though not exclusively, between the education and game departments.

Through these illustrations of tension between gaming and learning I will furthermore demonstrate that the above conflict was in part due to cultural ideas about the dichotomy between work and play steeped in Taiwanese culture. Though the stated

aim of UrIsland was to challenge this idea, the reality on the ground did not always reflect this, as the company had to find a way to make a profit while their revolution was still trying to get a foothold. The ways in which education/work and play were combined and sold, and game stigma was thereby presumably combatted, by UrIsland included choices in game design, marketing, and the inclusion of offline materials. Revolutions are not won over night, because the hearts and minds of people cannot be changed that quickly. Here I will be exploring the process of ideological change through employee perceptions of work and play as shown through the decisions and changes made to Talking Island – the product meant to revolutionize ESL education in Taiwan.

Although much of this chapter discusses points of contention, the interplay between work and play and dealing with game stigma was not always so wrought with adversity. Aware of some of the parental fears about digital games from the beginning, there were "safeguards" and recognized educational structures (such as grouping quests into chapters) built into the program. These encoded features, unlike curriculum components, were not up for debate by the time I arrived; they were already integral parts of the game world. Another example of the fluidity of work and play was within the workflow of UrIsland itself. The employees did not just make a game and try to sell the idea of playful productivity, the lived it – at least while in the office.

Interestingly, the atmosphere and the attitudes within the office, though generally reflecting a more radical view of play and games than mainstream Taiwanese views, were still the product of their national culture, and so capitalist/work ethic ideas were not completely absent from employees' discussions of play and games in general or Talking Island in particular. Yet UrIsland seemed to successfully integrate work and play within

the office anyway, in a way that mirrored their goal with Talking Island. Despite this

integration within the workflow – and the stated claim to integrate these within their

virtual world - work and play aspects were divided into two separate departments: the

game and education departments. And these two departments had very different ideas

about how to modify their product(s) in order to increase sales.

Work (and Play) in Taiwan

In this chapter I will be treating work in term of productivity broadly

conceptualized to include individuals producing goods for sale (which earns money),

knowledge (for themselves such as students learning or for others such as the work of

academics) or money (such as wages earned for labor and services). This definition is

admittedly more expansive than the word is often used to mean, but it encapsulates

better the attitudes and behaviors on the ground in Taiwan and there is a theoretical

basis for doing so. First, the relationship of work to money, then I will come back to why

I am including studying.

In capitalist societies work has become connected, often by definition, to money -

work is what one does to earn money.

> What is now most interesting is its predominant specialization to regular paid
> employment. This is not exclusive; we speak naturally of working in the garden.
> But, to take one significant example, an active woman, running a house and
> bringing up children, is distinguished from a woman who works: that is to say,
> takes paid employment (Williams 1983, 335).

Or, as Julian Orr simplified this idea, ""work" is now used more to mean "being

employed" than to refer either to doing or to the thing done" (Orr 1996, 9). This

definition, as will be shown through some of the following examples, fits the way

Taiwanese talked about work with me, however it does not account for all of the work

practices and attitudes towards leisure activities I witnessed at UrIsland or heard about

from parents talking about education. It may seem like a bit of a jump here that I

mention leisure activities suddenly while discussing work, however as the case of Sam

(addressed later) shows, Taiwanese conceptualizations of work and leisure activities

(including play) are intricately linked. Part of what is missing from Williams' definition is

context, "work must be seen as situated practice, in which the context is part of the

activity" (Orr 1996, 10). This could explain why I was explicitly told that napping at

UrIsland was acceptable because it allowed the employee to be more productive in the

afternoon. Because this was done (no one did this daily, but occasionally) in the office

during work hours the employees in question were getting paid for this time – and it was

done within the context of increasing productivity, so in theory, according to the above

quotes, napping was a part of the job. The same could be applied to the time I spent

playing with Molly's iPhone and yet neither of these activities, though completely

acceptable within the office and seen as being beneficial to work, were considered a

part of anyone's job.

The importance of money to this definition can be seen in some Taiwanese

people's ideas about game companies. For example, one woman I interviewed, Abby,

from a larger game company than UrIsland, told me that when she first came to work for

this company her family didn't understand. They thought she just played games all day

and they disapproved of her career choice. Many parents, Abby said, still think jobs with

game companies are bad. She started with this company when they were much smaller

and has made her way up the corporate ladder as the company has grown and

expanded. Now in upper management – and making a good salary – in a company that

is currently one of the largest game companies in Taiwan and is also traded on the

Taiwan stock market, her family has begun to understand and accept her career.

Abby's family's original assumption that Abby does nothing but play all day

because she works for a game company is similar to the broad association of games

and play that Thomas Malaby points out in Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games:

> Games have a long-running, deep, and habitual association with "play,"…*Play*,
> as it is used in both game scholarship and often more widely, commonly signifies
> a form of activity with three intrinsic features. It is *separable* from everyday life
> (especially as against "work"; it exists within a "magic circle"), *safe*
> ("consequence free" or nonproductive), and *pleasurable* or "fun" (normatively
> positive) (2007, 96).

Because this association was clearly made by all of my informants, I consider people's

attitudes towards games to be similar to those held about play, because they are, at

least in popular thought. People play games and play is by definition not work, not

productive, and therefore not important or beneficial. Although I often hear Taiwanese

speak about games and play in this manner, there is one point of divergence. Many of

the people did not seem to see games – especially digital games – as safe. Rather

these games were often seen as addictive and dangerous and therefore as having

negative consequences – which means they are not really separable either. This

disposition fits with what Malaby points out later in the Beyond Play article in that the

above conceptualization of games does not hold when people's attitudes towards them

are analyzed (Ibid.). Even Alex's framing of Talking Island as something revolutionary

(and the inclusion of joy points, used to combat addiction - I will talk about these later in

this chapter) suggests that he is acknowledging these associations – otherwise there would be no need for a revolution.

To return to my use of the word "work" as including studying as the work of students, Taiwanese place a high value on both work and education. In speaking with adults about their children specifically or about the need to study at *buxibans* more generally the rhetoric used often mirrored that used in discussing work. Employment and education are both held in high esteem and are deeply linked due to the need of education for employment. The higher one's credentialed education the greater one's earning potential and chances for landing a respectable job. Furthermore, being a student (one who studies) is an important part of a child's identity from their parents' point of view, as well as an important part of college students' identity, and a part of adults' identity in terms of their past (because they were once a student they now have these credentials). This echoes part of Orr's conclusion in his ethnography of work among technicians almost perfectly. As Orr says, "[t]he work of field service is seen to be an important component of the worker's identity, and this importance is revealed in discourse among workers" (1996, 149). In my case for students I add in parental views of their children because in this context of dealing with minors it is relevant.

I will now address the ways in which work and play are linked in Taiwanese conceptions of these two concepts. Most notably, play is often set up as the antithesis to work, and because work is valued so highly, it is not uncommon for play to be accordingly devalued. This is so true for Taiwan that, as the example above shows, Abby's family initially saw her job at a game company as undesirable because of what the company made (games). Outside of game companies (as in the States) there is

107

backlash against and stigmatization of gamers; however, this is beginning to subside. Although the acceptance of gamers in America is not exactly the same in Taiwan, the stigmas mirror each other – exemplified in the idea of the antisocial unemployed young adult male (or the kid that will grow up to be that).

To give insight into Taiwanese ideas about video games, I will recount two early encounters I had outside of UrIsland. Both of these happened during my preliminary research in Taipei and both highlight this denigration of play. The second also clearly suggests the link between and importance of money and work in opposition to playing games. The first was a chance encounter I had when I got lost on my way to a *wǎngkā* (網咖- internet café).[31]

It was the beginning of spring. I had been in Taipei for a few months and was beginning to feel comfortable getting around the city. While waiting to go check out a *wǎngkā*, an American tourist, Becky, asked if she could come with my friend John and me. I said yes, but warned her that I was not exactly sure where this place was. This seemed to concern her, so I reassured her that it should not be too much of a problem since I knew we could always just ask for directions. I told her of the time I was lost with a friend when a young woman happened to pass by. We asked her for directions, and when she realized she did not know the place we were looking for, she knocked on her neighbor's door and asked them. Over the past few months, I had come to expect this

---

[31] Although 網咖 literally translate to Internet café, all such places I ever saw clearly catered to gamers.

level of helpfulness from the Taiwanese. This reassured Becky and she decided to come.

Despite not knowing exactly where we were going, I was not worried about finding the *wăngkā*. Digital games are everywhere in Taipei. Every day I passed advertisements for them, places selling them, or people playing them. The city is overflowing with video games. Besides, I remembered the general area of the *wăngkā*. It was just past the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi building (my landmark whenever I was near home) but I got lost in the crowds. There were too many people obstructing my view of the storefronts. We were standing on a busy street corner, so I turned to the stranger next to me and asked him for directions. He claimed to not understand. I assumed the problem was my Mandarin and so I asked John to ask someone else.

John is Taiwanese-American. He had been studying Mandarin for longer than I had and his family speaks Mandarin, so his speaking ability was better than mine. He asked the next person who passed by. This person also responded that they did not know and walked away. This was strange. I looked around trying to see something familiar while John scoured the dictionary in his iPhone. Becky, meanwhile, was getting annoyed.

I spotted a young man carrying a book bag who appeared to be of college age. Many people in Taipei speak some English and this was especially true of college students from my experiences. I decided to ask this young man for directions in English, in case we were saying "Internet café" wrong. When I approached the man he smiled and told me he spoke English. When I asked him if he knew of the Internet café

that I was sure was nearby, he looked uncomfortable. He said he did not know of any, but suggested that we might find one if we just walked around the area.

We tried to no avail to get help from a couple more people. This was one of the only times I ever had trouble finding assistance when I needed it. We did eventually find the place, but only because we happened upon it while weaving through the crowds. I finally noticed the night elf painted on the inside of a small doorway with stairs leading to the basement. Months later, when I had established closer relationships with a few locals, I told this story to one of my friends. He laughed, but was not surprised. No one wants to admit to knowing about such things, he explained.

The second such encounter was much more awkward, but also a more direct lesson in Taiwanese concepts about games. I asked one of my acquaintances, Sam, about gaming on our second meeting. He replied to my inquiry with questions of his own, "Why do you ask *me*? Do I look like I have no job?" He then proceeded to tell me that he works very hard every day and that he has his own apartment and has no time for such things. He was clearly offended by my question, which is not to say that he did not in fact play any games, seeing as I later found him playing *Farmville* on Facebook and saw more than one console in his living room.

Whether or not Sam ever played games does not make his statement any less significant. It is, after all, not unknown for people to secretly engage in activities that they are publicly embarrassed to admit to or even that they publically condemn, in other

words, what Herzfeld calls cultural intimacy (2005).[32] Additionally, as Sally Falk Moore

points out, it is already well established that "discrepancies exist between ideology and

social reality," and so Sam's reaction, which suggests such a discrepancy, is not

unusual (1975, 32). Sam's response was to immediately set up playing games as the

antithesis to work; *Do I look like I have no job?* He then elaborates his point, so as to

make sure I understand that he does not play games, but is, rather, a productive adult,

by explaining how he is so productive he has made enough money to buy his own

place. Sam has no time to play because he works. Just like no one knows where any

wang-ka are – yet they exist and stay in business.

     Earlier I described the arguments against play as being economic in nature. Like

other capitalist countries, in Taiwan, economics and class are deeply intertwined.

Almost all of the people I interacted with during my time in Taiwan were middle class or

higher and so the views of play and work that I came to know there come from this

demographic. This separation and valuation of work over play, for the middle and upper

classes at least, is not a modern invention. While some of the negativity directed

towards digital games may be due to the fear that accompanies all newly introduced

technological advances, play—or certain forms of play—has a long history of being

denigrated in Chinese society, a cultural tradition shared by Taiwan, with the one

notable exception of the early Confucian stance. In "Children's Play in Taiwan" Hui-Ling

Wendy Pan points out that the early Confucian view of proper play was that of

---

[32] There are in fact three possibilities here. The first being that Sam is personally embarrassed by the fact that he plays. The other is that he is not embarrassed, but he recognizes play as socially unacceptable and therefore will not admit engaging in it. The third, and most likely, is a combination of these first two.

education in the polite arts: ceremonies, music, archery, charioteering, language, and mathematics. She goes on to explain, "Confucius maintained that the development of the civilized character must be based on immersion in the polite arts, which essentially are the active aspects of play," (Pan 1994, 35-36). After the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) however, this view of play as a part of education was abandoned and "the mainstream of Chinese culture viewed play as the antithesis of work," (Pan 1994, 36).

There have been both positive and negative rhetorics of play through Chinese history, but even during the period before the Sung Dynasty it was not play in any form that was approved of; rather it was structured, educational play that Confucius was advocating. This is not to suggest that Chinese people did not or do not play. As Anne Behnke Kinney notes of the Han period (206 B.C.-220A.D.): historians "repeatedly cited aristocratic adolescents' fondness for gambling, hunting, cock fighting, and dog and horse racing as evidence of their moral deficiencies," (2004, 54). Despite the deprecatory view of these activities they were nonetheless practiced. By this time play had taken on a risk factor in that how one spent their leisure time came to be "a standard approach to character assessment," (Kinney 2004, 54). This is still seen today in Taiwan. When I asked Sam, a middle class man around 30 years-old, about gaming, he didn't just deny it – he was visibly offended that I asked him. His position in the middle class may have started at birth, but his continued place there was assured by him having a respectable job, of continuing to be a productive member of society – a position seen as antithetical to being a gamer.

In summation, in popular Taiwanese parlance, work is productive and play is not, but negatively defining a term (play is not work) does not tell us what play is. So what do

Taiwanese think playing and games are? According to Julie, they are fun. In the introduction to this chapter I told the story of Julie questioning me on whether or not I thought Talking Island was a game. While my reasoning during this discussion was based on comparing Talking Island to other games, Julie's counterpoint to me was that Talking Island was not fun. Playing games is supposed to be fun. This makes sense in common usage seeing as work is generally the activity one has to be paid to do and play is the activity that one wants to do.

What's in a Game? That which we call a game, by any other name would be as fun

Are games, by definition, fun? Julie certainly seemed to think so, as can be seen from her argument in the introduction, and she was not the only one at UrIsland to express this idea. In various conversations with employees the complaint that Talking Island was becoming less fun due to current changes were not uncommon. These arguments sometimes arose around the game itself, but more often came up concerning the worksheets, workbooks, and other school materials that were being developed as educational supplements to be used in conjunction with Talking Island – in other words, the Talking Island package. Because the supplementary materials were never intended to be games, or fun for that matter, I will revisit this aspect later on. For now, I will focus on the game play, design, and intended use of Talking Island the virtual world.

For my purposes here I will refer to Talking Island as a game for two reasons. First, the original mission of UrIsland, the idea that Alex had, was to make an MMORPG to teach English. In other words, Talking Island was meant to be a game. Second,

although I respect Julie's concerns about fun and the Talking Island package, as my previous discussions about play have already alluded to, I will be following Malaby in disassociating 'fun' from the definition of games; therefore, her emic concern does not negate my definition of Talking Island as a game. This has the added benefit of allowing for the possibility of "bad" games, or games that some people may not consider fun. This is especially important seeing as fun (itself difficult to define as Dibbell points out in *Play Money* (2006, 270) is a perceptual response to an activity and therefore, rather than offering clarity to the definition of games, it manages only to further complicate it. I could add here as well – or should I say acknowledge my bias? – that I immediately recognized Talking Island as an MMORPG when I played it.

Why did I recognize Talking Island as an MMORPG? Because, in addition to the description given in chapter 3, it resembles World of Warcraft, the last MMORPG I studied. They are both virtual worlds consisting of several maps and populated by both NPCs and avatars. These worlds are persistent, meaning that the game continues regardless of individuals logging in or out. Players can explore these worlds and interact with both the NPCs and other players. They are social environments. NPC interaction takes various forms depending on the NPC as well as the interacting player's level or progress in the main quest line. The main quest line is the primary source of progression for players, through which they gain levels and access to new areas and abilities. In addition to the main quest line, there are also side quests, mini-games, and special event holiday quests. The first time a player logs into either world they start by

creating an avatar. This avatar is customizable and each one must have a unique name of the players' choosing.[33]

At this point Talking Island starts to diverge a bit, but still remains within the recognizable MMORPG genre. One such difference is that after the noobie[34] quests, players are assigned to a guild, whereas guilds in other games are more commonly voluntary. In Talking Island each guild is headed by an OF, whereas in most MMORPGs guilds are generally headed by players. What being in a guild means for players depends on the player and the OF in charge of that guild. Some OFs would hold mini-classes, challenges, or social events for the members of their guilds, however none of these were a part of the requirements for the OFs jobs and so were left to their discretion. Second, even when OFs did schedule such events, they were all optional and so not all players would participate. This means that guild membership could be a significant part of the Talking Island experience for some players while for others it was largely irrelevant. I should also note here that unlike many other MMORPGs there were no forums, guild or worldwide, for players to socialize through. Aside from the educational goal, the biggest difference between Talking Island and the rest of the genre is Talking Island's lack of a player economy. There is no in-game auction house,

---

[33] In large MMORPGs with multiple servers names need only be unique on any given server. In the case of Talking Island, which is much smaller than something like WoW, all of the players are on the same server.
[34] A noobie is a person who is new to a game or at performing a certain task. It is a commonly used term for novices in gaming communities predating Talking Island. UrIsland, in designing their tutorial (another fairly common inclusion in games) borrowed this gaming slang and called their tutorial "the noobie questline."

no black market trade of goods outside the game[35], and even trade between players is discouraged by not encoding a way for players to directly trade items with each other. This is unusual for an MMORPG in that economies are often central to player interactions with each other and the environment (Burke 2002). The reason for this difference, I was told, was because of the target demographic – 7-14 year olds. They did not want to put young children in a position in which they could get easily taken advantage of.

That Talking Island follows the same general structure of traditional MMORPGs should not be surprising considering its origin. It was conceived of by Alex while he was working for another game company running the Taiwanese version of Lineage, an older international MMORPG. He presented the idea to one of his colleagues in that company and together they would eventually move on from there to found UrIsland. Talking Island was designed to be an MMORPG. So why, years later, was this being questioned?

When I first discovered Talking Island it was already a fully functioning game. It had passed alpha and beta testing and had had a soft launch. At this time work was still being done on the game and new content was being added (as is the custom with MMORPGs) but they were still struggling to work out how best to market and price it. Shawn explained the company's biggest obstacle as being a problem of stigma against video games, exacerbated by the fact that the targeted demographic was young enough to need their parents to do the actual purchasing of Talking Island. The prevailing image

---

[35] Perhaps I should say at least there was no black market for goods during my time in the field. It is possible that one could arise, however, with the downplay of economic activity within this particular virtual world there is less incentive for this than there is in large mainstream gaming communities.

of digital games, while noticeably in flux during my time in Taiwan, was still fairly negative. Games, especially online games, were seen as detrimental to educational goals for children, and so, according to Shawn, UrIsland needed to overcome this by emphasizing the educational value of Talking Island.

For this reason, Shawn said, Talking Island was being ticketed as "educational software." Within the office, while the word "game" was often used when referencing Talking Island, the word "player" was not so common. Most often people used the word "kids" or occasionally "students." This is significant, because I am not talking about scripted diction being used out on sales calls here, but rather the word choice of employees in the relative privacy of the office. The targeted demographic, the game's player base, was increasingly being thought of as a group of ESL students rather than as a group of players. The problem was that the demographic was actually both – they were ESL student players.

This semantic revision was a part of the ongoing wave of marketing strategy changes and Talking Island package developments that were the work/play debates among some of the employees at UrIsland. This was not the final iteration, however it was during this time that Julie and I had our elevator conversation. Later on, Mitch approached me to say they had made the decision to go back to marketing Talking Island as a game, however I noticed some people still used the term educational software, and even more so when the Shanghai project started to take over the office. Regardless of these label changes, what Julie was really asking, on a deeper level, was whether or not Talking Island could continue to have the potential to be a successful game given that educational value was being increasingly emphasized in the new

117

content and auxiliary materials being developed and added to the Talking Island

package at this time. In other words, were worksheets over shadowing the virtual world?

    According to Malaby, "A game is a semibounded and socially legitimate domain of

contrived contingency that generates interpretable outcomes" (2007, 96). By this

definition, Talking Island is a game. It is bounded by virtue of being an online virtual

world, yet, like other MMORPGS, is not enclosed by "a magic circle" cutting it off from

the "real" world. In fact, Talking Island bled into the everyday life of its players in an

immediately real and consequential way due to its use in schools and as a home study

aid for ESL students. It is a domain of contingency in that with every action, whether

scholastic, playful, or social there is more than one possible outcome, i.e. there is, at

minimum, the possibility of success or failure in every interaction with either the game or

other people within the game. These interactions then had the very real domino-esque

possibility of affecting a child's ability to successfully complete other assignments within

the Talking Island package.

    As discussed earlier, this definition does not necessitate that the activity in

question is fun, and indeed Malaby argues that fun is not an essential component with

his example of drawing lots for inheritance in Greece, "to assume that any game must

be about fun would make little sense when applied to such a moment" (2007, 99). The

idea that games are fun is a part of many popular, culturally-situated conceptions of

games, however, and so it makes sense for Julie to use this as a point of argument in

expressing her fear over what was becoming of Talking Island. As MMORPGs become

ever more prominent, the popular idea of what a game is may be in flux. MMORPGs are

a part of a broader genre of games that includes tabletop RPGs such as D&D, and early

digital dungeons such as MUDs and MOOs.[36] This lineage is unique from other genres in that there often is no win-situation. These games can potentially last forever, or for as long as people are willing to play them and run them. Therefore, MMORPGs need to be continuously updated and expanded in order to keep the experience compelling and thereby keep people playing the game over long periods of time. In my past work with World of Warcraft hardcore raiders, the word fun was in fact, rarely, if ever, heard. Instead people used an assortment of words to describe their reasons for playing all of which related to the experience being compelling in some way, shape, or form.[37] To be clear, I am not making the argument that this is something new or unique to MMORPGs, but rather that with the advent of this genre (and its predecessors) this aspect of gaming is becoming more obvious. Indeed Malaby makes the argument that it is more analytically useful to describe the gaming experience as compelling rather than fun as well (2007, 99).

Given how the conversation with Julie proceeded after her initial question, it became clear that although she may have been concerned with how fun the game was or was not, she was also concerned with how it was becoming (in her opinion) less and less compelling. UrIsland was not doing well during my time there. The company had yet to turn a profit or sign enough players to even break even. As the conversation with Julie continued, she expressed the concern that kids would not want to keep playing because the game was not fun - i.e. it was not compelling enough to keep the interest of

---

[36] The acronyms here stand of role-playing games (RPG), Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), Multi-User Dungeon (MUD), and MUD Object Oriented (MOO).
[37] Then again some games are less successful in that they are not compelling or "fun," and yet they are still just as much games as box office flops are still movies.

young children. This was an ongoing concern among some people in the company. The financial situation was naturally on the forefront of everyone's mind as they depended on the well-being of the company for their continued livelihood, but money was not the only concern. Some employees also expressed belief in the idea of Talking Island and the goals of UrIsland and expressed to me a real desire for it to succeed.

Part of Julie and others' concerns at this time was the direction that the new marketing campaign, and thus the direction the new content, was taking. In fact UrIsland went through several manifestations of public presentation, some more popular than others. When I very first met Shawn, Talking Island was described to me as a supplement to traditional English classes that could be used at home to hone kids' speaking and listening skills. By the time I was in the elevator with Julie, they were focusing on trying to sell Talking Island to *buxibans* as a classroom component. To make it more palatable to these schools the education department was creating worksheets, flashcards, and other offline materials to supplement the content of the game. Eventually they began developing a full curriculum centered around Talking Island. In short, there was a heavy focus at this time on emphasizing and expanding external traditional educational materials (such as worksheets) and many people were concerned that this not only went contrary to the original goal of UrIsland, but that it was also making the experience of Talking Island as a whole less appealing to kids.

Listen carefully, circle the right words and fill in the blanks!

_____(Hello, Hi)!
I am Superkid Number 11.
_____(Supermodels, Superkids)
are good kids.
We guard the Statue of Liberty.
Can you help us?
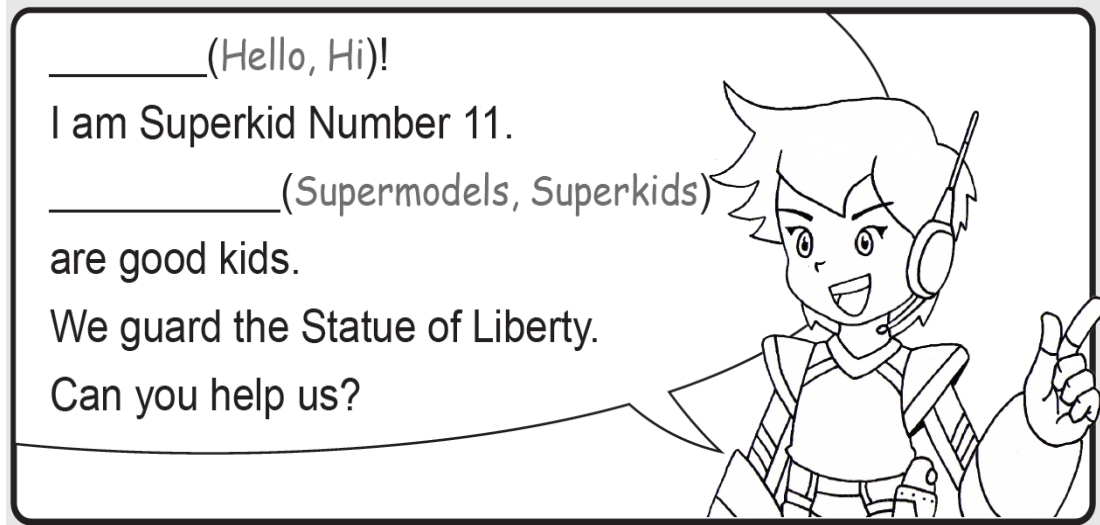
Figure 31: An excerpt from a chapter 1 worksheet.

These external components were made based upon dialogues that were a part of the main questline and did not involve any changes to the game itself. Even so, some people were concerned that the addition of so much traditional schoolwork would detract from the overall enjoyment of playing Talking Island. Even though the game world was not being changed in relation to the worksheets, the experience of Talking Island was being changed because the kids were now being asked to complete worksheets after and sometimes during their time in Talking Island thus changing their experience of it. This fear illustrates Julie's (and others') conception of the "game" or the experience of playing Talking Island as going beyond the virtual world itself – beyond where any "magic circle" might exist – if such things existed. Huizinga's theory of a magic circle, that play is voluntary and set apart from "real" life (1950, locations 171-185) therefore doesn't apply. Talking Island the virtual world was a part of and the base for the Talking Island package. In questioning the game status and fun of Talking Island

Julie's concern was that this package was detracting from the appeal of the game in such a way as to suggest the two components were not clearly separable.

An easier way to think of how the Talking Island package was being questioned here may be to use Mia Consolvo's argument in "There is *No Magic Circle"* when she states that "we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply, but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts" (2009, 416). In the case of students using the Talking Island package in *buxibans* this is particularly salient. The curriculum attempted to control player actions in the world beyond the code – itself a form of control (Lessig 1999, Malaby 2006) - by stating which quests or other milestones had to be completed during any given play session. This is not just "the ordinary rules of life," but an explicit forcing of classroom bureaucracy into competition with the encoded flow of Talking Island, its open-endedness, and in particular, the main quest-line of the game. I will go into this further in the following section.

Despite internal deliberations on the changing nature of Talking Island and its future, Alex's goal, and thus of UrIsland, was not just to make a popular MMORPG. The goal was to make an immersive environment in which kids could learn and practice speaking and listening to English in a compelling game format. Julie, of the game department questioned the direction the company was taking with Talking Island because she saw it potentially evolving away from this goal due to the increased focus on learning over play. Yet the education department had struggles of their own trying to create a package that would make the game recognizable as educational.

Educational Value vs. Cultural Conceptions

I was out on a quick break from work one day with Danny. I never actually worked with Danny, but we occasionally spoke around the water cooler, at lunch or on breaks. Unlike most of my informants, he didn't speak any English and so all of our conversations were strictly in Mandarin. We often had trouble communicating (not that it ever stopped either of us from trying) and although I originally assumed this was because of a lack of ability on my part, several people from the office confirmed that they (native speakers) also had trouble following Danny sometimes. As one person put it, Danny "talks as if he was writing an academic paper." This is likely why I so often enjoyed our conversations, too. On this day, we were, once again, trying to discuss deep philosophical issues – education and anthropology.

I was trying to ask Danny about education in Taiwan, but we were having a major and cascading communication problem. It started because in that moment I couldn't think of the word for education. My brain was hopelessly stuck on the word 學校 (xuéxiào - school) when I really wanted to say 教育 (jiàoyù – education). So what I really did was ask Danny about school in Taiwan, to which he asked what that had to do with anthropology. I then tried to explain around the term I was searching for in hopes that he would just figure it out, but apparently I succeeded only in sounding as if I was simplifying what "school" is. Fortunately, he jumped on this and immediately started explaining that "school" and "education" are very complicated issues and he wanted to make sure I understood that these are not simple topics. As soon as said the word "education" it triggered my memory.

By this time we were already walking back up to the office, but I was so excited that I would finally be able to explain what anthropology had to do with education that I just kept on talking as loudly as I had been while we were outside. I told him that education was a fundamental part of culture because at school small child are taught the cultural values of their nation. Not only do I realize that this is very important, but I also realize that because I grew up and went to school in America I had a potentially different perspective and so I needed to ask people like him about education here in Taiwan. From there I further connected education and anthropology together through my research at UrIsland (they made an educational game after all) since Danny had already accepted that doing anthropological research at the company was a good idea.

When I finished I was so frustrated from expressing these complex ideas in Mandarin that I exhaled a big breath of air and bent forward to rest on my knees while saying, "Oh my god Chinese is hard" (it was relatively early in my time with UrIsland); and that was when I realized the entire room was listening to me. Everyone laughed, good-naturedly, but more importantly, I learned that many of the people in the office agreed with my assessment of the importance of education. Many agreed that this was not just business, they were a part of an industry of national importance, and ESL was near the top of the list for subjects Taiwanese were both interested in and concerned about.

As mentioned earlier, English is a required subject in Taiwan, and it is included on some standardized tests as well as on entrance exams for high schools and colleges. In addition to this mandatory instruction, there is a large and popular industry of *buxibans* that teach English starting from preschool and continuing through adult

language classes. Despite this length of study, many people are uncomfortable speaking English and do not have a level of competency indicative of the number of years they have spent studying. In the UrIsland office the general consensus on why so many Taiwanese had such difficulty with English was threefold: First, only reading and writing are usually tested; second, because of this and a perceived lack of quality, native speaking English teachers, many schools will essentially teach to the test and focus on reading and writing; third, the English that is taught in schools is "textbook" English and does not prepare students to deal with English as it is actually used by native speakers. Furthermore, many people felt that traditional classes failed to engage the interest of children, thus creating a situation in which there was no motivation for kids to practice the language outside of finishing their written homework as quickly as possible.

In contemplating these shortcomings, Alex came up with the idea of gamifying the process of learning English. By creating a game English could be made more engaging. By making it a computer game that included voice recognition software, they could offer students recordings of native speakers and an opportunity to practice speaking the language. By making it an MMORPG Talking Island became an immersive environment in which students were exposed not only to the language, but also to cultural knowledge that is crucial to being able to effectively communicate with people of different cultures.[38]

---

[38] I will go more in depth about the idea of immersion and what it meant to UrIsland in the next chapter. For the moment I use the word ethnographically in line with their reasoning – as both a virtual world aspect and a teaching method.

To accomplish these goals Talking Island was modeled after New York City and native English speakers were hired to play the voices of a majority of the characters. Anywhere they needed written words, such as in dialogue boxes and in some parts of the UI (or user-interface) English was the preferred language. The only time written Mandarin appeared was in the noobie quests, system messages, and occasionally in the UI and individual player's quest logs. This choice was made so as to make the introduction and continued smooth play experience possible. (If an error message was to appear in English, the logic went, it was highly likely that the player would not understand what the problem was and may get frustrated with the system.) As time passed, it was decided that even this small amount of Mandarin detracted from the immersive nature of Talking Island and these aspects began to be translated into English with the goal of making Talking Island completely Mandarin free. (With the caveat here that many children still used Mandarin when chatting with each other even though it was discouraged by OFs and teachers when they were present to notice.) This included system error messages. The perception of immersion, even when the program was being interrupted by an error message, was deemed important enough to go through the trouble (for the company and the users) of translating them all.[39]

The main source of English instruction in Talking Island comes from the main questline. At the time of this writing, there were 90 main quests (this does not count the noobie quests – which were designed to teach the kids how to play and thus included

---

[39] I helped with some of these translations myself.

some Mandarin - nor the special event or holiday quests).[40] The quest line started with short simple quests teaching basic vocabulary and slowly increased in difficulty and sometimes length as a player progressed. In addition to these coded sources of language practice and instruction the company employs Online Facilitators, or OFs as they are known in the game. The closest parallel to an OF in a more traditional MMORPG would be a gamemaster, or GM, and indeed OFs do serve in some capacity the same as a GM. The OF's job, however extends beyond that of a GM in that they are also tasked with tutoring responsibilities. The tutoring responsibilities of the OFs are quite extensive. They lead optional classes in Talking Island, run guild events[41], and assist players with game or English related questions. They also quiz kids on a one-to-one basis in exchange for in-game items, and oversee the highest level mini-game. The OFs were not native English speakers, but they were mostly educated as English teachers.[42]

So while playing Talking Island kids had to listen to recordings of native speakers, speak and read English, and had access to English teachers. Even so, many parents had a problem with paying for their children to play an online game. I most often heard about this problem from Shawn. Part of his job was to go and give promotional presentations at schools, *buxibans*, book fairs, and other places of education around Taiwan. He told me that while he was often well received and they would always make

---

[40] I'd like to clarify here that by "main source" I mean those sources from the game that were used to create worksheets and core lesson plans. This is not to suggest that the special events, side quests, or holiday quests were somehow less educational. In fact, some of these activities outside of the main questline were quite rich with language, customs, and history lessons.
[41] Unlike regular GMs, OFs are a part of player guilds.
[42] As can be seen in the drawing from the introduction, in the beginning conceptualization stages the idea was for OFs to be native speakers located in the USA.

some sales from these events, it was just not enough, and there was simply too much stigma within that generation.

The company's answer to this stigma problem was to focus marketing on *buxibans* where they could sell several accounts at once to be used in the classroom. In order to make Talking Island more palatable to the *buxibans*, they decided to create the offline supplemental materials I mentioned earlier, thus making an entire Talking Island package with everything a teacher needed to teach English. By far, the vast majority of this was worksheets. The worksheets consisted of pages to do in class and as homework, and weekly, monthly, and quarterly assessments. All of the teaching points for these were taken straight from the main quest dialogues, but all put into formats familiar to parents such as, multiple choice questions, fill in the blanks, and matching. The worksheet system was designed such that kids practiced new vocabulary and grammar in the order it was presented in the game, so that put together the entire dialogue could be read like a script straight from the worksheets (and such an activity was at one point a part of the curriculum).

The curriculum that was developed with all this went through many revisions, but in the first incarnation students were being asked each week to complete a designated number of tasks in game, five or more worksheets (depending on the length of the quest being assigned) a weekly assessment, and sometimes also a monthly or quarterly assessment. There was a lot of dissent within the company over this model and the feelings being expressed were not helped by the growing frustration over the actual logistics of finishing the work involved in creating it. Shawn frequently tried to convince the others in the education department that although the very traditional curriculum and

supplemental materials went against the revolutionary idea of what Talking Island was supposed to be, this was all necessary to get the parents on board with paying for their kids to play a game and to get *buxibans* to carry it. No one in the department liked it. The rest of the department felt that the problem with Talking Island was not its format – i.e. that it was not familiar to parents or teachers – but rather marketing. They felt that if UrIsland educated parents and teachers on the benefits of the gamification of learning English, that indeed it was possible for something to be both a game and educational through their marketing, that then UrIsland could begin to create the educational revolution that was their original goal.

Although the Talking Island package did not fit in with the original revolutionary ideals of Talking Island as they were presented to me, compromises had to be made for the *buxibans*, and these compromises happen to follow the logic of bureaucray as described by Malaby in "Ritual, Bureaucracy, Game: Modernity and its Cultural Forms of Control" (2013). This is the classroom bureaucracy mentioned earlier. A teacher dealing with a classroom full of students needs to have order and control in order to keep the learning environment constructive. Having all of the students progressing in the game, and thus being exposed to the same vocabulary and grammar, at the same time allows teachers to be able to structure their lessons for those learning points. As businesses, *buxibans* further needed to be able to demonstrate their students' progress. Relying on character level for this was not feasible because this was an unknown to most parents and teachers. Exams, on the other hand, have been fully entrenched in the Chinese bureaucracy of education for ages (Zeng, 1999, 8). As Malaby says of bureaucracy, it "organizes action and meaning through distinctive invocations of order" (2013, 1). This

explains parents' understanding and acceptance; the entrenched bureaucracy of the exam system in Chinese culture has already organized the action of studying and made the results meaningful. This is something Shawn clearly understood and tried to incorporate into the curriculum development he oversaw.

Throughout the many curriculum revisions, worksheet fiascos, and general disagreements over the future of Talking Island, I never heard any of the employees question whether or not Talking Island was educational. It was well known and accepted that listening and speaking were crucial components of learning and being able to use a language – foreign or not, these were what were missing from English education in Taiwan, and this was exactly what Talking Island had to offer. Beyond these educational benefits Talking Island also offered kids an engaging gaming experience. So why then was the status of Talking Island as a game questioned whereas its status as an educational tool was not?

To answer this we must return to the culturally-constructed dichotomy between play and work that is held by many Taiwanese. When Julie (and others) saw more and more supplemental materials, i.e. work, being added to the Talking Island experience, which was originally seen as mostly play, the fear was that Talking Island was becoming less and less compelling (or even game-like). Of course, Talking Island itself (along with myriad other educational games) disproves the very idea that work and play are mutually exclusive in the way it wove both together. Talking Island was not the first educational game in Taiwan, but it was the first MMORPG of its kind. Even in the middle of a Fabo battle – something all of the kids I observed were very interested in – the players had to speak English in order to make their Fabos do anything and thus win the

battle. In short, at the same time a kid is playing with their Fabo they are also working on their English pronunciation.

This is not to say that the misgivings over the supplemental materials were unfounded. In the original curriculum the amount of traditional schoolwork being asked of the kids far outweighed the amount of time delegated to playing the game. Furthermore, these materials strayed very far from the original listening and speaking emphasis goals of UrIsland … not to even mention the goal of making learning English fun. The few times I was fortunate enough to visit *buxibans* using Talking Island all of the kids wanted to talk about their Fabos. None of them wanted to discuss the worksheets. The Fabos were compelling. The kids wanted to catch them, level them, and battle with them. The worksheets were mundane.

Although many of the disagreements in the office revolved around learning goals versus gaming goals, at the root UrIsland was facing a different problem: how to sell their product. For those like Julie the solution to this problem was to stick to the revolutionary ideals that UrIsland was founded on. The financial argument here is that if Talking Island can offer an engaging gaming experience two things will happen. First, the children will want to keep playing and in doing so their English will improve. Following that, when parents see their child's English improving then they will be willing to continue paying the monthly fee charged for continued access to Talking Island. For those like Shawn the solution was to make Talking Island look as familiar to parents as possible and not directly challenge the work-play dichotomy. The financial argument here is that if their product is recognizable then parents will not hesitate to spend the initial money on it. Then when the kids show improvement because the game is

compelling and they start suddenly showing interest in studying English the parents will

want to continue to pay to keep their children in Talking Island. Unfortunately, this

marketing problem was often clouded over by internal struggles over the work / play

distinction; and so all too often changes were being made to the curriculum adding

work, without considering play. In other words, modifications to the package often had

the effect of eliminating contingency without acknowledging (or perhaps realizing?)

contingency's role in compelling game play (Malaby 2007, 106). This was because the

offline materials were focused on appeasing *buxibans* which, among other things,

wanted paper worksheets and exams that children could bring home and show their

parents. As Malaby points out of bureaucracies, "The commitment is to ironing out the

contingent, the logic is that of ordering, and the techniques rely heavily on

documentation" (2013, 6). The *buxibans* and parents wanted documentation showing

what their children were learning.

At this point it may seem as if MMORPG stigmatization was an afterthought in

the development of Talking Island, seeing as I have been focusing on curriculum and

offline components, however this is not the case. The reason for this focus is timing.

This is where UrIsland was in their production of the Talking Island package while I was

present. By the time I arrived, Talking Island had been launched, and an accompanying

book released[43], however there is evidence within the game to suggest that some of

these concerns about existing stigmas, or at least similar concerns, had been raised

---

[43] This book I am referring to here is different from the curriculum materials being developed during my time at UrIsland. This book, also called Talking Island, was one part instruction manual, one part promotional material, and one part parents' guide to what their children would be learning in the first 5 chapters of the game.

during the initial creation phase. Up until now I have been focusing on aspects of Talking Island that were being developed or modified while I was there. In the following section I will be focusing on those aspects that were encoded in the game and completed before my arrival. This information therefore was gained through me playing Talking Island and then asking employees about these issues and components. One such example is the joy points system, and I will start here because it neatly ties in with the preceding discussion about perceptions.

Joy Points and More – Encoding Solutions

Joy points are similar to hit points, but not exactly the same. Hit points (or health, or heart points, etc) are commonly used in games to measure the amount of life that character has left. If a character takes so much damage that their hit points reach zero then they are dead (or incapacitated, it varies across games). Joy points, however, don't measure health, they measure a Fabo's happiness. When something happens to make a Fabo sad, they lose joy points. The biggest thing that will make a Fabo sad is being overworked, which is determined in relation to how long a player has been playing Talking Island. The amount of joy points a Fabo loses rises exponentially after the first two hours, so the longer a child plays the faster they will lose joy points. If a Fabo's joy points reach zero the Fabo runs away and is permanently lost to the player. Because the game is designed to be Fabo dependent, a player cannot do much without a Fabo other than retrieve a new one from their Fabo home (like Pokémon, kids collect Fabos and keep them in their Fabo home, but only one is used at a time) or request a new one if they have none left. Getting a new Fabo is only a temporary fix in any given play

session, however, because the loss of joy points is based upon the player's time online, not an individual Fabo's. So the rate at which the new Fabo will lose joy points doesn't reset because this particular Fabo just came out. Therefore, the incentive is for kids to logoff rather than play all day long.

When I asked why joy points were encoded into the game I was explicitly told this was to prevent children from becoming addicted, because digital games, and MMORPGs in particular are seen as addictive and dangerous for being time sinks. I then pointed out that there was a simple way to stay online longer without losing one's Fabo – by feeding a Fabo Note Candy which would restore joy points (although admittedly after enough time this would become unreasonably expensive). In response I received a smile and the explanation that more importantly, the joy point system was a way to reassure parents that their children would be restricted in the amount of time they could spend online in the game world.

Figure 32: This is a screenshot of my inventory of Note Candies. Note Candies are specifically for Fabos and come in a large variety of types. Each type effects a different stat or boosts a specific type of Fabo. The text in the white box is giving the information for a Note Candy I am hovering my mouse over (but which is subsequently covered by the text). The number I have circled in red in the upper right hand corner shows my playtime for that session as 3 hours and 46 minutes which means I was going into my Note Candy stash in order to find one that would restore Joy Points to my Fabos. Players could get Note Candy from some quests, vendors, or from OFs – who could give players items at their discretion. (Side note: I took this screenshot as part of my editing responsibilities. The text in the white box was subsequently rewritten to improve clarity.)

This was a selling point about perception. The creators perceived the stigma of MMORPGs (specifically regarding addiction and wasting time playing) and encoded joy

points within their game. They then used this as a selling point to assuage potential parental fear about allowing their young children to play such a game. The smile and comeback to my challenge about the usefulness of the system in preventing addiction clearly demonstrates that this was as much about creating a perception as it was about encouraging a healthy lifestyle. Which is not to suggest that UrIsland didn't care about health. In addition to the joy points, after two hours of play and every so often after that, pop up messages (in English) would appear reminding children to get up and move around. No one was advocating that children should be spending hours on end in Talking Island – but neither did anyone think joy points or these messages constituted a guarantee against addiction.

Joy points were a part of UrIsland's marketing balancing act, attempting to meet the needs and desires of parents, children, and *buxibans*. Although the concerns of these parties sometimes overlapped, they more often conflicted, sparking debates within the company over the following three major educational issues:

- Assessment styles: leveling in the game versus traditional models such as tests and worksheets – such as Shawn's argument for the traditional style offline materials.

- Engagement: whether or not the game is still "fun" (with the addition of all the offline materials) and if not, does this undermine the educational benefits of having students engaged with their learning – such as Julie's concerns.

- Stigma: directly related to engagement, the problem with game stigmas are that they disallow the gamification of learning thus hurting the goal of engagement - and in this case, the very life of UrIsland.

Joy points, of course related to the stigma problem. They are also one of the few solutions that neither the game nor education departments seemed to have a problem with. Unfortunately, the tasks of meeting the other two needs were divided among the game and education departments thus leading to interdepartmental conflicts.

Before I get too in-depth into these issues, however, I will lay out a brief history of the idea of Talking Island. Alex's original idea for Talking Island was to make an MMORPG, a game, to teach English. The original design of Talking Island relied heavily on speaking and listening skills because these were seen as lacking in ESL education. Although there is text in Talking Island there are no explicit grammar lessons, and in fact, Talking Island dialogues were written to simulate spoken English and not proper written English. Talking Island was meant to supplement the mandatory ESL classes children were already taking.

In the beginning, it was imagined that Talking Island would be most useful in homes, although there was discussion, even at this point, about possible opportunities for Talking Island in *buxibans* or public schools. After launching the game, they realized that they would not make enough money from individual sales to support the ongoing costs of running and updating a virtual world. Therefore they needed to target *buxibans* to remain viable. This is when the curriculum tensions arose.

I start with this brief overview because I want to make it clear that from the start Talking Island was intended and designed to be a game, and they were not about to scrap that project. Therefore, when some people began to feel that gamer shame was hurting their sales, their first answer was to simply change the language they used when talking about Talking Island. This is the point they were at when I met Shawn at TIBE (the Taipei International Book Expo) and he gave me a sales pitch about Talking Island. In this pitch, Talking Island was educational software (not a game) that students (not players) used (not played) to learn English. In fact Shawn continued to use this language even after I told him about my previous work with video games and subtly pointed out surface similarities between WoW and Talking Island.

Since Talking Island was also designed to be educational, the use of educationally focused terms was not incorrect in any way. In fact, Talking Island was designed to look and be both game-like and educational; therefore, certain design aspects could be highlighted to emphasize it as educational software making it sound more like a textbook than World of Warcraft. The way this was done was ingenious in that it offered parents and teachers a recognizable format to follow their children's progress without disrupting game play – i.e. without hurting player engagement.

Talking Island was organized to resemble a textbook. The quests are grouped into thematic chapters, 13 in total covering 90 quests. As far as game play is concerned, this format can be ignored without hindering progress. In fact, I played well into chapter 2 before I realized there were chapters. Rather than directly affecting game play, the book format of Talking Island's organization makes the structure appear more

educational to parents and *buxibans* – the target consumers of Talking Island (since elementary school children cannot yet purchase their own toys).

This is not to suggest that the book layout was merely a cosmetic decision. The idea was that by using familiar academic terms parents and teachers would find it easier to understand and communicate the progress students were making. Furthermore, terms such as "level" already had established different meanings in ESL education. Getting a character to level 2 in Talking Island does not correspond with being at level 2 in English (not that English levels were strictly standardized, but under no realistic scale would leveling a character to 2 be equivalent to a level 2 in language learning). Yet, to try and match avatar levels with ability levels would create a frustratingly slow game progression for anyone let alone elementary school children.[44] Therefore, character levels could not be used as assessments or markers of progress in the same way class levels could. Other terms, however, such as dialogue and chapter, were much easier to translate into the game world, and could still be used like an assessment tool akin to homework. To illustrate this, I will describe chapter 1 of Talking Island.

Chapter 1, called "The Superkids Team," consists of the first five quests of Talking Island.[45] It is an introduction to the game world and the main plot. Quest 1 introduces the main protagonists (the Superkids) their main function (to guard the Statue of Liberty) and the main antagonist (Octacomputer). Quest 2 - 4 introduce players to Fabos. Fabos get a three-quest introduction because they are a major

---

[44] I imagine if it took me a year to gain each level in WoW I never would have made it to level 2!
[45] The number of quests in each chapter varies according to the story.

component of game play. Each player starts out with just one, but can collect more. Fabos must be cared for and are used for battles. Some quests do not require the active use of a Fabo, but it is impossible to progress through the storyline without one. By completing quest 5, the end of chapter 1, the player becomes a member of the Superkids team and embarks on the adventure of defeating Octocomputer and putting the world right again.

Thus, chapter 1 is an introductory chapter to the world of Talking Island, just as one would expect from any other textbook introducing the world of any other subject. In comparison to language learning textbooks specifically, each quest is easily comparable to the dialogue lessons common among these. To further help parents and educators make the ideological leap from textbook to MMORPG, the game comes with a book (as in a physical printed-on-paper book as mentioned above) that includes all of the dialogues for chapter 1 (game quests 1-5) as well as a breakdown of what WBUs are covered in these lessons, a FAQs section, and promotional testimonials.

Even with this textbook-like organization, some employees still believed that the problem in sales they were having was due to the stigmatizing ideas of parents and teachers against video games. In addition to this, others pointed out that the price of Talking Island, when compared with the price of *buxiban* classes, was too high considering that writing (which along with reading was the focus of testing in Taiwan up to that point) was not even taught.[46] It was these concerns that lead to the decision to

---

[46] There were already talk in the news about changing the exams to include listening and speaking. See for example, http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2010/08/05/2003479649. A Taipei Times article about MoE proposed changes. Oddly relevant, this article happens to end with a brief note on

make the fully comprehensive curriculum described earlier. This way, *buxibans* would

not have to purchase Talking Island in addition to textbooks and workbooks – Talking

Island would come with all that.

Beyond Talking Island – Playing and Working in UrIsland

Figure 33: A snapshot of me at work and play.

Internet addiction and gaming, further supporting the existence of the stigma I have mentioned in this
chapter and elsewhere.

Ideas about work and play in UrIsland were not restricted to Talking Island. As alluded to in chapter 3, the UrIsland office atmosphere was a compelling blend of work and playfulness. In some ways, UrIsland was a lot like I had imagined a video game company would be – fun. I was not fully engaged and enjoying my work every day, but when one's work is studying the creation of games, even the most tenuous and practical distinctions between working and playing tend to disappear. This took some getting used to for me, but I found that in some ways, my bias towards the ideas of work and play created an opportunity for me to learn. I had more or less been raised on the work ethic view of play, not unlike, though less extreme, than how many Taiwanese viewed games. By this time I had already spent several years studying video games, most notably World of Warcraft, so I was not of the mindset that gaming was inherently wasteful. Far from wasteful, I even once had a chance encounter outside of UrIsland, with a young man with a very high level of English who claimed that his fluency was due to spending all of his free time playing WoW on US servers. Whatever my personal beliefs however, I did not want to inadvertently offend anyone, and so at first I would not play anything other than Talking Island while I was inside UrIsland. Of course, this lasted only until Molly introduced me to her collection of iPhone games and taught me the company's stance on playing in the office – we might learn something.

The idea of gaming as research for the company was also worked into the regular meetings of the game department. Although I was never able to attend one myself, I heard about them from Lilly who was a part of that department. Everyone was expected to play games outside of Talking Island and then at each regular department meeting one person would give a short presentation on whatever it was they were

playing. Lilly said it made their meetings more interesting than other types of company

meetings and that it gave them the opportunity to learn about alternative options that

might be incorporated into Talking Island.

This is not to suggest employees were always "working" while "playing" around.

Rather, there was an indistinct division between work and play, and the activities in

question did not always involve games, but also included other social media such as

YouTube, Facebook, and MSN messenger. Downtime, such as when Molly sent me a

YouTube video of a girl opening a box of cockroaches in a locked car, was valued for its

regenerative effect on focus and creativity.[47] Furthermore, all of the applications I

witnessed in use were used for both work and play in such a way that it was difficult to

distinguish usage.

I mentioned YouTube, Facebook, and MSN in particular because these were the

three I saw the most and used myself to interact with others in the office. I include these

social media also because, although they are not considered "games" in and of

themselves, they can be played with almost as if as a part of game. They are "gamelike"

as Malaby would say (2009,14). As an example, I will describe in more detail the time

Molly sent me the cockroach video via YouTube.

---

[47] Shawn explicitly told me this one day when I asked him why he had no problem with me taking
cigarette breaks as often as I did. He wasn't condoning the smoking, but rather the break from working
which he said was good for me. He then compared this to other things employees did to recoup such as
taking short naps during lunch, stepping out for a snack or coffee in the middle of the afternoon, or
playing a quick iPhone game or even Talking Island itself. Furthermore, while in meetings or working
cooperatively with people on especially intensive projects, it was not uncommon for someone to call for a
quick break for this same reason.

I was editing worksheets for the new *buxiban* package (participating in working) when Molly told me to check my email. I opened my email and saw a message from Molly with the subject, "Don't Scream." No longer working in this moment, but overcome with curiosity I clicked on the YouTube link, which was the only content of the message. The video was a practical joke. A man locked a woman in a car, gave her a heart shaped box, and then filmed her opening it. The box was filled with cockroaches and the rest of the video shows the woman freaking out and trying to get out of the car. In sending me the video, Molly was playing a joke on me. Everyone who knew me knew I freaked out over cockroaches. Molly set up a situation in which her goal was to watch me freak out in the middle of the office. Upon seeing the subject line of the email – even without yet knowing what the video would show - I knew my objective in this game was to not freak out.

This particular case of playing with YouTube was clearly more playful and less work oriented, however, as noted earlier, play was acknowledged in the office as having a regenerative effect for the brain and so in this way it was a part of working, even if indirectly.

In addition to sending each other the occasional playful video, we also exchanged videos and posts about other games, such as Ingress. These game related videos and posts were meant both to inform others we thought might be personally interested in the game and to generate ideas for Talking Island and the curriculum. The other two popular applications in the office, Facebook and MSN, were also used both playfully and directly for work. UrIsland has a Facebook page for Talking Island and as a part of our work, we were all asked to interact with it, however I do not know anyone,

nor ever saw anyone opening Facebook just to post on the Talking Island page without also taking a minute to check their own newsfeed, or their farms or their zoos.[48] In fact, some people left Facebook open in the background all day to quickly check updates during short breaks or to turn to their social networks for help with work related questions.

This use of Facebook to crowd source problem solving is similar to what Lori Kendall reports in her book *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*. Kendall's book focuses on a MUD she calls BlueSky and although MUDs are quite different from Facebook in design, some of the ways in which the two get used overlap, such as people using them both as an escape from work and for work. As Kendall explains, "Participants stress the value of the work-related computer information they have obtained on BlueSky," and use these as opportunities to reinforce the group identity (2002, 73). Facebook, having a much broader user base, does not garner such community identity as does BlueSky, however, this does not preclude getting information from the site nor the occasional argument over whose answer is better.

MSN was the one application that skewed more towards work and less towards play, but was still used for both. MSN was used extensively within the office to communicate. I found this interesting at first since the main room of the company was an open concept design (i.e. people were messaging other people in the same room). I quickly learned, however, that messaging often made more sense than walking over to

---

[48] For anyone not familiar with Facebook games, the references to farms and zoos are because Farmville and Zoo World were popular at this time.

someone else's desk because it allowed people to cooperate in real time while both

having access to their own computers and it cut down on the noise level of the room by

ensuring there would not be a constant barrage of conversation in this shared space.

During MSN conversations, even the serious ones, emoji were often used during

the conversation. These were used to convey meaning, emotions, and ideas, but in a

more playful way than straight text. It would also happen on occasion that serious work

discussions would flow into a series of exchanged emoji and back again. Likewise,

social chat would also intersperse project discussions, sometimes simultaneously and

other times taking over then subsiding. This chatter, project collaboration, and emoji

play is work flowing into play flowing into work until the two can only be distinguished at

the extreme ends of the work-play spectrum and is indicative of interaction in UrIsland in

general.

Conclusion

Change over time, especially while witnessing it in the present, can be quite

difficult to document and relate to others. Nevertheless, that is what I attempted in this

chapter. It is even harder to implement such changes; yet that is exactly what UrIsland

was (and still is) attempting. Beyond developing and marketing an innovative product,

UrIsland was built on the idea that learning can not only be fun, but also found in a

game and outside of a traditional classroom. This meant that UrIsland was also selling

an ideological change for Taiwanese education – that work and play are not mutually

exclusive, a straddling of education and games. That Talking Island was an MMORPG

in particular, adding the sphere of technology to this already weighty challenge, served to push UrIsland further to the cutting edge of these industries in Taiwan.

Within the office, the general acceptance of this novel approach to work and education was palpable in the playfulness present. Various social media outlets were treated as both work tools, social tools, and as gamelike artefacts indicating the ease with which employees could flow between work and play without necessarily abandoning either at any time. Meanwhile, instances such as with PvZ and the game department presentations further show that even actual games were also recognized as being potentially beneficial and/or productive.

Yet, the fall back to productivity as an indicator of acceptability also shows that this ideological change had not yet fully taken hold. The tendency within capitalism to see productivity as beneficial and everything else as wasteful – that work is good and play is not - was still a struggle within the office. Of course, Talking Island straddled this debate anyway, because (even if one agreed that it is a game) it was still a game designed for productivity – in this case – for learning English. Furthermore, the very existence of an "education" department and a "game" department – two separate departments and often at odds with one another – also shows the difficulty of making fundamental changes in people's perceptions.

Is Talking Island a game? Julie's question was a bit philosophical but this abstract question had very real roots in the very pragmatic solutions to practical roadblocks UrIsland was facing. UrIsland is a company and whatever other goals they may have had, the only way to remain in business was to make money. Interestingly, it was this basic problem and differing views on how to solve it (rather than philosophical

146

differences about the exclusivity of work or play) that seemed to cause the most tension between the two departments. What will make the most money – appealing more to children or to parents? This question had not yet been answered when it came time for me to leave Taiwan.

Moreover, Julie's question shows a tactical rejection of a magic circle. Julie was concerned about Talking Island being less fun because of the package – items and activities that lay outside of the virtual world of Talking Island and therefore outside of the boundaries of the imaginary magic circle. In fact I would argue that the very existence of gamer shame shows that the Taiwanese do not fully hold such ideas of separation – otherwise, what would there be to be ashamed of? As it stands, the stigma of games (and video games in particular – as shown by the stories about Sam and the wang-ka) exists because these play activities are seen as being consequential (in a negative way) to the rest of life. The actions, questions, stories, and reactions that I heard, watched, or was a part of in Taiwan all suggest that play is not separable. However, this should not be mistaken to mean that for the Taiwanese play is always or never acceptable.

The existence of joy points and in-game messages telling kids to get up and go outside are a sign that the developers of Talking Island, from the beginning, expected to encounter some resistance to their revolution. In the next chapter I will delve deeper into other expectations of UrIsland and of their target consumers. Just as joy points were an acknowledgement and response to certain cultural expectations, so too were limitations encoded into certain avatar choices and some changes made to rules. Nonetheless,

UrIsland did not capitulate on all matters, as will be shown in the debate about storybooks, Fabos, and dialogues in this next chapter.

Chapter 5: Playing with Expectations: UrIsland's Other Challenges

"This will make teachers obsolete." – from an education departmental meeting.

Introduction

As is already clear by this point, UrIsland conceived of Talking Island as a revolutionary product. Mostly this was because of its novel use of the immersion and engagement of an MMORPG platform to facilitate language learning. That Talking Island focused on teaching English specifically further added to the possible scope of this revolution due to the importance Taiwanese place on both education generally and English language education in particular. I have already touched on this in the previous two chapters in the discussions about why America was chosen as the model for Talking Island and in discussing Taiwan's position and goals vis-a-vie international relations and markets. That English proficiency was held to be a crucial part of children's education in Taiwan was evident by the fact that it was a mandatory subject and obvious in the number of times it appeared in the news. According to the China Post, from June 2011: "English language proficiency is considered one of the key elements in developing international competitiveness." This was a nationalist project, and was overtly seen as one.

I mention the importance of ESL education here again to make clear why UrIsland envisioned Talking Island as a revolutionary product. They were not building software with the intent of satisfying a niche market; they were hoping to touch an entire generation. Even after the main focus of work within the company switched to opening a

flagship learning center in Shanghai, China,[49] the hope of many was that the Shanghai

project would be successful enough to fund a flagship center in Taiwan. The UrIsland

dream continued to be about revolutionizing ESL education for Taiwanese students,

boosting English proficiency there, and thereby opening up more and better economic

opportunities for the next generation. Even Alex spoke about this in his farewell speech

- that though his original idea was a Talking Island flagship in Taipei, the investors

wanted to focus on Shanghai because they wanted a return on their investment.

UrIsland had lofty goals and a charismatic leader. This was, in some ways, a

company of dreamers built by a dreamer. Yet these were educated dreamers, keenly

aware of existing educational norms and practices they saw as inadequate to the task of

preparing students for meaningful interactions with English speakers. This they wanted

to upend. This was their intended revolution. Therefore, other cultural expectations,

such as gender roles, racial traits, and the place of teachers, were left largely intact and

unchallenged. Furthermore, despite their revolutionary claims, the company had roots

within the existing Taiwanese social system – meaning that stereotypes within Talking

Island, though often intentional, sometimes went unrecognized. More often than not,

however, decisions were made with an eye to the cultural expectations of the parents,

teachers, and students such that the company was careful to engage with these

expectations even while attempting to overturn others. The quote at the beginning of

this chapter is one such example.

---

[49] In the office people referred to this project simply as "Shanghai," and within the context of conversations I never saw this cause any confusion, however here I will use the phrase "Shanghai project" to ensure there is clarity between when I mean discuss the project versus referencing the city of Shanghai.

This quote was uttered during an education department meeting and reflects some of the radical ideas floated during the curriculum development phase for the Talking Island package. The goal at this time was to make the package so comprehensive that every last detail was laid out in full. During the meeting in which I heard that quote the possibility of offering grading services for worksheets and assessments was also put forward. Coupled with the expertise of OFs, who were trained ESL teachers, this meant a parent could theoretically purchase the package for their child in lieu of sending them to *buxiban* classes for English. The entire learning process would go online. Interestingly, the person who said, "This will make teachers obsolete," had made his living as a teacher before joining UrIsland and was one of the employees pushing for a more traditional looking package. The idea of making teachers obsolete was not a part of the original revolution and never became a part of it. It was, rather, an expectation of that individual of what the end result of the Talking Island package, as it was then being discussed, would or could be. In the end, however, this was just too much. In a country where Confucius (*the teacher*) temples still exist, teachers were seen as far too valuable to be gotten rid of in exchange for a game, even by the UrIsland employees.

These were not the only expectations or intentions that had to be set aside for UrIsland's revolution. In fact there were many. In chapter 3, for example, I wrote about how UrIsland intentionally included certain stereotypes about America in order to keep the aura of America for their customers. In this chapter I cover some of the other challenges UrIsland faced and expectations engaged with or ignored by the employees of UrIsland and the players. This is not a comprehensive treatment of every design

intention within Talking Island. Rather this chapter offers a representative sampling that highlights the choices the company faced trying to straddle the three spheres of meaning of education, technology, and games with their MMORPG.

I start by analyzing how gender in Talking Island is portrayed in a stereotypical manner aligned with the patriarchal and heteronormative social structure of Taiwan. I primarily focus on gender tropes in WBUs within Talking Island, but also include gender based restriction on the presentation of self through avatars for the players. In conversations with UrIsland employees it became clear that this portrayal and limitation of gender was a combination of conscious decisions to align the game world with cultural expectations as well unconscious decisions that passed under the radar.

From there I turn to a problem many a virtual world developer has faced, intended use versus actual use. Virtual worlds are vast open spaces and although Talking Island, like other MMORPGs before it, had a main questline that offered structure to the world and guided players through the world's mythos, there are other activities available in the game. The expectation was that the main questline would be the primary activity of players in the game, but field observations (made by the company for themselves and not just by me for me research) showed a different story. Children often clicked through dialogues without much care, but they loved Fabos. The collection of, discussion about, and care of Fabos outweighed the main questline in player engagement, especially for the younger end of Talking Island's target demographic.

Interestingly, Talking Island's target demographic itself was another point of contention between intended and actual use. Talking Island was specifically designed for and limited to use by 7-14 year-old children. People over the age of 14 were

specifically prohibited from playing Talking Island in order to keep this virtual world a special place for children. Despite their best efforts to regulate the age of this population, adult players were occasionally caught in the game. In this instance UrIsland eventually decided to concede to the adults that wanted to play Talking Island and the age restrictions were lifted. This is unlike their response to what became the Fabos versus dialogues debate in the education department during which the department ultimately did not give in to emergent player practices and instead tried to double down on their effort to focus player attention on the main questlines.

Marketing and curriculum plans for the Talking Island package came into question because of the observations of children playing. This program was supposed to engage kids in learning English, but the curriculum focused on the questlines which were not as compelling to the players as the Fabos. Some people felt this could be remedied by dressing up the questline dialogues in the offline materials while others felt shifting the focus to Fabos was a better method of capturing a larger audience.

This debate came to a head in my last few months in the field when the company started focusing all of their energy on the expansion into China. With all they had learned in Taiwan and on research trips to Beijing and Shanghai, UrIsland decided the current curriculum needed to be entirely revamped, but the debate of dialogues versus Fabos remained steadfast throughout this process. The fourth section of this chapter then analyzes a particular disagreement within the education department over this issue in regards to a series of storybooks the department was writing to be a part of the Talking Island package.

This disagreement in particular exemplifies the struggle within the office to balance the Talking Island package between the three spheres of meaning discussed within this book. Everyone involved was working under certain expectations they had of the future in Shanghai (which could not yet be known), yet they differed on what path would lead to success. The debate between Fabos and dialogues was a disagreement over which to prefer – actual use or intended use, games or education, and technology in general as seen in the storybooks which were another example of offline, non-digital materials being added to the Talking Island package.

Before I left, Shawn decided that we would stick with the dialogues as our primary focus. As the head of the department, he ultimately made that call on his own seeing as the rest of the department disagreed. Unlike the other expectations and intentions discussed in this chapter, which were resolved before I left Taiwan, this one remained fluid. The offline materials and curriculum were still being finalized on my last day at UrIsland and the Shanghai *buxiban* didn't even open until after I left the field. Therefore, I cannot report on how the storybooks were received or if they were even used.

At the end of the day everyone was doing their best to make this company work, but that meant acquiescing to certain cultural and player expectations. Although when and where these concessions should be made was hotly debated, almost everyone agreed some concessions were necessary. UrIsland, though trying to create a revolution, only wanted one revolution – in ESL education. Therefore, to keep this focus, they engaged with other expectations, such as gender and potentially interested

players, by accepting them and not challenging them, while maintaining as best they could the dream that was Talking Island.

Unconscious Bias: "A boy can't be a girl and a girl can't be a boy"

In order to be successful, even revolutions need to be based on imaginings within the realm of the comprehensible – absurd, absolutely idiosyncratic ideas will never gain traction. They have the habit of stopping people in their tracks, whereas relatable ideas – often connected to labor, politics, or food – are motivators people can identify with. This is why, for example, UrIsland designed Talking Island with the organization of a book – to relate their revolution (language learning through an MMORPG) to the familiar (a common textbook) so as to make it comprehensible to a generation (parents and teachers) largely unfamiliar with virtual worlds.

Interestingly, this is similar to designing virtual worlds as well. In order for players to accept a world as believable, regardless of magic, mythical creatures, and other impossibilities, it needs to be internally consistent and in line with what players expect. In discussing UrIsland's revolutionary goals above I talk about making Talking Island comprehensible. This relates to the discourse of immersion the employees of UrIsland used. Certain decisions were made, as with the ideas about America from chapter 3 and about gender as I will show below, in order to avoid what Alison McMahan calls shocks, or things "that jar the user out of the sense of reality" of the virtual world (2003, 76). This comprehensible reality is part of immersion. For my purposes here, I consider immersion in an MMORPG to be the sense of being enveloped within the game-world, whether by perceptual (having one's senses surrounded by the system with mediators

155

such as goggles, etc.) or psychological means (engagement through storylines, participation, etc.) with this definition being pieced together from Chen *et al.* 2011, Ermi and Mäyrä 2005, and McMahan 2003.

There is some debate about immersion and what it means, even among the authors cited here, but I am choosing this particular interpretation of immersion within a game-world because it aligns closest with the way in which my informants used the term immersion. Within UrIsland however there was an extra layer of meaning to the idea of "immersion" because this word is also used to describe the highly regarded method of language teaching in which the target language is exclusively used, or the experience of a student immersing themselves in the target language by studying abroad. This additional meaning of immersion was in fact the intended goal of Talking Island – to use the immersive experience of an MMORPG to immerse ESL students in an English environment akin to a virtual study abroad experience – it was the *raison d'être* for choosing to make Talking Island an MMORPG specifically, rather than any other type of game.

In chapter 3 I wrote about Talking Island as an imagined America - a space that Taiwanese could recognize as being American regardless of any discrepancies there may have been with lived experience in America. The choices made in relation to creating this American aura were conscious ones, made to appeal to the expectations of their potential consumers. This was not the only aspect of the game that played into cultural biases. Other aspects, such as how gender was portrayed, also largely aligned with general cultural expectations. In the case of gender it was not always clear when decisions were being made consciously (so as not to rock the boat of others' biases) or

unconsciously (because of their own biases). When it was clear that others had noticed

gender bias, the consensus was gender equality was not on the forefront of UrIsland's

goals. That is to say specifically that this was a case of accepting cultural expectations

for the purpose of avoiding shocks (keeping immersion) and keeping focus on the ESL

goals of UrIsland.

Although gender-bias appeared unacknowledged or ignored by many within

UrIsland, the idea that educational materials are sometimes sexist was not a new idea

in Taiwan. Doris Chang addresses this in her analysis of the effects of Margaret Mead's

Sex and Temperament on the feminist movement in postwar Taiwan.

> With the revocation of martial law in 1987, Awakening feminists saw a new
> window of opportunity to challenge the gender-biased curriculum of the national
> education system…With their strong conviction that children's social conditioning
> was the key to subverting traditional gender roles, Awakening feminists in 1988
> conducted a comprehensive textual analysis and criticism of gender-role
> stereotyping in elementary and junior high textbooks. By exposing the gender
> biases and authoritarian tendencies in the textbooks, Awakening feminists urged
> the Taiwanese public to join hands with the women's movement to exert
> pressure on the Ministry of Education to revise the textbooks' contents (Chang
> 2009, 70).

Although my questioning often garnered surprised looks from the employees of

UrIsland, it was not because the ideas themselves were unknown in Taiwan. Some

people admitted that they had simply never thought about it before. These ideas had

never (or only very rarely ever) been conceptually linked to the individuals' immediate

work. This makes sense given the laser focus in the office on the revolutionary nature of

linking education and MMORPGs to address problems in ESL education and not on

addressing other educational issues. This also suggests however, that Talking Island's

biases in WBU depictions (and avatars) went unnoticed by some because of the implicit

gender landscape of Taiwanese culture (still struggling to incorporate newer feminist ideas into their older Chinese patriarchal tradition) – basically that the depiction of gender in WBUs and avatars seemed natural.

Although there is a feminist movement in Taiwan, traditional ideas about gender roles persist. This should not be surprising. Change does not happen overnight. Yet in some ways it was surprising to me while living there because of the way in which older ideas about gender roles would sometimes collide with newer feminist sensibilities. Take for example the following vignette of a momentary encounter between myself, Natalie, and Tim.

I was rolling a water cooler bottle across the office, not necessarily because I wasn't strong enough to pick it up, but because it was early in the day and I was too lazy to try. (I am not a morning person.) Half way from the storage area to the water cooler stand, Natalie stopped me and asked why I was trying to replace the water jug when there were so many strong men around. The anthropologist in me jumped to attention and the feminist in me raged (not an uncommon pairing during my time in Taiwan). The two conflicting emotions were apparently equal in strength, cancelling each other out and leaving as my only outward response a feeble, "Uh … I don't know?" Which wasn't really true, of course, but I was caught off guard by the question and by the person asking it. Natalie was an independent, unmarried, educated, feminist. I didn't expect her to admonish me for attempting a physical task, let alone to do so in such a gendered way. She didn't just remark on the fact that I was rolling the jug across the floor, she threw in that there were "many strong men" in the office that could be doing this for me.

Natalie, did not respond to my questioning answer, but rather looked towards the men and asked them why none of them were helping me. At this, Tim (a young man so afraid of both English and women that when I switched from working only afternoons to fulltime he reportedly told a coworker that he "couldn't handle this first thing in the morning") jumped up to finish the job for me. With that Natalie went back to her desk, but I had to follow Tim because I still had yet to get a drink. When Tim finished I thanked him and he jetted back to his desk as fast as he could without looking too suspect.

This portrait of a moment is not meant to suggest that UrIsland had a sexist atmosphere, but neither was it a utopia of gender equality. The company was embedded in a culture with gendered ideas (a condition not unique, of course, to Taiwan) and although the progress of their feminist movement was clearly visible (for example, the DPP's female presidential candidate in 2012 and 2016 Tsai Ing-wen 蔡英文), patriarchal tendencies were still conspicuous. Natalie was a feminist, but water jugs are heavy, and that is men's work. As Tu Weiming points out in his analysis of identity and politics in Taiwan, gender (along with ethnicity, language, land, class, and faith) is one of the most deeply ingrained aspects of identity within the collective Taiwanese conscious (Tu 1996, 1131). Gender equality will not come easy there. In addition to this, UrIsland was attempting to combine three commonly gendered industries: high technology, gaming, and education; the first two being perceived as predominantly masculine spaces and the third, feminine. When Natalie publically shamed the men about the water cooler she looked towards the IT and game departments (it was an open-concept office space) as this was where most of the men were sitting.

The question of how this might be affecting Talking Island begged to be asked; and reminded me of the current gendered toy debate in the USA.[50] The play – and lack thereof – with gender roles in and around UrIsland and Talking Island was unspoken, except for when I insisted on asking about it, but it was hard for me not too. I kept noticing it, although my reasons for this were not always about gender directly, but also about small ways in which Talking Island differed from the MMORPGs I was used to. The most glaring difference for me was that I could not play a male avatar because in all my previous MMORPG gaming experiences I had been able to choose the gender of my avatar, but after this, and in addition, the WBUs also started to catch my attention.

Within Talking Island, avatars of both genders are afforded the same quests and abilities, however gender roles are reinforced in other ways. Flashcard images and NPC roles often depict stereotypical gender roles – for example, the nurse is a woman and the doctors are mostly male.

Figure 34: Examples of one of the nurses and one of the doctors from Talking Island. All of the nurses, but only one of the six doctors are female.

The Superkids, however, the protagonists of the game, are both male and female and gender plays a more neutral role in their positions as Superkids. Players are not allowed to play with the gender of their characters. Children must play an avatar that aligns with their offline gender. Gender identity is elicited during registration, and attested to by the players' parents at the moment they give

[50] See: Bennhold, Katrin, 2012 Toys Start the Gender Equality Rift. New York Times, July 31., and Atkins Wardy, Melissa, 2013 Seeking Gender Equality in LEGO World. CNN Parents http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/03/living/lego-petition-female-minifigures/., for examples of this debate.

permission for their child to play. In addition, most of the clothes available to players are strongly gendered and limited (by the software, the code) to avatars of that gender. Interestingly, these avatar restrictions were accepted and reinforced, mostly without question, by both the men and the women within the company, creating a contradiction-filled, but largely implicit, gender landscape.

What is a boy or girl anyway? Once, when asking about the lack of play allowed with gender in Talking Island, I received the following very blunt reply, "a boy can't be a girl and a girl can't be a boy, there are only two genders and they can't be changed." I

Figure 35: An WBU from a quest in which Romeo is under a spell that is confusing him about Juliet's gender.

was asking specifically about the policy that forced players to play an avatar of the same gender as their physical world body, and to be honest, I found that first response odd. In my past experiences with MMORPGs I had never encountered such a limitation. These were *role-playing* games and it had not yet, until that moment, occurred to me that gender would be considered stretching this aspect too far. A child can't actually be a Superkid or fight insane computers either, so why would gender be an issue? At that I was told the decision to limit avatar gender was made because they did not want identity issues to arise during voice chat or to create confusion surrounding sexual identity because the children are so young. In short, they did not want to engage in this debate. Their focus was on language education and it was easier to keep that focus if they acquiesced to expected gender norms rather than calling attention to them.

One could argue that a boy cannot "be" a girl, and a girl cannot "be" a boy, but fundamentally, what does it mean to be of one gender or another? This idea that gender is both an essential and a biological characteristic was taken for granted by this informant. This does not translate into a conscious belief that either gender is inferior, but rather that they are different and therefore will sometimes get treated, and will be expected to behave differently in certain contexts. Although other aspects of Talking Island also suggest answers to this question, the WBUs offer the most direct insight into cultural ideas about gender in Taiwan because they directly relate ideas in the form of images with ideas in the form of words.

The use of WBUs, which are essentially digital flashcards, is an integral part of both game play and learning in Talking Island. Each WBU contains an English word or phrase along with a depiction of that word or phrase. Using voice recognition software, players must repeat the WBUs in order to continue the game any time one of them pops up on the screen. No Mandarin translations or hints are given to help the players understand the WBUs. Players are expected to learn the words based on the WBU pictures, and from the context in which each one is introduced within the dialogue. If necessary a player can turn to an OF for help with WBUs (or anything else) but the OFs will guide the player to the answer rather than give it to them.

Figure 36: An example of an WBU.

There are 1,979 WBUs in the main quest line of Talking Island (not including special events or temporarily available holiday quests). Of these WBUs, 1,403 have pictures depicting humans, and of those, 133 are adjectives or adjectival phrases

162

describing humans. I will be using this subset of WBUs, the adjectives, to illustrate the overall portrayal of males and females in Talking Island to illustrate the cultural expectations of gender as imagined by the Taiwanese.

The prevalence of WBUs throughout the game and my initial sense of their imbalance started immediately. There are four WBUs in the first quest which caught my attention. In order of appearance they are: "afraid," "brave," "I am a brave Superkid," and "We are all brave Superkids." In these four WBUs, as well as many others, human characters are depicted. Although they could have opted to use animals or mythical creatures, the purpose of using pictorial explanations for the WBUs was to avoid using translations and to have the children associate the words with the contexts in which they would be used. Using humans for these WBUs is more compatible with this goal than using animals would be, but then it needs to be recognized that someone, male or female, will have to be portrayed in such a way as to suggest the meaning of the word. My argument here is not that this should not be so, but rather that the disproportionate portrayal of females as weaker than males perpetuates patriarchal undertones in the next generation. This is not just a question of how females are portrayed, but also how much. Out of my sample set of 133 adjectives depicting humans, male depictions outnumber females by more than two to one making males much more visible in the game world.

	females	males	both
■ Series1	25	62	46
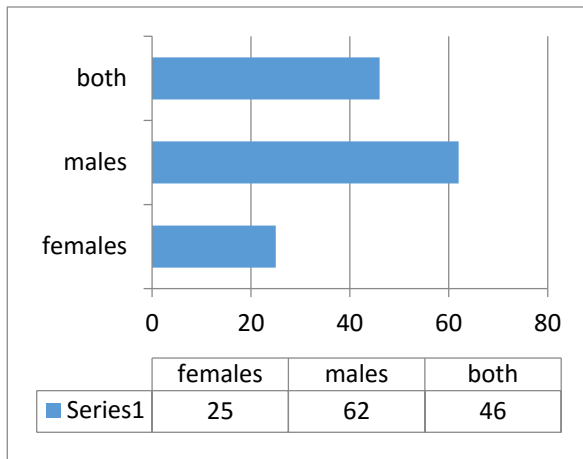
Figure 37: WBUs of adjectives describing humans broken down by gender. The category "both" is for pictures that have both male and female characters.

Why is visibility significant? Because despite the prevalence of women online, the idea of the digital default - the assumption that all people on the Internet are white, male, and heterosexual (Silver 2000, 143) still persists.[51] In creating a digital American public through Talking Island with far more male than female NPCs, males appear to be the defining standard of American characteristics. As David Silver goes on to say, "Significantly, communities – geographic and online – are defined not only by who and what are included but also by who and what are excluded," (2000, 143). This lack of female characters in Talking Island also supports Taiwanese views of gamers, thus capitulating to another cultural expectation.

Women and girls are not seen as a part of the gamer community in Taiwan. This was made clear to me every time I spoke to anyone outside of UrIsland about my research or entered a gaming space – such as a convention or game store. For example, each time I mentioned my research to someone for the first time, they would

---

[51] As of this writing I still get mistaken for a man. I find this all the more bewildering considering how many videos of me are also online and openly connected with my cyber identities.

begin by responding with shock and then follow up with either a reason why I should not

do such research (it's dangerous for a woman, not respectable, etc.) or continued

disbelief – as in I would be asked follow up questions clearly probing for what I was

really doing in Taiwan.

Back to the WBU analysis - to break the 133 adjectival WBUs down further, I

divided the adjectives into six categories: positive qualities, negative qualities, beauty,

praises, sickness, and neutral. Positive and negative qualities include emotions, so

"smart" and "happy" are both included under the label positive and "sad" and "naughty"

both fall under negative qualities; praises include self-praise; and neutral refers to

WBUs in which opposites are depicted equally. Because males so vastly outnumber

females, the expectation is that males would comprise a larger proportion of each

category and in fact, this is the case for all of them except beauty. When these six

categories are analyzed proportionally to each gender the differences, while still

noticeable, are less pronounced. Furthermore, these charts support the idea of males

as the default category of people in that neutral depictions use males far more than

females – 18% of male depictions are neutral whereas only 4% of female ones are.
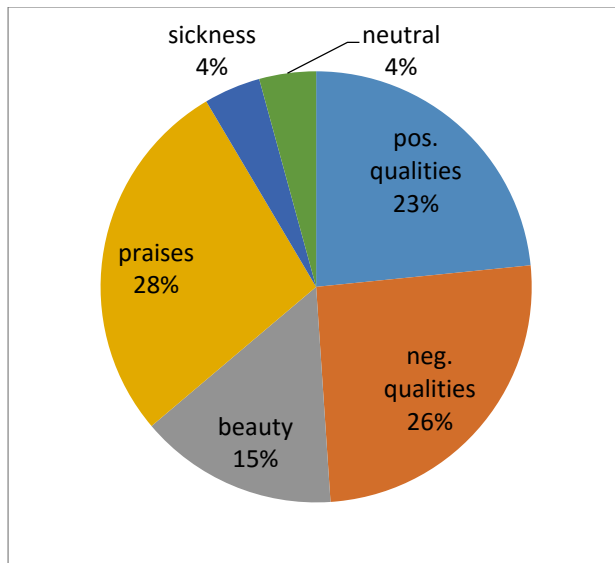
Figure 38: How females are portrayed in adjectival WBUs. These percentages include WBUs in which both genders are pictured, but only when it is clearly the female being described by the adjective.
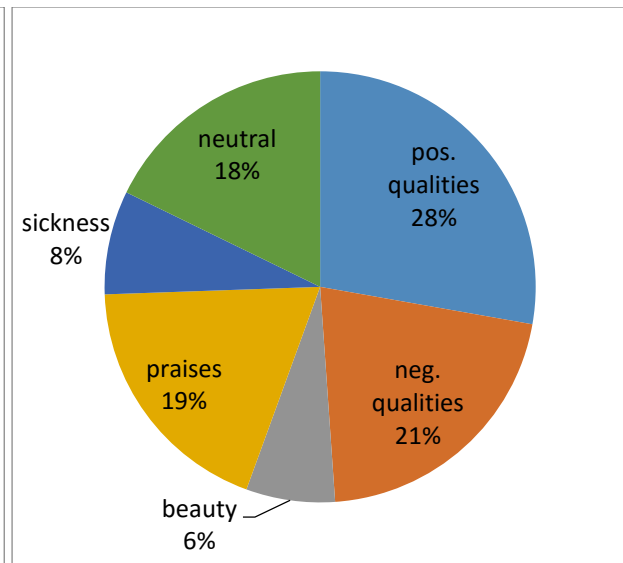
Figure 39: How males are portrayed in adjectival WBUs. These percentages include WBUs in which both genders are pictured, but only when it is clearly the male being described by the adjective.

While these numbers are important, a look at a couple of examples will give a better idea as to the presentation of genders in Talking Island. For this, I chose the WBUs that deal with fear and bravery because these concepts are introduced right away in Quest 1 and because they are closely associated with the protagonists, the Superkids. This is significant, because players join the Superkids in the conclusion to Chapter 1 and so presumably identify with them.

Out of this sample set of fear and bravery WBUs there are five dealing with fear and six dealing with bravery. The pictures used for these WBUs are repeated in whole, or in part, on all but one WBU. Figure 40 shows a depiction of these eleven WBUs. Although I have pulled these WBUs together for the sake of this analysis, they are not presented consecutively in the game.

Adjective WBUs about fear	Adjective WBUs about bravery

Figure 40: Fear and bravery WBUs.

As can be seen in Figure 40, bravery is always depicted as a masculine characteristic, whereas females are depicted as fearful and in need of protection, as is seen in the six WBUs showing boys protecting girls and the five WBUs showing girls being afraid. Referring back to Figure 38 and Figure 39, males and females are not always depicted in such stark terms, however neither are gender norms ever blatantly crossed. Take for example, that there are no depictions of girls protecting boys or of boys being afraid. When I tried to inquire about these eleven WBUs in particular, I had to pull up the pictures on my computer to illustrate what I was talking about, because this phenomenon had gone apparently unnoticed by many until I asked about it. Even then a few people said that it would look odd to show a girl protecting a boy and that's not what people want their sons to see. Only one woman in the office had noticed this prior to my questioning, but as she had joined the company well after all of the WBUs were completed, she had had no chance to bring it to anyone's attention when it would have mattered. At this point, she added, the company had far more pressing issues to deal with (referring to the financial troubles that had been plaguing the company since before she came to work for them).

Beyond the surface danger of such stereotypes to equality, the fact that the WBUs could go unnoticed by some suggests that there are still deep-seated beliefs surrounding the essentiality of gender norms. Natalie, from the introduction, is a strong, self-supporting, independent woman who nonetheless saw a problem with me replacing the water cooler bottle by myself. On the other hand, at least one had noticed, but accepted it essentially as the price of doing business. Thus these WBUs and the rate at which they were noticed are examples of both recognized and unrecognized cultural

transmission that is running counter to current trends within society while also playing into the expectations of parents.

Thus far in this chapter I focused on the ways in which UrIsland acquiesced to Taiwanese cultural expectations. In the next three sections I will be speaking more to UrIsland's expectations – their expectations of players, gameplay, and their hopes for the Shanghai expansion. For the first two, who was playing Talking Island and how, I show not only the ways in which UrIsland's expectations were not met, but also their response. In the final section about the Shanghai expansion, I delve deeper into the curriculum development process by focusing on one particular aspect, the storybooks, as an example of how some of these expectations and realizations were being dealt with. This section also touches on some of the expectations UrIsland employees had for the Shanghai project which leads to questions for further research, but first I look at one more capitulation to the Taiwanese market, from before the Shanghai expansion.

Making a Children's Space: Adults in Talking Island

As mention before, UrIsland designed Talking Island for elementary aged children, 7-14 years old. The lower limit of this age range was flexible, but younger children sometimes had difficulty playing alone. In one of my *buxiban* observation opportunities, there was a 3 year old, but the child was unable to play Talking Island, being simply too young to understand the game mechanisms or how to use the mouse to move their avatar. Instead, the 3 year old sat on the teacher's lap while she controlled the mouse. The upper limit, on the other hand, was strictly enforced. If there was a child still playing on their 15th birthday, they would be asked to leave. There was, however, at

least one exception to this rule that I heard about – there was a 15 year-old girl who was allowed to continue playing because she and her younger sister always played together. As with gender, a player's parent had to put in the child's birthday during the registration process – it was required, and again, the assumption was that parents would be honest. Unlike gender, however, which through the code automatically generated an avatar of the aligning gender, age restrictions were not encoded. Teenagers were not really what UrIsland was worried about, however.

The upper limit of the age range was strictly kept because they wanted Talking Island to remain a safe place for children. By this they meant safe from "weirdos" (this was the actual word used to denote predators) but also from adult supervision. They wanted kids to feel free to play and explore Talking Island with other children without the stress of having authority figures lurking about. This was so strict in fact that UrIsland kept a separate private server for their employees (other the OFs) to play on. (Unfortunately, this meant I had to play on this server as well, and so I had very little access to the public Talking Island server.) The OFs in the game, of course, were adults, but they weren't adults that gave homework or chores to kids, unlike teachers and parents. The OFs were there to help players when needed, but the children didn't have to interact with OFs if they didn't want to. Plus, the OFs were a part of the game world only for children, unlike parents and teachers who are integral parts of a child's whole life. For these reasons, OFs were not believed to ruin the "free from adult supervision" atmosphere.

Despite these restricts, adults were sometimes caught in Talking Island, and the OFs told me that most of them were caught because players turned them in to the OFs.

The children and adolescent players of Talking Island, the OFs said, could tell if an avatar was being controlled by an adult. Many times, the adult was the parent of a child who played who just wanted to check out the game for themselves. This was not seen as a big problem because usually this meant the parent would not be coming back regularly. Other times, however, the OFs encountered adults who wanted to play for themselves because they needed or wanted to practice English … and then there were the times they found Alex, because he liked to poke around his creation every once in a while.

Unlike the exception made for the 15 year old girl who played with her sister, the predicament of adults wanting to play Talking Island required more careful consideration because it threatened to change the atmosphere of the game-world. Furthermore, if you had a parent trying to share their child's account then it would disrupt the flow of learning. The program would only know that avatar X made progress – not that someone else was controlling the avatar and so the child did not actually learn whatever was covered during the parent's play session. I only heard of one confirmed case of this happening, but again, unless someone noticed the different demeanor, voice, or behavior, no one would know when it happened.

For most of the time I was at UrIsland these restriction were kept and adults were asked to leave if and when they were found. There was in all this time, however, no mention of adults found to be doing anything in Talking Island other than practicing English and playing the game. The adults weren't causing any problems outside of being older. Perhaps this helped UrIsland to eventually make the decision to stop kicking adults out of the game, though this is not the reason they gave me. At the time I

was told that as long as these adults continued (or started to, as in the case of parents trying to play on their child's account) to pay for their own account, the OFs weren't going to remove them.

In this particular case of developer intentions versus player use, UrIsland decided to look the other way. They did not change anything about the game, offline materials, or marketing to accommodate adults. Talking Island was still targeted to children under the age of 14, but UrIsland stopped actively enforcing the restrictions. One change they did make, however, was in regards to the lower end of the demographic. As I will discuss in more detail in the section on the Shanghai project, the market in China demanded materials for younger children than Talking Island was originally designed for. Therefore, UrIsland decided to capitulate to the market and write new curriculums and worksheets for the new "kindy class" (short for kindergarten) they would offering for 5-6 year-olds.

Best Laid Plans: Use vs. Design

In chapter 4 I gave a thorough description of the curriculum and complete Talking Island package. In particular here, I want to point out again that most of the offline materials (worksheets, assessments, and lesson plans) were based off of the main questline. It was through the story arch of the main questline that players were introduced to vocabulary words in context and to the sound of native speakers of English. The main questline was designed with language acquisition in mind before the offline materials were even thought up. It was expected – indeed it was designed such

that this aspect of the game would comprise the primary point of engagement and learning for the players.

It should come as no surprise to anyone who studies games or technology that the way something is designed to be used and the way it is actually used are often not one and the same. The most famous example that comes to mind is "A Rape in Cyberspace" from Julian Dibbell's book *My Tiny Life*. The incident happened in LambdaMOO, a world built by a couple of Xerox employees as a kind of experiment into MOOs (MUD[52] Object oriented). It was meant to be a social space, but there was nothing in the code to enforce this. Therefore, Mr. Bungle – the perpetrator – was able to take it upon himself (or themselves – as it was later revealed that Mr. Bungle was an account share by several people), to subvert this idea by violating several other characters in one of the most central areas of the entire world (1998, 13, 30, 61).

These disconnects between developer intentions and player use are not always quite as traumatic as the Bungle Affair, however, as Thomas Malaby shows in his account of the Second Life atoll. This project was in response to what some Lindens (employees of Linden Lab, the creators of Second Life) saw as a dilemma with user generated content – which was the whole point of Second Life in the first place. Unfortunately, some saw it as aesthetically unappealing. The new atoll, separate from the mainland, on the other hand, was brought online with content already present, "the remains of an imagined past civilization" (2009, 6). The hope here was that an existing style would encourage users to channel their creations harmoniously into the style of

---

[52] Multi-User Dungeon

the atoll. More than that, the Lindens hoped the exploration of and resulting creations on the atoll would bring users to "realize one of the values that hung like a promise over Second Life …enlightened creativity, with an attendant aesthetic payoff" (Malaby 2009, 6). Although there were a few places that demonstrated at least some user engagement with the Lindens' intentions, the atoll overall wound up looking like the mainland (Malaby 2009, 5-7).

And so it was with Talking Island. I mentioned before (chapter 4) that children found the worksheets tedious. Of course they did - they're worksheets - but perhaps it went deeper than that. Take for example, the class I was fortunate enough to sit in on in a *buxiban* in northern Taiwan. As with most snippets of fieldwork, this encounter was in some ways typical and in others not. This particular class was not using the Talking Island package. The class consisted entirely of game play. There were no teacher-led class activities or associated projects. There was a teacher present in the room, however; her duties during this time were more like that of a chaperone.[53] The teacher would help kids out when they got stuck on something, and she did spend quite a bit of time with one of the children, but other than that, she spent a good chunk of the time I was present discussing Talking Island with one of the UrIsland employees.

The class was small and the students were slightly younger on average than the demographic Talking Island had been designed for. There were only four kids present:

---

[53] This may or not have been the intention of the buxiban director. On the way home from this visit, one of the UrIsland employees told me that this teacher had quietly informed him that since the buxiban was only paying her 1000NT more per month to cover this class she felt they aren't paying for anything more than chaperoning. Since I did not learn of this until after we had left it was too late for me to question the teacher further on this matter.

two 6 year olds, a 7 year old, and a 3 year old. The 3 year old barely seemed to know what was going on, so the teacher played with him, helping him navigate and use the mouse. One of the 6 year olds was a girl and she had the best pronunciation. She was the only one I didn't witness struggling with the voice recognition software – or trying to get around it. The other 6 year old, struggled a bit with getting past the WBU cards (when they appear they have to be read aloud in order to proceed) and at least once that I saw, tried to trick the software by spouting random vowels into his headset mic, but it didn't work. He eventually asked one of the other kids to talk into his mic for him.

The 6 year olds were a bit more shy with me than the other two, but once the 7 year old and 3 year old talked to me for a bit first, the 6 year olds seemed to decide I was ok and began talking to me too. Shawn had introduced me to the kids as a student from America and told them to call me 阿姨 (āyí – auntie, also used for a woman of one's parents' generation). I was usually introduced as a teacher to kids, but I was happy that was not the case this time, because I think the less formal introduction helped the kids feel more comfortable with me. (This was a problem at times, as I mentioned in chapter 3 about my experience in making kids cry. Not that I have made many kids cry, but I was different looking and I spoke funny, as one kid told me, so I can see why that might be scary.) Unfortunately, at this point they all wanted to talk at once. Four kids, talking to me, each other, and the game all at once. In fact the only reason I knew they were occasionally talking to the game was because that was the only time any of them attempted to use a word of English (and naturally my ears tended to pick up English over the rest). Due to the cacophony that ensued, I was not able to understand,

or even hear, everything the children said, but even so their thoughts on the game were quite clear. The Fabos are awesome!

Figure 41: Butterbee, a Fabo

In fact the Fabos seemed to be the only part of the game the kids cared about at all, and my experience at this *buxiban* corresponded with what others reported from other *buxiban* visits. Children battled them, caught them, and took care of them. They discussed the various types of Fabos available so far (none of them had gotten far enough in the game to have seen all of the Fabos yet) and compared collections and why they liked some Fabos more than others. It seemed to me that as far as the children were concerned, the Fabos were the main element of Talking Island … or at least the primary draw. During my own observations it was the same - the children spent most of their time chatting or focusing on the Fabos.

Since this was not a structured class, they did not have daily objectives that needed to be met in order to participate in a classroom component like other students would, and this likely had an effect on the amount of time - or lack thereof - the kids put towards questing. Furthermore, given the extremely young age of these kids in particular – especially the 3 year old – the quests represented a much higher hurdle than intended. Though I will point out that based on their stats, I know at least 2 of the kids, the 7 year old and the 6 year old girl, both had completed some quests prior to my visit. This focus on the Fabos, rather than the main questline as expected, later became a hurdle in a few education department meetings during the lead up to the Shanghai expansion (which will be more thoroughly discussed in the next section).

The problem was this. The main questline had been the primary focus of curriculum development in the education department for the entire time I spent with UrIsland (at least two years). This choice was in line with the fact that it was the overarching storyline of the quests that created the story that introduced players to English words and grammar in context and in a way that attempts to mimic natural usage. Again, it was designed to be the main source of educational content. This is unlike the Fabo battles, during which WBUs pop up - this method of study is more akin to studying flashcards – bits of information taken out of context. So it is not that Fabo battles didn't have any educational value, it is that those battles did not offer the full immersion experience which was *the* selling point of Talking Island. Yet a couple of employees at UrIsland told me that all too often when they watched kids play (without interfering) the children tend to click through the dialogues without reading them, unlike the time and care they would spend with Fabos.

There are two major reasons why this did not surprise me at all, and neither are because I think there is some fault with the Talking Island storyline. My reasons have to do with the nature of game play in virtual worlds and the nature of studying abroad/language immersion, which Talking Island was trying to simulate.

In my previous work in World of Warcraft most notably, but also in Final Fantasy XI (both MMORPGs), I witnessed and participated in various game play styles, some of which aligned with the developers' perceived intentions and some of which did not. As mentioned above, the way in which a thing is designed to be used and the way in which people will use it often do not align. The open ended nature and pure vastness of virtual worlds makes exploration beyond such structured paths as quests even more

177

accessible. Even in Talking Island, which is the smallest and most structured virtual

world I have ever played, this is so.[54] Players, all of whom find meaningful engagement

in different activities, take advantage of this and play the game the way they find

compelling.

This idea is not new. The most famous classification of gamers is probably that of

Richard Bartle's in *Who Plays MUAs?* (1990).[55] In this seminal piece Bartle charts out

four basic player types: achievers, killers, socializers, and explorers based on how

players interact with games and other players within games. Most (if any) players will

not fit solely into one category at all times, but the taxonomy has proven useful in

understanding the myriad ways in which players can and do engage with virtual worlds.

I did not spend enough time in the *buxiban* context to give an in-depth analysis of

Talking Island player styles in relation to these specific categories. I bring up Bartle's

work simply to show that different styles of engagement within one virtual world is a

well-known phenomenon and should be expected.

The second reason I was not surprised is based on my own experiences moving

to a country where my native language was not spoken and spending two years living in

a hostel with a never-ending stream of foreigners coming through. I did not speak

Mandarin when I first arrived. I had taken a year and a half of language classes before I

left, but that equates to barely being able to have my basic needs met. Therefore, it was

---

[54] This is perhaps an unfair comparison of size and structure given that Talking Island is educational and made for small children, whereas all of the other MMORPGs I've played have been large commercial releases targeted at mostly adult or teen audiences.
[55] Bartle later extended these ideas in Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs (April 1996).

impossible to have conversations with people and difficult even to get information from people for several months. I mention that I lived in a hostel only to point out that this experience was not unique to me. Over the course of my time in the hostel there was a steady flow of people staying at the hostel for a few months at a time while they enrolled in school or looked for a job teaching English, and many of them also lamented the difficulty of day to day life because of the language barrier.

With this experience under my belt, I could imagine how difficult, intimidating, and frustrating it would be to try to fully understand dialogue while trying to enjoy a game for a beginning ESL student. This does not mean Talking Island was not beneficial to beginners. As much as some kids might have wanted to skip them, all dialogue was spoken as well as written and so a player could only click through as fast as the NPC spoke. Also, as WBUs were also a part of dialogues, students were getting picture prompts to help them understand certain words within each quest. As a player continues through the various quests, single word WBUs become phrasal WBUs and eventually full sentences. This mimics my own progression of learning Mandarin through immersion quite well. In the beginning I understood next to nothing, but I stayed and I listened, and over time I slowly understood more and more.

Fabos and dialogues were not the only issues raised during my *buxiban* observations. Remember the 6 year-old spouting vowels into the mic, trying to get the game to accept gibberish as English? At first I wasn't sure if this is what the kid was doing – i.e. trying to cheat - or if he was just that low of a beginner with English, so I described the behavior to one of the OFs the next day in the office and she confirmed that kids did that sometimes and that my description fit the bill for a kid that was getting

too excited about what he was trying to accomplish to want to be slowed down by the WBU challenge. With this particular child, I suspect it was a little of both, but what I found more interesting was that the OF I was speaking with didn't seem to think this was an issue – or at least not one that they could do anything about.

From what everyone saw visiting *buxiban* classrooms, in fact, this tactic of tricking the voice recognition software failed more often than not and so rather than being alarmed by the attempts, the OF pointed out that this just goes to show that their software was working well. Even my own story backed that up – the boy did not successfully trick the software. He had to ask a classmate for help. This could also be seen as cheating, of course, but as Mia Consalvo points out, that depends on whom one asks (2005, 96). Furthermore, the way in which this boy cheated (for lack of a better word) fits neatly into Consalvo's findings on why people cheat, "It is a way for individuals to keep playing through: boredom; difficulty; limited scenarios; and rough patches or just bad games" (2005, 97). In this case the boy cheated due to difficulty with WBU pronunciation, but rather than give up, he asked a friend for help.

There are a couple of caveats here, of course. First off, quitting the game was not an option as this was a classroom setting. That being said, the boy appeared to be enjoying himself once he was past this one hurdle. He continued to actively engage the game – he was battling Fabos – and talk about it with the kid sitting next to him. Second, what this boy may not have known is that after a certain number of failed attempts the game itself would have let him continue on (although the player's Fabo would lose some joy points when this happened, so it was not without consequence). I brought this up with the OF as well and she admitted they did not advertise the fact that

the software will eventually let them continue on because they wanted to the kids to

keeping trying in earnest. Of course some kids figured it out anyway – or they asked

their friends to speak for them. By the end of the conversation the OF made it clear that

although it would be great (not to mention more educationally beneficial) if all the

children played Talking Island the way it was designed, at least they were playing and

getting some exposure to English language. One could argue then that UrIsland's main

objective was still being met because it still exposed children to English.

Like many developers and inventors before them UrIsland had certain

expectations about how their game would be used, and as can be seen in this section,

those expectations were not always met. This was not necessarily a problem per se, but

it was a fact that needed to be addressed when the company decided to expand their

enterprise onto the mainland. As I mentioned earlier in this section, player interest in

Fabos over dialogues was an issue that came up in many education departmental

meetings, especially during the lead up to Shanghai. In the following section I will

introduce the Shanghai project, UrIsland's expectations for the expansion, and how they

were addressing what they had learned from *buxiban* in Taiwan.

Shanghai: Designing for a New Market

The idea to expand Talking Island into China had been around since before I

came to UrIsland. The reason for this is the same as every other company that wants a

piece of China. UrIsland believed that with over a billion people, even getting a tiny

fraction of the Chinese market on something can be very lucrative. The decision was

ultimately made to start with a flagship learning center in Shanghai because Shanghai, I

was told, had money. The longer I was at UrIsland the more focus shifted to Shanghai, until in my last few months, when Shanghai was the only project I worked on or heard about at all. The new focus on Shanghai was never meant to replace Alex's dream for Taiwan. He still wanted a flagship center in Taipei, and to revolutionize ESL education in his home country. The hope now was that a short-term focus on China, if successful, could fund the dream back home.

I want to note here, up front, that I have never been to Shanghai myself. All of the information in this section came from various members of the upper management of UrIsland as they took several trips over there to set up the expansion. In the later stages of this, when a location was secured and being prepared I was invited to come along and see the place for myself, but my finances prevented me from doing so. A couple of people also broached the subject of having me move to Shanghai to be their first teacher at the new center, but I insisted on returning home to finish my PhD (because I did not feel I could do so while working fulltime in China).

Even though Shanghai was a different market than Taiwan there were some similarities, most notably, their *buxiban* industry. Like Taiwan, I was told, Shanghai was saturated with *buxiban*, and so, as they had done in Taiwan earlier, UrIsland decided to call Talking Island a software package that included post purchase training and support (classes) at their learning center. This way, UrIsland believed they could avoid competing head to head with traditional and established *buxiban*. Because this change was really just a marketing strategy, it did not require any reworking of the game or

curriculum.[56] A further similarity with Taiwan, and benefit to UrIsland, was that education was highly valued and English language was an extremely popular subject of study, and so there was an existing demand for ESL educational services.

There were however some differences in the market. In Taiwan, mandatory English classes don't begin until 3rd grade (about 8 years old). Many parents who are able will start their kids in a *buxiban* earlier than that, but there are certain restrictions for children under 6 years old. Therefore, the decision was made to design Talking Island for the 7-14 year old demographic. In Shanghai, 70% of the market, I was told, was under the age of 7. This, coupled with what was learned about the popularity of Fabos with kids in Taiwan, meant the entire curriculum needed to be reworked.

During this time it seemed as if there was a never ending string of meetings, demos, and sample offline materials made. Changes were constantly being called for, especially after *buxiban* visits, some of which included experimental demos of parts of the Talking Island package that were still in development. *Buxiban* demos were often evaluated by employees from various departments and so the feedback – which lead to all the changes demanded – came from a wider point of view than was present in the education department (where these materials were being generated) alone. Some of these demos were done by UrIsland employees and some were done by the regular teacher for a given class. (I did one demo myself, in front of the entire upper management team, and found it to be nerve-racking.) Many people wanted to focus on

---

[56] By this time almost the entire game had been translated into English, however the registration process, associated website, promotional materials, and anything else that might still be in Mandarin did need to be converted from traditional to simplified characters.

improving those aspects that were popular, like everything related to Fabos, but others

disagreed. These people felt that it was the unfamiliarity of Talking Island's design that

was hurting sales in Taiwan and that this same problem would be mirrored in Shanghai.

Therefore, their logic was, this could be avoided by improving the more traditional

curriculum focused on the main questline dialogues that was already in development.

The number of changes, meetings, and debates on how to design the curriculum were

too numerous to recount all of them here, so I will relay just one incident here: the new

storybooks.[57]

The idea of having separate storybooks was not new. Before I even came to

UrIsland they had a colorful sample book printed that was based on the mythos of the

Talking Island world.[58] This existing book, however, was quite long, and in the months

leading up to Shanghai, it was decided that having a series of short stories, under one

page long each, that could be read to the very young kids during class would be more

useful than the existing full-length book. Molly and Shawn collectively agreed on this,

but disagreed on what the content and uses for these short stories would be. Being an

avid reader, writer, and native English speaker, I was asked to help write these stories.

The first stories I wrote were all origin myths about how certain Fabos came to

be. It would already be known (or would be revealed) through the game that Fabos

were not naturally occurring in the Talking Island world. They were created, some on

purpose, some on accident. They were meant to be magic animal-like companions for

---

[57] This particular episode is indicative of the way in which the education department functioned.
[58] This is different from the promotional book that came with the game. I call this book a sample because as far as I know they hadn't been using it or selling it during my time in the field.

kids, created by two doctors with a passion for making toys, but the details for the

creation of individual Fabos were not included. The goal was to keep these stories short

in order to keep the attention of kindergarten classes while incorporating as many

WBUs as possible while also keeping the stories in line with the existing mythos of the

world. Sometimes I would write the first draft of these alone and then run them by Molly

for her to edit, and other times, such as the example below, and if she had the time,

Molly and I would write them together from scratch.

The Story of

Vel the Salamander

The first Salamander Fabo was born when Doctor Good and Doctor Hi put a toy lizard in a magic hot spring. The heat of the spring gave life and magic to the lizard. The doctors named this new Fabo Salamander. The hot spring magic made Salamander able to use fire and not get burned. From here the Salamander spread throughout Talking Island.

During the explosion at T4K Toy Store, Vel, a young Salamander, got lost. A Superkid found Vel hurt, but still alive. The Superkid made Vel feel better again by feeding the young Salamander hot pudding, Vel's favorite food. Being very friendly, as Salamanders are, Vel got along very well with the Superkid and was happy to have a new friend.

Now that he is healthy again, Vel and the Superkid are on a quest to save Talking Island, rescue Doctor Hi, and find Vel's parents.

Hi! I'm Vel. I am friendly and a little lazy sometimes. I love saunas and hot puddings.

Figure 42: An example of a Fabo origin story written by Molly and me.

186

Shawn liked the stories, but being one of the people who were a little more

traditionalist in their approach, he thought they weren't directly educational enough. He

argued that it would be better to have stories based on the dialogues so that they could

be used directly in line with the lessons and assignments that were based on the quest

dialogues. At this point, I admit, I got a little caught up in the moment, and I argued with

him. I told him that just reading to kids, without making it a direct and obvious lesson,

was beneficial; providing an example of how my mom had done that with me, and now I

was getting a PhD and traveling the world.[59] But I caught myself and did not argue at

length.

Shawn asked me to write a new sample story based on the Quest 1 dialogue

and so I did. As I understood it, he wanted me to copy the exact dialogues, only putting

in extra sentences where needed to make it a story. I did this, but I didn't like the result.

It was technically correct to his specifications, but the story felt choppy and unnatural.

So I wrote two more versions, all based on the same dialogue, but progressively less

stringent in copying the wording exactly. Still being unhappy with what I had produced, I

took these three story versions of Quest 1 to Molly to see if she could help.

Molly didn't like any of the versions I gave to her, but then again, she still

preferred the Fabo stories. She tried giving me a couple of suggestions to make the

story more interesting, like forget the actual dialogues and just write a story about what

happens in Quest 1, which of course I said I could do, but that this would go against

what Shawn wanted. Stumped on what to do, we went to Amanda, a recent hire in the

---

[59] Thank-you mom and *The Poky Little Puppy*.

department, for more input. Amanda agreed that the quest dialogue based stories I had written were quite bad, but she wasn't sure what to do about it either.

Not knowing what to do next, we ended up having a long conversation about what each of us would do if we were in charge. Collectively we came up with the idea of having two books. One would be a collection of Fabo origin stories like the ones Molly and I had written before. They would be read during a story time lead in to the letter of the day. We did think these stories were still a little hard for kindergarten kids, but we decided if they were illustrated the teachers could help the kids through it. The other book would be a Fabo alphabet workbook for children to practice writing letters and with each letter there would be one or two WBU vocabulary words from the story the kids had just read.

Amanda and Molly both thought having story time for kids that young was a good idea, and I pointed out that these could also be helpful in marketing since kids like Fabos. When Molly showed Amanda the Fabo stories she said there was no comparison. The Fabo stories were far better. So they decided we needed to sit down and tell all of this to Shawn which we did right there and then. I was taken aback by this plan, because I had never before seen a Taiwanese person be so forward about disagreeing with their boss to his face. In the actual meeting, however, Molly was much more reserved, while still getting the point across, with some help from some blunter comments from myself. Surprisingly Shawn was agreeable to the idea, so we set to work deciding which Fabos and WBUs to use and then worked out a schedule for production.

I felt really good leaving the office that day and was really looking forward to writing more stories for them. Unfortunately due to other obligations, I was unable to return to the office again until 5 days later. By the time I returned the plan had changed again. It had been decided that we would combine the workbook and storybooks into one and then also do the storybook based on the questline dialogues. As for my three previous attempts at writing those, and Molly's insistence that the quests don't make good stories, Shawn said I should make them interesting without changing the dialogues or storyline.[60]

Molly and Shawn often didn't see eye to eye. Part of the problem was that Shawn believed that traditional approaches to education would sell and Molly believed that the novel approaches would sell if they just stuck to them. Each one was trying their best to help the company, but their differing expectations of the market – both in Shanghai and in Taiwan - led them to different opinions on how the curriculum should be written and ultimately in how the game should be used.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown a sampling of the non-revolutionary ways UrIsland interacted with the expectations of the market and some of the additional challenges they faced beyond the work debate discussed in chapter 4, in order to keep their focus

---

[60] I want to clarify here that Molly didn't think the game was boring. In fact she and I spent a lot of free time questing in Talking Island together. The problem she was having with this story idea was that the quests had been written as part of an interactive game. The dialogues worked in that context, but removing them from that context, she felt, didn't work.

on their main goal. They were ahead of their time and they knew it. To be successful they needed to focus on one revolution only, not all of them, and make Talking Island palatable enough to the general public to be a financially viable MMORPG. Furthermore, UrIsland was a company embedded in the very society they wished to revolutionize and so not all issues were noticed by everyone in the company, as with what I found when asking people about gender portrayals and limitations within the game.

The portrayal of gender in Talking Island is perhaps the starkest example of this and is why I chose to include it here. Unlike the stereotypes about Americans that I covered in chapter 3, many of which were intentional and known to be stereotypes, the stereotypical and patriarchal representation of gender in WBUs appears to have been largely unrecognized. When someone did notice it however (besides me) it was pushed to the side because it was not important enough for UrIsland to detract them from their primary educational goals, and financially they had more pressing concerns to deal with. The gender of avatars, on the other hand, was a conscious decision on the part of UrIsland to encode heteronormative gender presentations into the options available to players, because, they said, of the age of the target demographic and to make things easier on the teachers especially.

That the gendered WBUs were in line with the patriarchal undertones of Taiwanese society and that the avatar restrictions acquiesced to Taiwanese cultural expectations did not cause any major concerns for UrIsland because these choices did not conflict with any of the expectations of the parents and teachers they hoped would buy their product. In the case of some of UrIsland's expectations on the other hand,

such as who was playing their game and how, the employees were forced to confront these issues and decide on a course of action.

As I have shown, these were not easy decisions to make. In the case of adults wanting to play Talking Island, UrIsland originally tried to enforce their plan of having this be an (almost) adult free play space. This was UrIsland straddling the game sphere, trying to keep Talking Island as much of a play space as possible. They would also straddle this sphere, along with education, in facing the dilemma of Fabos versus dialogues. This did not have to become an either or debate, but in the case of the storybooks, it did. The dialogues were designed to be the main educational aspect of Talking Island and yet the appeal of the Fabos was dominating children's engagement with the game-world.

Due to the timing of my research, and the ongoing evolution of UrIsland and Talking Island, some of the responses to these failed expectations have yet to play out and so the end results are unknown. The learning and support center in Shanghai, for example, was due to open 3 months after I left Asia, and the decision to no longer bar adults from the world was made just before I left. Others, such as the way in which Talking Island was designed to be used, compared with how children actually use the game, have already shown what every game developer already knows – how one designs a game to be played and how players will actually engage with that game is not always one in the same.

Chapter 6: And In the End …

Talking Island, the island within an island within an island, all of them threatened by some outside force. In the end this book is a story of the struggle for survival. Will the Superkids save Talking Island from Octocomputer? Will UrIsland successfully navigate the boundary waters between technology, games, and education and live to see their ESL revolution take hold? Will the cross-straits status-quo continue to hold? Will it matter for the Shanghai expansion?

These are all questions for another day and a future time. Due to the rate the economy, cultural ideas, and politics were changing during my time in the field, the answers to these are still being forged and have not yet taken shape. The three spheres of meaning UrIsland was grappling with, technology, games, and education, are major forces in Taiwan, regardless of the success or failure of one little company. These are issues tied to Taiwan's future and UrIsland is fully aware of this. They looked to the heavy investment their government made in technology, the investment of families in education, and the popularity of games and sought to create a confluence where these three could feed into and support each other. The idea was to make Taiwan a stronger place by joining these rivers of meaning, but rerouting a river – let alone three – is no easy task.

I began this ethnography with the story of my last two days with UrIsland because the outpouring of emotion during Alex's speech highlights the emotional ties employees had to the dream that was Talking Island. This place was more than just an office, just a job, it was a family and they were working towards goals bigger than selling a product. It is also pertinent in that in some ways it bore some resemblance to a

commencement ceremony, though much less happy and hopeful. For most of the people in the office that day that was the end, but it was not the end for UrIsland, it was a new beginning. As of this writing the company is still in business and Talking Island is still being sold and supported, though the people I worked with and wrote about here are, for the most part, no longer a part of it.

Whatever problems UrIsland may have encountered, it is still impressive how far they went. Talking Island started as an idea Alex drew out on a piece of scrap paper over lunch. Almost seven years later, when I asked Mitch about the beginnings of UrIsland, he still had that piece of scrap paper to scan a copy for me. He saved it because he knew even then that this was going to be something special.

Technology and education are accepted by most as beacons for Taiwan's future as evidenced by governmental and personal investments in these two facets of life and business, but games are still stigmatized by many, despite their wild popularity and increasingly recognized economic potential. The employees of UrIsland saw themselves as instigating a revolution in ESL education because Talking Island was a digital game. Rather than shy away from the challenge of joining play and learning together – two states seen as mutually exclusive by many Taiwanese – UrIsland sought to break down this cultural wall. Yes, they were trying to sell a product, but more than that, they were also attempting to popularize the idea that learning can fun. They believed that playing could increase the effectiveness of learning and that learning can happen outside of a classroom.

That Talking Island was teaching English in particular is significant to understanding the scope of UrIsland's goals. English is an asset on the Taiwanese job

market in part because it is the current *lingua franca* within international affairs and America specifically was chosen because of its pervasiveness in this arena. On an individual level ability to speak English is seen as beneficial because it offers people access to more and better jobs. On the national level Taiwanese are keenly aware of their precarious position within the global amphitheater, and building strong economic ties internationally is seen by many as reinforcing the security of the nation both politically and economically – rather one imagines the future of Taiwan as independent or as a part of China. Because English is the current *lingua franca*, having people who speak it eases the burden of international companies coming to Taiwan and of Taiwanese companies moving abroad. As I mentioned in chapter 3 about my time as a corporate English instructor, I had that job because there was a demand by international companies for their employees to speak English and a desire of employees to keep those jobs.

The employees of UrIsland recognized this and often described their goals in nationalistic terms. Improving English proficiency (something they thought their product could do better than any of the existing *buxiban* English programs) would help make Taiwan stronger and improve the economic opportunities of the next generation. This was more than marketing rhetoric. One of the employees once told me the company wanted to offer Talking Island for free to disadvantaged children once they became financially solvent because they wanted to help people and because raising up the poorest is beneficial to the country as a whole.

International relations, however, go well beyond America and speaking English. China officially claims Taiwan as part of their territory despite having no direct control

over the island which functions under a democratically elected government. While my goal in Taiwan was not to study cross-strait relations, it was hard not to notice the smiles and nods of approval I received when I told people I was there to study *Taiwanese* culture. As the island embraces the diversity of the people living there an increasing number of inhabitants are identifying themselves as Taiwanese and imagining their nation as having a distinct culture.

Furthermore, I was present for UrIsland's ramp up to expanding into Shanghai. During this time people made it clear to me that they needed to do this for the survival of the company (and to appease investors) but that this should not be taken as a sign they were abandoning their goals for improving ESL education in Taiwan. These were not off-the-cuff remarks made in conversations, rather people went out of their way to make sure I (the researcher that was to write a book about their company) understood this fact. One person, even made a point to show me the special passport and visa he had to get, as a Taiwanese national, to travel in China. He explained this in English and used those words.

Given the importance and acceptance of technology and education within Taiwan and the gravity of the national projects UrIsland was attempting to be a part of, one might wonder why Alex would choose to approach these spheres of meaning through the bridge of a third sphere - games, a highly stigmatized and contested sphere of meaning in Taiwan. Alex was already working for another game company when the idea for Talking Island came to him. He was already personally on the forefront of the changing perceptions of digital games in Taiwan, becoming increasingly acceptable, however slow that change may be, and could already see the power games have for

engaging people. A game – specifically an MMORG - he believed, would be the answer

to the critical problems facing English proficiency in Taiwan. He just had to convince

everyone else. I now turn to these three spheres of meaning: technology, education,

and games, which were so important to both UrIsland and this book.

I organized this book via the lived experience of workflow within UrIsland,

dividing up the intersection of technology, education, and games, through the daily

experience of my time working and researching at UrIsland. Now, I tie these strands of

meaning together by organizing this conclusion via these three spheres of meaning.

After this I include a fourth section on Taiwanese imaginings of the other, not because it

is separate from the other three, but because it involves all three.

Technology

As covered in chapter 3 the government of Taiwan has played an active role in

the island's high technology industry for the past several decades. One of the ways they

have done this is through the creation of their two major research institutes, the

Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI), largely concerned with hardware, and

the Institute for Information Industry (III), for software. Although both of these institutes

were created with similar goals, to boost a burgeoning private industry, supply new

technologies, and support research and design efforts, III was not as successful

because it competed with private companies (Breznitz, 2005).

This melding of technology is significant to all levels of society. On a political

level the technology sector is often held to be a part of Taiwan's path to independence,

economic or otherwise (depending on which political party's rhetoric one is looking at) but this is balanced, at the same time, with the national endeavor to preserve historical artifacts and traditions – both Chinese and Taiwanese. Technology is everywhere, blended in with older customs and appropriated into the Taiwanese way of life, such as my friend's iPhone on the temple steps. This governmental investment in technology, coupled with technological discourse during elections, shows a national level of embracing of technology that is reflected in everyday life as well.

On the micro level, in addition to the ubiquity of mobile devises such as smart phones, the incorporation of other digital communication practices further point to Taiwanese acceptance of technology. In chapter 4 I discussed UrIsland's employees playfully engaging with social media. Setting aside the playful aspect for one moment, YouTube, Facebook, and MSN messenger were all actively used for work and social purposes, the first two for research and promotion and the third for interoffice communication. There was in fact so much reliance on these programs that they were all but required for the job. Employees were directly asked to engage with Talking Island's Facebook page for example, and although this was not presented as an official requirement, it was understood as an expectation more than a suggestion. This was not unique to UrIsland. The particular programs used may vary, but this open use, acceptance, and reliance on social media platforms was common across Taiwan.

Technology in Taiwan is not, however, limited to communication tools. Technology is an idea, a sphere of meaning for the Taiwanese. In the case of governmental aspirations, for example, the future is technology just as for some companies Silicon Valley is. UrIsland is one such place. The open concept layout of the

office and the de-emphasis of hierarchy provided both a visual and social atmospheric feel of an imagined Silicon Valley. This lent an air to the office as a place on the cutting edge, a perception they actively cultivated and pointed out to me when I was first being introduced into the company.

While I have thus far recapped all of the favorable views of technology from this work, this was a drawback for UrIsland's decision to create a digital game in particular. Although I demonstrated in chapter 2 a relatively long history of acceptance of technology in education, this did not negate the stigmatization of games in Taiwan in general, and MMORPGs are particularly seen as dangerous and addictive in a way other games are not. (This is why Talking Island has joy points.) Rather than being viewed as technology – a favorable sphere within Taiwan – MMORPGs are viewed as games – a much less favorably viewed sphere of meaning. Yet it is because MMORPGs are compelling and appealing that Alex wanted to make one in the first place. This choice was about more than popularity, however. It is only through the use of such technology, a virtual world, that UrIsland was able to create the following:

- an immersion experience by recreating an American digital public, including
    - native speakers voicing NPCs (listening and comprehension practice) and
    - simulated interaction with foreigners (enculturation)
- a system of feedback for pronunciation (the SR voice recognition software) and
- a social experience to practice new language skills

Although an argument could be made for creating an immersion experience without using digital technologies - tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons and Dragons come to mind for example - these types of analog games could not offer the listening and comprehension practice available in Talking Island through their avatars voiced by native speakers. Furthermore, the bar to entrance for something like Dungeons and Dragons would be much higher than the bar for Talking Island due to the complexity of verbal world building. Analog games also would not be able to offer effective evaluation of pronunciation without the addition of a competent player, guide, or gamemaster – someone to, in effect, play a teaching role and offer corrections or reinforcement of understandable speech. The only aspect here that could be potentially covered with an analog game, or at least a multiplayer one, would be the social aspect, but even here Talking Island has the advantage of having a potentially larger player base.

Unfortunately for the industry, digital games have thus far not been a part of national Taiwanese aspirations for technological advancement. Going back to the beginning of this section and to chapter 3, the III did not engage with the Taiwanese game industry, despite the industry's early success. In spite of being far behind the likes of places such as South Korea (in some people's opinions because of the government's neglect of the industry) many in the industry are seeing hope for their future in Taiwan's increasing acceptance of gamers.

Games

Acceptance of digital games may be increasing, but this did not mean UrIsland did not face stigmatization. Change is hard and in this case also slow. Acknowledging

this, UrIsland worked with, rather than against, Taiwanese culture whenever they could, without abandoning their core mission of making ESL education fun. Nowhere is this more evident than in their public negotiation and marketing of Talking Island's identity. Was Talking Island "educational software" or was it a "game"? It was marketed as one or the other at various times, and it was arguably both, but this became an important distinction when trying to ease parents and schools into investing a monthly subscription fee into this novel approach for children's language learning.

Although in some respects the marketing classification of Talking Island as educational software or as a game was playing semantics, real changes were also made to the Talking Island package in order to accommodate *buxiban* and parental expectations and demands. During my time with Talking Island all of these types of changes were made to the supplementary materials (what would become a full blown curriculum before I left Taiwan) and not the game world. Even so, these came to be seen as a part of the Talking Island experience and some within the company began to question what they saw as a diversion from the founding goals of UrIsland. Enter Julie and our elevator conversation. Do I think Talking Island is a game? I told her I do and also told her why. I still do, but as I write this conclusion I am starting to question why, in that moment in the elevator, I felt the need to justify my answer.

At that time I was a member of the education department and there was a growing rift between that department and the game department – headed by Julie. In fact, if it was not for the fortuitous happenstance of the two us of winding up alone in that elevator I might have never had the chance for such a frank conversation with her. It was not that either of us had a personal problem with the other – it was that the two

departments had very different ideas about what was best for the future of Talking

Island and UrIsland – and these were some very big differences. (I did not overtly take

sides in these debates – but as a part of the education department and an academic, I

was socially positioned within the company regardless of my personal thoughts on

these issues.) Everyone in question had the best intentions – and in fact the same

intentions – but the two departments were unable to agree on how UrIsland should

proceed in order to reach the company's goals.

At the core of the debate was the question of which consumer the company

should primarily appeal to, the children who would be playing Talking Island or the

schools and parents that paid for it. Not surprisingly, the game department often made

suggestions that focused on the players and the education department often sought to

court the money source directly. Julie's question wasn't really about whether or not

Talking Island was a game. It was about whether or not Talking Island could be a

successful game if it ceased to be compelling to play. Despite my positionality within the

company I saw the logic in both approaches, but Julie had no way of knowing that

before the elevator. She did not know I was a gamer. No one else in the education

department was. We spoke more frequently after that day and I got more chances to

help the game department with their projects as well.

More importantly, Julie's question, along with the prevalence of gamer shame

more generally, shows a (un)conscious dismissal of the idea of a magic circle.

Worksheets for the Talking Island package are outside of the game world, yet Julie was

concerned they would ruin the experience of the game, because Talking Island does not

end at the digital boundaries of the virtual world. Outside of this education-focused

space, play is further seen as consequential in general – even if for negative reasons. Remember Sam? His response to my inquiry about whether or not he plays games clearly shows a conceptual link between playing, productivity, and success in the sense that one cannot be productive and financially successful if they play games. What his response and my later discoveries of the multiple games he plays shows is an example of what Herzfeld calls cultural intimacy (2005) and it was not the only time I encountered this. Sam did not fully buy into the idea of success and play being exclusive either, but I was an outsider and this was not something he was prepared to share with me.

What the stories about Sam, looking for a wang-ka, and Julie illustrate is that Taiwan is in a state of flux regarding their views of games. Sam would not yet admit to an outsider that he plays games, but he does play them. No one would admit to knowing where any wang-ka are, but they not only exist – they are prevalent. Julie, working for an educational game company, openly acknowledged (as did everyone working for UrIsland) that work and play can be combined, yet game design and educational design were split into separate departments, with department heads regularly at odds with each other.

Yet whatever differences Julie and Shawn may have had, the office space of UrIsland was indicative of their revolutionary goals. Work and play coexisted on a spectrum with no clear ends. In chapters 3 and 4 I described the workflow in UrIsland and showed how games and game-like artefacts were often synonymous with work tools. The various social media and games –both Talking Island and others – used/played in the office were crucial to getting work done and yet all of them were also played with during downtime and while working. Of all the chat-logs I saved for later

review, I could not find one that I could label as purely "work" or "play" oriented. The two states coexisted and we were all productive nonetheless.

The stories about Sam and looking for the wang-ka, in showing the type of stigmatization that UrIsland was up against, also serve to illustrate that Talking Island was pushing cultural boundaries. Yet their goals prove to be even more cutting edge when all three spheres of meaning - technology, games, and education - are considered together, because it is in relation to ideas about productivity (which relates to education and technology) that gamer shame becomes the most forceful.

Education

It did not happen very often, but every once in a while we had children visit UrIsland. Sometimes it was a player who wanted to see where Talking Island was made and to meet the OFs in person, and sometimes it was the child of an adult who was coming into the office for a meeting. By coincidence, this seemed to only happen when I was not in the office, but I would hear about these visits later on from other employees. There was one afternoon though, I came back in from lunch and saw a little girl sitting with Natalie just across the aisle from my desk. The little girl looked about 7 years old and Natalie was introducing her to Talking Island.

Unfortunately, I was really busy that day. I had to go through all the dialogues for the upcoming Christmas quests before they could be added into the game, so I did not have time to try to talk to the little girl. I only briefly noted that Natalie was explaining to the girl about how to move about within the Talking Island world and then sat down to

get to work. After a few minutes Molly quietly got my attention and told me to listen to

the conversation Natalie was having with the little girl. What follows is an approximation

and translation of that conversation. Molly filled in the first exchange for me as it

happened before I started listening:

> Girl: Who is that girl?
> Natalie: That's 馬琳.
> Girl: Why is she here?
> Natalie: She works here.
> Girl: Why?
> Natalie: She speaks English.
> Girl: Why?
> Natalie: Because she is American.
> Girl: Why?
> Natalie: Her parents are American.
> Girl: Why isn't she at home?

At this point I could not help myself. I giggled aloud and before Natalie could answer the

last question, the little girl noticed that I had not only looked over at her, but I was

listening to her conversation as well. She shrunk down in her chair and turned away

from me. Later Natalie told me that after turning away from me the little girl started

whispering and had asked if I could understand them (speaking Mandarin), followed

with a couple of more questions about why I could. At least the little girl did not cry.

I was quite possibly the first American this little girl had ever seen and so her

curiosity was understandable. I include this story though because of her shyness

towards me which illustrates why UrIsland believed it was important and educationally

valuable to make Talking Island's NPCs look like Americans – to help children become

more accustomed to interacting with foreigners and thus more able to use the English

they were learning. This need for the ability to interact with foreigners was of course

also part and parcel of Taiwan's international aspirations as discussed in chapter 2.

As should be clear by now education is highly valued in Taiwan, in part stemming from their Chinese heritage. Case in point, "teacher" is a title in Mandarin. In chapter 5 when I mentioned that I was usually introduced to children at *buxibans* as a teacher it was because I was introduced as Teacher Krista, 馬老師 (Mǎ Lǎoshī - Teacher Ma), or Krista老師 (Teacher Krista). This is also why I include studying under the label of work. From what I saw in Taiwan education is treated with the gravity of a job, perhaps more so. Add to this that a good education (or at least a good accreditation) is believed to lead to a good job, and good jobs also offer continuing education, and it becomes clear that these concepts are too intertwined to be fairly treated separately. *Buxibans* further point to the importance of education for the Taiwanese considering not only the money being spent on them, but also the fact that the number of *buxibans* in Taiwan more than doubled in the decade between 2001 and 2011.

Buxibans suggest something else though as well: the standardization of education. *Buxibans* began as cram schools focusing on the exam system – specifically, the entrance exams for high school and college. Most *buxibans* still focus on the subjects traditionally taught in school and that are on the tests, as shown in chapter 3, but they have grown far beyond exam preparation considering the large numbers of elementary aged children enrolled. The idea of a *buxiban* was originally to be a supplement to mandatory education, but enrollment is becoming anything but. Rather than being an option for a struggling student or a boost, *buxiban* attendance is seen by many as necessary for children just to keep up. These long hours in classes and the pressure exerted on children is so serious that its even starting to become a cause for concern for parents regarding their children's health and wellbeing.

English language is one of the mandatory school subjects in Taiwan, appears on entrance exams, and is a wildly popular subject to study in *buxibans* (by which I mean popular with the parents). Even so, proficiency in verbal English is low. Many people blamed this on schools teaching to the test, because entrance exams were, up until that point, only written. This corresponds with what I saw among certain friends and coworkers who could text chat in English with me far more competently than they could carry on a face-to-face verbal conversation. While focusing on written English may help students test well and get into good high schools and colleges, it is not enough in terms of Taiwan's economic and political projects to increase their international standing. The Taiwanese need to be able to communicate verbally with foreigners if they want to participate in the global community – a fact many of them know as evidenced by the times Taiwanese protestors and politicians use English.[61]

Against this backdrop of educational problems Talking Island was conceived. Talking Island was designed first and foremost to engage children in listening to and speaking English through the immersive experience of an MMORPG. Through this medium children could be exposed to spoken English, actively practice speaking themselves, and learn about American culture, all crucial components to effectively communicating in English – especially with Americans.

Yet creating an MMORPG was about more than these directly educational aspects, it was also about making this experience compelling. Rather than being a

[61] For an example of a political use see David Blundell's account of the first public debate between the Kuomintang and the Democratic Progressive Party which was conducted in English (2012, 5). For an example of protestors' use of English, do an image search for the 2014 Sunflower Movement student protests in Taiwan to see signs written in both English and Mandarin.

chore to get through as quickly as possible, Talking Island was designed to make children want to study English. This aspect was twofold. First, because students would be more engaged with a game world than they would be with traditional educational materials the hope was that they would learn more and become even better at speaking English; and secondly, playing a game would offer a way for children to study in a playful manner that would be less stressful than all the classes they were already cramming into their weeks. Talking Island was not just any kind of game though, it was an MMORPG; and this choice was made for the immersive aspects of virtual worlds because immersion is considered by many one of the best (if not the best) ways to learn a foreign language. The very first time I met Shawn at TIBE this was one of his main selling points for Talking Island.

Be that as it may, despite Talking Island's promise to offer a better way to learn English, and despite the strong academic culture in Taiwan, UrIsland struggled with this particular intersection of meaning. Work and play were still seen as mutually exclusive by many Taiwanese and for parents and *buxibans* an educational MMORPG was a hard sell. This was why UrIsland developed the Talking Island package. By adding these offline materials they were able to sell a complete ESL curriculum package that deemphasized the technological and game aspects by offering *buxibans* more traditional looking materials such as worksheets and tests. This they did without making changes to the virtual world, thus appealing to the needs and desires of parents and *buxiban* teachers, while still hopefully leaving Talking Island as compelling as it was meant to be. Of course, not everyone at UrIsland agreed with this particular plan, such

as was seen in chapter 4 with my conversation with Julie, but everyone hoped for the best nonetheless.

Imaginings of the Other & Playing to Expectations

One of Talking Island's major selling points was offering immersion without the expense of studying abroad, but in order to do this they felt they needed to play into certain expectations, even while upending others. The designers of Talking Island kept their focus on revolutionizing ESL education and left other concerns alone. They needed Talking Island to be a financially viable MMORPG in order for the company to survive. Therefore, they followed certain cultural expectations within their target demographic, gender roles and imaginings of America most notably, for the purpose of creating a game world that would be seen as internally consistent with what players and parents expect.

Talking Island was overtly modeled after New York City, but realism was not prioritized. Certain aspects of New York, as representative of America in the Taiwanese imagination, were chosen for the purpose of giving the game world an "American" feel. Uncle Sam, Midwestern accents, and the Statue of Liberty were all included because they are seen as fundamentally American and, importantly, different from Taiwan. Not unlike Western views of Asia, Taiwanese view Americans as essentially foreign in a way that other

Figure 43: Uncle Sam   Asian groups are not. Talking Island was a practice in the othering

of America, but for a reason. Beyond basic language learning, UrIsland meant for

Talking Island to enculturate children and to help get them accustomed to interacting with foreigners, so that they would not be as shy as the little girl in the office was. It was no accident that American differences were highlighted rather than their similarities; it was intentional, and this was possible because Talking Island was a virtual world game.

Because Talking Island was a virtual game world, UrIsland was able to create a digital representation of a global icon through their own cultural imagining of the other. For UrIsland these decisions all tied back into Taiwanese national goals. They attempted to tap into two accepted and respected spheres of meaning in technology and education while reaffirming Taiwanese ideas about themselves and others through Talking Island's use of common gender and national stereotypes.

And In Conclusion

So what now? Like any good ethnography I have left many questions open for further research. Some of this is specific and due to the timing of my research. What will make more money – appealing more to children or to parents? UrIsland had yet to find the answer to this question by the time I left. The last I heard they were still navigating between these two interests, but maybe that is where they will find their answer – in appealing to both. Like work and play there is no absolute reason the interests of these two must be at odds.

And what about Shanghai? Many companies (Taiwanese and otherwise) like UrIsland think China is the market to go after due to its size. As one informant told me, with over a billion people, even a one percent market share is enough to make it, but

size does not guarantee success. Moreover, ways in which the Shanghai *buxiban* market differed from Taiwan's were already being brought to light before I left, so where does this leave the goal of expanding in Taiwan if the Talking Island package is modified for the Shanghai market? Unfortunately, the learning and support center in Shanghai, was not due to open until after I left Asia, and the package materials we were putting together for the Shanghai project were still incomplete on my last day in the office.

Furthermore, how might the move to Shanghai change or effect UrIsland's long term goals? In chapter 2 I explained some of my coworkers' views on my work vis-à-vis the framing of the island's culture as Taiwanese and related UrIsland's founding goals to some of Taiwan's national goals – whether imagined as a road to independence or not. The people I talk about in this ethnography, however, are no longer working at UrIsland. The company still exists as of this writing, and they have expanded into China, but this new group (both in China and in the head office in Taiwan) is now working in a different context – dealing with a different government and within a different culture. Will this new cohort imagine Talking Island in the same way as the people I knew? Will dealing with the Chinese change their perspective – or strengthen it? Regardless, an imagining of America and Taiwan has been so thoroughly written into Talking Island that it will persist and be transmitted for as long as UrIsland continues to maintain their servers.

Throughout this ethnography I highlighted the relatively modern interplay between technology, games, and education, and illustrated that all three of these are more than the sum of the objects that make them up. These three are spheres of

meaning. For many, like the Taiwanese, technology and education mean progress and the future, while games stand as an obstruction to productivity (which for some is further equated with progress). This is all despite games' continued expansion into overlapping with both technology and education. This acceptance of the first two and stigmatization of the last creates an increasing point of tension not unique to Taiwan. In fact this pressure can be found around the developed and developing world and especially in societies endeavoring to grow their technological infrastructures and industries. UrIsland with their forthright goal of confronting this point of tension was an ideal place to research this intersection. Some of the details of this ethnography are necessarily specific to UrIsland and to Taiwanese culture, but these three spheres of meaning: technology, education, and games, are a part of the human experience and so the overarching lessons of UrIsland's struggles on the island of Taiwan offer the opportunity for others to see at least one example of how we might not only deal with this tension, but embrace it.

Bibliography

Anderson, Benedict. 2006. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (Revised Edition). London and New York: Verso.

Ashton, David. 1999. Education and Training for Development in Asia: The Political Economy of Skill Formation in East Asian Newly Industrialised Economies. Florence, KY, USA: Routledge, 1999. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 5 December 2015.

Australian Dept. of Foreign Affairs & Trade. "Taiwan country brief." http://dfat.gov.au/geo/taiwan/pages/taiwan-country-brief.aspx

Bartle, Richard A. 1990. "Who Plays MUAs?" *Comms Plus!* October/November: 18-19. Accessed from: http://mud.co.uk/richard/wpm.htm.

Blundell, David. 2012. "Taiwan Coming of Age." In *Taiwan Since Martial Law: Society, Culture, Politics, Economy*, edited by David Blundell, 3-26. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

Breznitz, Dan. 2005. "Development, flexibility and R & D performance in the Taiwanese IT industry: capability creation and the effects of state–industry" *Industrial and Corporate Change* Vol. 14 No. 1: 153–187. Advance Access published January 10.doi:10.1093/icc/dth047.

Brown, Melissa J. 2004. *Is Taiwan Chinese?: The Impact of Culture, Power, and Migration on Changing Identities.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Burke, Timothy. 2002. *"*Rubicite Breastplate Priced to Move, Cheap: How Virtual Economies Become Real Simulations." http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/Rubicite%20Breastplate.pdf.

Chang, Doris T. 2009. "Reading Sex and Temperament in Taiwan: Margaret Mead and Postwar Taiwanese Feminism." NWSA Journal, Vol. 21 No. 1 (Spring): 51-75

Chen, Mark, Kolko, Beth E., Cuddihy, Elisabeth, and Medina, Eliana. 2011. "Modeling but NOT measuring engagement in computer games" GLS'11 Proceedings of the 7th international conference on Games + Learning + Society Conference, Madison, Wisconsin, 55-63.

Chen, Yau-Jane. 2002. "The Development of CyberLearning in Dual-Mode Higher Education Institutions in Taiwan." *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* Vol. 2, No. 2 (January, 2002).

Chou, Chuing Prudence and Ching, Gregory. 2012. *Taiwan Education at the Crossroad: When Globalization Meets Localization.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Chou, Chuing Prudence, and Ho, Ai-Hsin. 2007. "Schooling In Taiwan." In *Going to School in East Asia*, edited by Gerard A. Postiglione, and Jason Tan, 344-377. Greenwood Publishing Group.

Chou, Chuing Prudence, and Yuan, James K. S. 2011. "Buxiban in Taiwan." Supplementary education in Asia 54, Spring 2011: 15.

Chu, Kathy. 2011. "Traditional approaches to English education should be changed: minister." The China Post, June 20. http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/national/national-news/2011/06/20/306865/p2/Traditional-approaches.htm.

Consalvo, Mia. 2005. "Cheating can be good for you: educational games and multiple play styles." *On the Horizon*, Vol. 13 No. 2: 95 – 100. http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/10748120510608124.

Courtenay, Jonathan Mark. 2013. "Culture & Competition – A study of Supplementarty Education in Taiwan." Thesis, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/6906/.

Dibbell, Julian. 1998. *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Dibbell, Julian. 2006. *Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot.* New York: Basic Books.

Dickson, Bruce J. and Chao, Chien-min.2002. "Introduction: Assessing the Lee Teng-hui Legacy." In *Assessing the Lee Teng-hui Legacy in Taiwan's Politics: Democratic Consolidation and External Relations*, edited by Bruce J. Dickson and Chien-min Chao, 3-26. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Ermi, L., & Mäyrä, F. 2005. "Fundamental components of the gameplay experience: Analysing immersion." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views – Worlds in Play.* Retrieved from http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.41516.pdf

Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State.* New York, Routledge.

Heylen, Ann. 2012. "Grassroots Taiwan History." In *Taiwan Since Martial Law: Society, Culture, Politics, Economy*, edited by David Blundell, 27-62. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

Ho, Hsiu, Lam, Yeana W., and Yeh, Kuang-Hui. 2013. "Character Education in Taiwan: A Reflection of Historical Shifts in Sociocultural Contexts." *Childhood Education* http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2013.851590.

Huizinga, J. 2014. Homo Ludens: *A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.* New York, Routledge. Kindle Edition.

Kendall, Lori. 2002. *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online.* Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Kinney, Anne Behnke. 2004. *Representations of Childhood and Youth in Early China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lan, Yu-Ju, Sung, Yao-Ting, and Chang, Kuo-En. 2013. "Facilitating EFL Reading Through Mobile-Supported Cooperation." *Language Learning & Technology.* October 2013, Vol.17, No. 3; 23–38. http://llt.msu.edu/issues/october2013/action.pdf.

Lee, Chi-Ming Angela. 2004. "Changes and Challenges for Moral Education in Taiwan." Journal of Moral Education, Vol. 33, No. 4, (December 2004): 575-595.

Lee, Teng-hui. 1995. "Chinese Culture and Political Renewal." Address at the opening session of an international conference on "Consolidating Third Wave Democracies: Trends and Challenges," August, 27. Printed in *Journal of Democracy* 6.4: 3-8.

Lessig, Lawrence. 1999. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace.* New York, Basic Books.

Liao, Yuen-kuang. 2007. "Effects of computer-assisted instruction on students' achievement in Taiwan: A meta-analysis." *Computers & Education*, Vol. 48 Iss. 2, (Feb. 2007): 216–233.

Malone, Krista-Lee M. 2007. "Governance and Economy in a Virtual World: Guild Organization in World of Warcraft." MA Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2006. "Coding Control: Governance and Contingency in the Production of Online Worlds." *First Monday,* special issue number 7 (September 2006), URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9/malaby/index.html.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2007. "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games." *Games & Culture* 2(2): 95-113.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2009. *Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Lab and Second Life.* New York: Cornell University Press.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2013. "Ritual, Bureaucracy, Game: Modernity and its Cultural Forms of Control." Paper presented at the Symposium "Modernity and Chance" at The Potomac Center for the Study of Modernity 5 April, 2013.

Marsh, Robert M. 2003. "How Important Is Social Class Identification in Taiwan?." *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Winter, 2003): 37-59.

McMahan, Alison. 2003. "Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games," In *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, 67-86. New York: Routledge.

Ministry of Education, Taiwan. 2012. "Education for Primary and Junior High School Students." http://english.moe.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=14626&ctNode=11435&mp=11.

Mo, Yan-chih. 2009. "Ma Calles for more university classes taught in English." The Taipei Times, November 8. http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2009/11/08/2003457927.

Moore, Sally Falk Moore. 1975. "Uncertainties in situations, indeterminacies in culture." In *Symbol and Politics in Communal Ideology*, edited by Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, 32-53. Cornell University Press.

NCEE. 2015. "Taiwan Overview." http://www.ncee.org/programs-affiliates/center-on-international-education-benchmarking/top-performing-countries/taiwan-overview/.

New Taipei City Government. http://foreigner.ntpc.gov.tw/.

Orr, Julian E. 1996. *Talking About Machines.* Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press.

Pan, Hui-Ling Wendy. 1999. "Children's Play in Taiwan." In *Children's Play in Diverse Cultures*, edited by Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, James Ewald Johnson, and Frank H. Hooper, 31-50. State University of New York Press.

Silver, David. 2000. "Margins in the Wires: Looking for Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Blacksburg Electronic Village." In *Race in Cyberspace*, edited by B. E. Kolko, L. Nakamura, and G. B. Rodman, 133-150. New York: Routledge.

Soong, Grace. 2011. "Students suffer from excess academic stress: foundation." *The China Post*, Nov. 24. http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/2011/11/24/323892/Students-suffer.htm.

Taipei City Government. 2015. Last modified October 27. http://english.gov.taipei/.

Taiwan Government. http://eng.stat.gov.tw/ct.asp?xItem=3417&CtNode=1596&mp=5.

"Taiwan students storm education ministry in textbook protest." BBC News Asia, July 31, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-33731411.

Tedards, Bo. 2012. "Trajectories of Democratization." In *Taiwan Since Martial Law: Society, Culture, Politics, Economy*, edited by David Blundell, xlix-lxxvi. Taipei: National Taiwan University Press.

Thomas, Michael K. and Yang, Wan-Lin. 2013. "Neoliberalism, globalization, and creative educational destruction in Taiwan." *Education Tech Research Dev*, 61:107-129.

Tu, Weiming. 1996. "Cultural Identity and the Politics of Recognition in Contemporary Taiwan." *The China Quarterly* 148: 1115-1140.

Wachman, Alan M. 2007. *Why Taiwan? Geostrategic Rationales for China's Territorial Integrity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Wang, Flora. 2010. "MOE proposes testing for English listening, speaking." Taipei Times, August 5. http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2010/08/05/2003479649.

Williams, Jack, and Chang, Ch'ang-yi David. 2008. *Taiwan's Environmental Struggle: Toward a Green Silicon Island*. Routledge.

Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society, Revised edition.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Zeng, Kangmin. 1999. *Dragon Gate: Competitive Examinations and Their Consequences.* New York: Cassell & Continuum.

Zhao, Suisheng. 2002. "Reunification Strategy: Beijing Versus Lee Teng-hui." In *Assessing the Lee Teng-hui Legacy in Taiwan's Politics: Democratic Consolidation and External Relations*, edited by Bruce J. Dickson and Chien-min Chao, 218-240. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc.

Education

2007 – 2015   Ph.D., Anthropology, UW-Milwaukee
                            Dissertation – Islands in the Making: National Investment and the
                            Cultural Imagination in Taiwan

2004 – 2007   M.S., Anthropology, UW-Milwaukee
                            Thesis - Governance and Economy in a Virtual World: Guild
                            Organization in World of Warcraft

1999 –2003   B.A., Anthropology, UW-Madison

Teaching Positions

Spring 2016   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Lecturer
                            Anthro-302: Anthropology & Popular Culture: Subcultures in the Digital
                            Age

Fall 2015   Alverno College – Lecturer (Professional Comm. – School of Business)
                            PCM 230: Influence and General Semantics

Spring 2015   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Lecturer
                            Anthro-302: Anthropology & Popular Culture: Subcultures in the Digital
                            Age

Fall 2014   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Lecturer
                            Anthro-104: Lifeways in Different Cultures: A Survey of World Societies

Fall 2013   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Lecturer
                            Anthro-102: Introduction to Anthropology: Culture and Society

Spring 2013   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – TA Instructor
                            Anthro-102: Introduction to Anthropology: Culture and Society

2012   Effective International English (Taiwan) – Corporate ESL Instructor

Fall 2010   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Teaching Assistant
                            Anthro-102: Introduction to Anthropology: Culture and Society

Spring 2009   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Teaching Assistant
                            Anthro- 561: Techniques and Problems in Ethnography

Fall 2008   University of Wisconsin Milwaukee – Teaching Assistant
                            Anthro-104: Lifeways in Different Cultures: A Survey of World Societies

Grants & Awards

2014   2nd place paper at the ASU Student Colloquium at UW-Milwaukee

2013	June Nash Travel Award from the Society for the Anthropology of Work (SAW) of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) for presenting in a SAW sponsored panel at the AAA annual meeting
2013	Graduate Student Travel Support Program of UW-Milwaukee for presenting at the Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers
2013	Travel grant from the Anthropology Student Union of UW-Milwaukee for presenting at the Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers
2009	Taiwan Ministry of Education Huayu Enrichment Scholarship for Mandarin language study
2009	Conference scholarship to participate in the Graduate Student Symposium at State of Play 6 at New York Law School
2009	Graduate Student Travel Award from UW-Milwaukee to participate in the Graduate Student Symposium at State of Play 6 at New York Law School
2008	2nd place paper at the ASU Student Colloquium at UW-Milwaukee

Research Interests

Social and institutional organization in virtual worlds, science and technology studies, computer culture, digital anthropology, education, language learning, China, Taiwan

Research Experience

2011 – 2012	Ethnographic research on educational video games, English language education, and the acceptance of digital games and game-based learning in Taiwan, including 2 years working as a consultant for a game company
2009 – 2010	Language study and preliminary dissertation field research in Taipei, Taiwan
2005	Ethnographic research of social organization, hierarchy, and microeconomics (guilds and DKP) in World of Warcraft

Publications

2009a	Dragon Kill Points: The Economics of Power Gamers. *Games and Culture*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 296-316 (2009).
2009b	The Gamer Community's Vision of Japan. *Global Currents*, Vol. 5, Issue 2, 6-7 (2009).

2009c   A Story from the Field. *Anthropology News*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 5 (2009).
                         (Departmental newsletter)

Presentations

2014a   Panelist for: Meaningful / Meaningless Play: The Brave New World of
                         Play and Games in Educational Contexts, International Academic
                         Conference on Meaningful Play at Michigan State University

2014b   "Beyond Research: What it *really* means to participate," presentation for
                         the Graduate Students of Anthropology Workshop at UW-Milwaukee

2014c   "Unconscious Bias: A Look at Gender in the Office and Game World of a
                         Taiwanese MMORPG," presentation for the ASU Student Colloquium at
                         UW-Milwaukee

2013a   Panelist for: Producing Digital Publics From Gaming to Crowdsourcing;
                         "Learning Digital Publics in a Global Mode: A Taiwanese Game's
                         Imagining of the American Public Sphere," American Anthropological
                         Association Annual Meetings, Chicago, IL

2013b   "Balancing Act: The Challenges of Creating an Educational Game,"
                         invited presentation for the School of Computing Research Colloquium at
                         DePaul University, Chicago, IL

2013c   Panelist for: Producing Digital Publics From Gaming to Crowdsourcing;
                         "Learning Digital Publics in a Global Mode: A Taiwanese Game's
                         Imagining of the American Public Sphere," 14th Annual Conference of
                         the Association of Internet Researchers, Denver, CO

2013d   "Working in Taiwan," invited presentation for the Chinese Language
                         Table for the Chinese department at UW-Milwaukee

2010   "Linguistic Considerations of Family in Chinese," invited presentation for
                         the Chinese Language Table for the Chinese department at UW-
                         Milwaukee

2008a   Round Table Discussant, "Finding Governance in Synthetic Worlds," for
                         the 2008 GLS Conference
2008b   "Dealing with a Progressive World: Common Themes in Anime and
                         Synthetic Worlds," presentation for the ASU Student Colloquium at UW-
                         Milwaukee

2007a   Panel Discussant, "Getting Into Graduate School," for the Undergraduate
                         Research Opportunity program at UW-Milwaukee

2007b   "Obstacles to Sustainable Urban Development in China," guest speaker
                         for Anthro-355: Globalization, Culture, and Environment class

Other Media Presence

2008-Present	Homepage:	http://kmalon5.wix.com/nvrendinglrning
2009- Present	Blog:	http://www.kristaleemalone.blogspot.com/
2012- Present	Twitter:	@GamerAnthro (focuses on education & research)
2007-2008	Blog:	Joystick101.org (author, Jan-Oct, co-editor Aug-Oct)
2015-Present	Podcasts:	http://www.technophilespodcast.com/

Language Skills

Chinese (conversational, reading and writing - traditional)

Professional Affiliations

2006 - 2014   Member, American Anthropological Association Sections: National Association for Student Anthropologists, Council on Anthropology and Education, Society for East Asian Anthropology

2004 – 2015   Anthropology Student Union at UW-Milwaukee

Professional Service

2014-2015   Anthropology Student Union at UW-Milwaukee elected faculty representative

2010 – Present   Peer reviewed articles for *Games & Culture*, the *Journal of International and Global Studies,* and *Field Notes: A Journal of Collegiate Anthropology*

Community Service

2014-present   Board member for the MMLO charity golf outing and Malone Family scholarship

2015   Invited presentation on the conflict between China's One Child Policy and traditional ancestor worship and familial obligations to 7th grade social studies classes at New Berlin West Middle School

2005   Invited presentation on the four subfields of Anthropology to social studies classes at New Berlin West High School