the escapist

EDITOR'S NOTE
by Julianne Greer

This week's issue of The Escapist is "New China." We are profiling the rise of a new power in the gaming world. Our contributors have come back to us with a variety of topics from the rampant piracy of gaming software in China, to the healthy market of MMOGs in China.

But why China?

Just as in other areas of the world economy, China is flying to the top of the ranks of consumers and producers of games. While we don't see the effects of this growth quite yet, we soon will. We may see changes in gameplay, financial models, mythology due to the infusion of the Chinese culture. I look forward to what the Chinese people can bring to the gaming table, and I think it's important to have an idea of their culture that we might all best work together in the future. To borrow from one of China's most famous philosophers:

"If a man takes no thought about what is distant, he will find sorrow near at hand."

-Confucius

Cheers,

Julianne Greer

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: I came across *The Escapist* after following a link to your article about Blizzard's "Secret Sauce." I ended up reading quite a few articles on the site. I was impressed by the high quality of the articles and appreciate that you explore various aspects of the gaming culture. Now that gaming is becoming more mainstream, it's nice to see more attention being centered on gamers and gaming.

-Sameer

In response to "Secret Sauce" from The Escapist Lounge: Great article. But as previously mentioned...where's *StarCraft*?!?

-**Iain**

In Response to "Twenty-Seven Hours Later" from The Escapist Lounge: We've all been there and share your pain. Some of my best memories are with five other friends, networked together in a friend's basement playing *StarCraft* for 16 hours straight! My son still begs me to play with him. A friend stuck at my house last week slipped *StarCraft* in (not having played it in years) and lost more than a couple of hours of his life to the alure of Terrans, Protoss and Zerg (oh, my!).

-**Jared**

To the Editor: I study mechanical engineering at the University of Pittsburgh. In my spare time, I'm a pretend web developer, and, accordingly, I think that I have a smidge of talent in the realm of design. This assertion, of course, may be open for debate.

At any rate, I happened upon your newest issue, and I was just blown away by how **gorgeous** your online magazine was! Not only was the writing excellent, but the way that you presented your article was simply fantastic. I wanted to read more just for that very reason.

-**Adam Wick**

In Response to "Bag Full of Ears" from The Escapist Lounge: I drew parallels between your journey, into the tainted underbelly of *Diablo II*'s Battle. net, to the very same way the corruption took the hero from the first story. Though, I don't believe there is a level where you go out looking for girls with this tortured hero ... but perhaps I hadn't unlocked that bit.

-**Franklin Webber**

In Response to "Exodus" from The Escapist Lounge: I love to see designers walk out of Blizzard and start their own company. I think it can be done; a small team of enthusiasts can create the basis for a game that'll blow existing games away. A small fringe game can catch on spectacularly the next year and wipe the dinosaurs from the stage.

-**Dagon**

电玩世间:

How China Cheats at the Videogame Industry

by Thomas Wilburn

Standing on the top floor of a large, mall-like shopping center in downtown Xi'an, there was no way for me to know that the shrink-wrapped *King of Fighters* collection was an illegal copy. My Chinese was good enough to get around the streets, but it wasn't up to grilling a salesman on authenticity. The packaging was a little garish, but not so much that it was out of line with other games I'd seen from SNK Playmore, developers of the fighting game series. And I didn't remember hearing about any PC ports, but I'd never really gone looking. The package even had an ISBN! Only real software has one of those, right?

When I returned home a month later, I'd be lying if I said I was surprised to find that the CD actually contained a copy of the WinKawaks arcade emulator and six Neo-Geo ROM dumps. The ISBN was a fake, and the manual was a blatant hack job. Even worse, it wasn't even a functioning disk: The file system was corrupt, so you could see the files but couldn't access them. Here's a moral question for you: How evil is it to download pirated ROMs and an emulator in order to "fix" my 22-yuan (~U.S. $3) Chinese bootleg? Let's just say it wasn't one of my proudest moments.

I like to think of myself as a reasonably ethical person. But deep down inside, I knew I wasn't buying a legitimate piece of software — and somehow, I just didn't care. For visitors to the People's Republic of China (PRC), the temptation to buy bootlegs is hard to resist. Piracy is everywhere, and not just for software. Clothing labels, music, movies, books — they're all fair game to counterfeiting rings. For the Chinese, caught in a developing economic mash up between Maoist philosophy and capitalism run rampant, piracy is a way of life.

Gradually, the rest of the world is beginning to wake up to the power of the Chinese economy. Entertainment software is no different in that respect. Like all market transactions, the prevalence of piracy can be broken down into the forces of supply and demand. But is there any way out of this criminal market and into a more virtuous one?

Demand is keeping me down

In 2003, between my second and third years of learning Mandarin, I traveled through China for about a month with a group of other Washington, D.C., undergraduates. We spent about a week in both Shanghai and Beijing, but the bulk of our trip was centered around Xi'an Jiaotong Daxue, a large university in the central Chinese city of Xi'an. Once the capital city of the Qin and Han dynasties, periods which formed the identity of China as a unified empire, it is now a curious mix of the ancient and the modern. Busy downtown traffic flows around city walls dating back hundreds of years, while massive hotels stand only a few blocks from the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, where Buddhist monks translated their religion's first holy texts. As much as any city can represent the sense of progress combined with the weight of history that comprises modern China, Xi'an does.

Despite its advancement in other areas, my host university's internet access was a joke. To get online, I paid a couple of yuan an hour at the internet bar just off campus, and I was in good company: Although Chinese computer ownership has skyrocketed over the last decade,

China states that piracy rates (i.e., the percentage of the citizenry's installed software not legitimately purchased) for entertainment software reached 96 percent during my visit. That's a high point since 2001, but only this year has it dropped below 90 percent. The IIPA

And no matter where I went in China, the boot screens invariably read "Windows '99" or other blatantly hacked displays, trumpeting their pirated status for anyone to see.

cafes are still scattered liberally, and they're still popular. At any time, they were packed with kids surfing the web, chatting with friends using QQ messaging software, or playing games like *Counterstrike*, *Diablo* and various MMOGs. And no matter where I went in China, the boot screens invariably read "Windows '99" or other blatantly hacked displays, trumpeting their pirated status for anyone to see. Somehow, I doubt that the rest of the games and software were any more legitimate.

In fact, the International Intellectual Property Alliance country report for

valued the Chinese stolen game market at $590 million, and that number is based on what people paid for the bootlegs, not what the actual retail price would've been. That's a lot of loose change falling between the metaphorical sofa cushions.

Why so much? Well, for one reason, China's enforcement of intellectual property laws is notoriously inconsistent. It's not that they don't have them — if the laws were followed, China would be probably have piracy rates closer to the United States, around 21 percent. But while the PRC pays lip service to

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copyright violations during trade talks and may even temporarily crack down on the criminals, it almost always immediately loosens what little grip it had on the black market. For example, laws passed to shut down offending service providers might require overly-specific citations of which materials are being stolen — as a result, ISPs simply ignore the citation on a technicality.

And why would the communist leadership take serious action? Pirate knock-offs (of all products, not just games) are the engines behind the Chinese economy, along with the sheer brute force of its massive low-wage labor market. Both factors have the effect of lowering the country's cost of manufacturing to almost nothing. Meanwhile, China argues that its population can't afford to pay market prices for games — convenient, since cheap pirated Western entertainment no doubt distracts Chinese workers from the same low wages that contribute to the country's manufacturing success; it's a Catch-22.

Of course, publishers aren't staying idle in the face of all this theft. They've discovered that some games can be

profitable in China — namely, multiplayer online games that charge by the hour, often through pre-paid cards or state-owned cell phone accounts (*World of Warcraft* uses the former). Companies also try the legal angle when possible. According to a high-level industry figure, who would only agree to speak off-the-record, gaming companies continually lobby international agencies to force China to follow its obligations under the U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade (JCCT) talks. The industry hopes that multilateral pressure from countries like Japan and the European Union will also be able to exert pressure.

"How's that working out for you?" I asked.

There was a pause. "Not so well," he replied. "But as a last resort, there's always the big guns: concerted action under the WTO trade agreements."

Not likely, according to Ted Fishman. He's the author of *China, Inc.*, a book about how China is charging to the forefront of global trade. Over the phone, the soft-spoken Fishman stated that "piracy is one of the very top issues Americans face in China," but was pessimistic about the possibility of WTO

action under the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights agreement, also known as TRIPS. The Clinton administration was much friendlier with China than the current White House, said Fishman, and yet still managed to bring more than 40 suits against the Chinese for violations under TRIPS. The Bush administration, after six years in office? Zero. Why so few?

"It's mysterious!" he said. "I can't figure it out."

Fishman could only advance the theory that the Republican-controlled government is more consumer-focused, more interested in low priced Chinese goods than taking action that might raise prices at Wal-Mart.

Additionally, Fishman is far more generous toward the Bush administration than I am. But no matter what your political persuasion, Fishman noted that WTO negotiations simply take more time than U.S. publishers can afford to waste. But every day, pirates continue to chip away at the "bottom line" — and even online games aren't immune, since server farms that mimic legitimate games spring up constantly.

The real shame of it all is that China is a market just waiting to be harvested. With more than a billion potential customers in a rapidly developing country, companies that figure out how to sell to the Chinese will make a killing. Of course, that's assuming the Chinese don't manage it themselves. When it comes to the supply side of the market equation, they're not exactly inexperienced ...

Air Supply

About a year ago, Blizzard Entertainment launched *World of Warcraft* in China, and to kick it off, they co-hosted an event with Coca-Cola. There was even a lavishly-produced ad campaign revolving around a Taiwanese pop group, called S.H.E. And by all accounts, the game has been a success. Sure, there are those pesky government censorship issues, but all in all it's been a smooth progression. Much is owed to partnerships with Chinese companies, who are running the day-to-day business of the game and providing localization, most likely at extremely reasonable rates, by American standards.

Yet, consider it from the perspective of a Chinese entrepreneur. Developing something like *WoW* at market rates in Irvine, CA, where Blizzard is based, can't be cheap. And then, there's the maintenance for those servers, patches and customer support. But the market rates for all of those services are much less expensive in China, where the average per capita income is only $6,800 a year. Low wages and government control ensure China's dominance of low-cost manufacturing industries. Why

couldn't they do the same thing for more high-level media design, like gaming?

In fact, that's exactly what is happening. Much the same way that India took technical outsourcing and turned it into a growing software design and consulting industry, Chinese businesses are starting to consider the possibility of moving into IT and other innovative industries. Ironically, China's high piracy rates make this much, much easier. While American companies might pay thousands of dollars for tools like compilers, source control and art design programs, the cost is virtually zero in China's little-enforced software environment. And Chinese companies may soon be able to pirate legitimately, noted Fishman, thanks to the so called "triangle-trade," where other countries help China work on open-source alternatives to popular computer programs in order to undermine American software engineering dominance.

Outside companies, aware of outsourcing shifts in manufacturing fields, have not missed the importance of this trend. EA, Take-Two and Ubisoft have all opened studios in Shanghai. Currently, they act as localization hubs, adapting current

> Low wages and government control ensure China's dominance of low-cost manufacturing industries. Why couldn't they do the same thing for more high-level media design, like gaming?

products to fit the language and government requirements for the country. But there's no reason the process can't work the other way - games designed, developed and programmed in China, then shipped to a smaller U.S. or European studio to be adapted for other markets. The process would need to be refined, but the problems aren't insurmountable, as Ubisoft (originally a French company) has proven.

Oddly, these two trends (the rise of local companies, as well as outsourced studios) may be one of the best hopes in the fight against piracy. As companies in China begin to move from simple production houses to IP-generating firms, the country will want to protect that domestic work from theft. The possibility is that standards will be tightened as China reaches a level of development comparable to the U.S. and Japan. A wild card in that scenario is the unpredictable communist leadership. They're certainly capable of controlling market infringement — the Jet Li action/propaganda film *Hero*, with substantial government money behind it, was pirated only in miniscule numbers — but they're

also capable of changing the rules to fit their needs at any given moment.

The color of the cat

When I left China, the impression I had formed was of a country still in conflict between its past and its future. What else can be expected from a country that began modernizing less than 40 years ago? Ever since Deng Xiaoping announced that "it doesn't matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice," the People's Republic of China has rushed forward, stumbling to catch up with the United States. Go to Shanghai, and if you look up at the shining buildings and bright neon signs, you'd almost believe the country has made it. Just don't look down at the streets filled with litter or the beggars in dark doorways; refugees from the poorer rural areas. China may have imported the technological advancements it was previously denied, but implementing the changes that go along with this industrialization is more complicated than the country is willing to admit.

[COMMENTS]

Thomas Wilburn went to China, and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.

China BRAIN, GAME

by Simon Abramovitch

In every gamer's brain, billions of neurons dance a massive, cognitive ballet. Inputs balance outputs, while mental associations and categorizations are formed. Through this structure of brainy bits, consciousness emerges. Some have claimed that the brain itself is irrelevant, and that consciousness is something that develops when anything, be it billions of neurons or billions of people, organizes and channels information. This theory, called "functionalism," has engendered much debate, notably in a thought-experiment by NYU philosopher Ned Block. The experiment runs as follows:

Get a whole lot of Chinese people organized, each with a cell phone. Have them all call and interact with one another, following an input-output structure isomorphic to that of a human brain. Would that group of people, collectively, become conscious in some way?

Although some philosophers claim this group of people, or the "China Brain," is conscious, there's a disconnect between the parts of that system not present in

an actual brain. Since each element is conscious in its own right, the emergent whole simply cannot form. There is no way for the China Brain to become self-aware. Something will emerge, sure, but it won't be a functionalist consciousness.

I currently work for Gameloft; sister-company of Ubisoft, international cell phone game developer and proud creators of *Paris Hilton's Diamond Quest*. Each of Gameloft's studios function independently, but oftentimes a particular project will be touched by hands from across the planet. Each person plays his part in the vast company structure, working together as a gestalt.

One of the branches we work with most is in China. A lot of the time, testers in Montreal will work with Chinese developers, identifying and fixing bugs together. Same company, same game project. How disconnected can we really be? The time zone difference isn't a big deal. Just switch a.m. to p.m. Simple enough. Language barrier? Since the people at my studio are predominantly

French-speaking, and those in Chinese studios speak Mandarin, everyone finds common ground in the world's new *lingua franca*, English! Never have emoticons been so instrumental toward a company's success.

Of course, there's more. Both branches work different hours per week, for different salaries, with different tools. The games themselves are made for completely different markets. While many people in North America still can't understand why anyone would pay for a cell phone game, the mobile and casual gaming industries are thriving in China. Additionally, only a fraction of the country's games arrive in North America, and not necessarily the most popular, specifically for cultural reasons.

With such an industry divide on so many levels, inter-studio work becomes that much more perplexing.

It could be, though, that human or cultural disconnect doesn't really get in the way of the final product after all. A programmer in China might be equally distant from the project's creative core

as the tester in Montreal. Less creative tasks are analogous to the company that makes paint, crafts easels, or produces canvas for an artist. Maybe even the game artists themselves are playing a certain kind of assembly role, and only the designer can be likened to a "painter" commissioned by his marketing patrons.

As the industry grows, inter-studio work will likely expand to mirror market diversity. China has the world's fastest growing economy. Combined with its booming online gaming market, the effects of its buying power will most assuredly be felt here. But just as one consciousness emerges from communication between two communicating brain hemispheres, perhaps there is hope for subsidiaries of global game companies on opposite ends of the planet to keep a sense of themselves. COMMENTS

Simon Abramovitch is a philosophy graduate and freelance writer, and currently maintains a blog about the purpose of humankind at www.thehumanpurpose.com

As the industry grows, inter-studio work will likely expand to mirror market diversity. China has the world's fastest growing economy.

RED Blindness

China will soon be the #1 online gaming market, and the U.S. has no clue how or why

by Allen Varney

For most of the last 3,000 years, the Chinese were the planet's most technologically advanced culture. They fell disastrously with the Industrial Revolution, but in this new century China is poised to regain its traditional lead - at least on the web. As of 2005, the CIA rated China the world's second-largest economy.,China has also overtaken Japan as the second-largest internet market, with 111 million users online. At its current growth rate, China should pass the U.S. in internet usage in five or six years. By that time, the Chinese gaming biz - which started five years ago, is expected to gross $900 million this year, and is growing at 24% a year - will hit $2.1 billion.

According to a report called "Red Innovation" by research house Pacific Epoch, 80 Chinese companies are already operating 150-plus online games, some of them with millions of players. Yet, except for a few Western and Korean imports, no one in America talks about those 150-plus games. Has anyone here played them, or even seen them? Apparently not - though that never stops people from commenting. Slashdot, Digg, Kotaku, all the rest - put

"game" and "China" in the same sentence, and watch endless, repetitive chatter about the same hot-button side issues:

- Chinese gold farmers

- Piracy

- Losers who play for 50 hours straight and then kill their wife or jump out a window

- Government efforts to restrain said losers by restricting how long they can play

- Knucklehead propaganda efforts like the proposed "*Anti-Japan War Online*" and "*Chinese Hero Registry*"

- Tech companies censoring searches and finking on protesters

- Tibet, Taiwan, Tienanmen Square ...

- The communist regime is corrupt, repressive, faltering, a ticking time bomb, everyone wants out, the rural masses will rise and overthrow their leaders, institute democracy, wah dah doo dah

All worthy subjects, but what about the games? It turns out there's a reason no one discusses Chinese games, a reason beyond the barriers of language and currency and trans-Pacific bandwidth. The explanation tells much about the state of Chinese online gaming, and how it will change in the next decade or two.

Middle Kingdom Games
The Sign, World of Legend, The Age, Magical Land, Westward Journey Online II (56 million registered accounts, 580,000 peak concurrent users), *Fantasy Westward Journey* (1.3 million concurrent), *Sanguo Heroes Online, Travia, Yulgang* (nine million accounts) - ever hear of these, or any of the rest?

Sure, you've heard of *Lineage*, and possibly *Kart Rider*, *Silk Road Online* and many other Asian games. But those are Korean, not Chinese. The South Korean industry, the world market leader in MMOGs, inspired the Chinese imitators. But now, homebrew games are winning out. According to the Korean IT Industry Promotion Agency (via Gamasutra), in 2003, Korean online games made up 68% of the total Chinese market in online games, but only 38% in 2004 and 20% in 2005.

Yet for all their millions of players, English-language descriptions of these Chinese games are rare and generic. Here's *World of Legend*, first in Shanda Interactive Entertainment's "Genesis of the Century" trilogy of games:

"Mankind is divided into three races spiritually, namely 'Dream Tiger,' 'Valley' and 'Flood.' Wars and weak royalty left the world to mighty warlords and the law of the jungle. The three races either fought or faked alliances. The day finally came when the devil, long imprisoned by ancient powers, regained its strength from the underground. Tamed demons began to revolt and even to erode human spirit. [...] Inside the *World of Legend*, user's characters exist in a virtual community where they experience unique lives as masters or apprentices, husbands or wives and members of a guild. Users can also enjoy virtual communities as 'siege battle,' 'guild battle,' 'civilization' and 'community life.'"

Vague, you say? That's among the most detailed English descriptions out there. For comparison, here's how NetEase. com, Inc. describes its *Westward Journey II Online* and *Fantasy Westward*

Journey, the most popular Chinese games in 2004 and much of 2005:

"*Westward Journey Online II* is based on the famous and romantic Chinese classical fiction *Journey to the West*, and the well-known film by Stephen Chow. It possesses of Chinese traditional painting style, with a touching story and well balanced game systems, it has become the most popular online game among all the China made online games.

"The background of the *Fantasy Westward Journey* is based on the mythology of *Westward Journey*, adopting a cartoon style to achieve into a romantic online game with full of energy. We have developed a brand new artistic style, humorous dialogues, gang competition, missions, refined technical advancement, all are well presented in the game."

Uh, yeah. Whatever. The only Chinese games with English-language versions (so far) come from NetDragon WebSoft, a division of TQ Digital Entertainment, a mid-range player in the crowded Chinese market. In America, NetDragon has

launched a *Pokemon*-style game, *Monster & Me*, and a couple of fantasy RPGs: *Conquer Online* ("Experience the ancient Chinese Kungfu and magic, enjoy the endless beautiful scenery and mythical environment in which you can develop your own character and interact with other real-life and imaginary beings") and *Eudemons Online* ("In this mythic world, you can choose to become a Warrior, Mage and Paladin. Command your heroes to adventure on the vast land of Atlantis and challenge the power of sword and magic"). Even these games draw little attention outside their own sites.

The English speakers who write most about Chinese games are business folks like Bill Bishop and investment firms like Goldman Sachs. They chronicle the current misfortunes of MMOG giants Shanda and NetEase.com, analyze the new play-for-free business models now gaining traction, and study the fast rise of The9.

The9's name describes online gaming as the new "ninth art," joining painting, sculpture, architecture and the rest. The9 built upon their previous licensing success (they worked with Korean company Webzen to distribute *MU* in

There's nine hundred million of them in the world today, You'd better learn to like them, that's what I say.

- Eric Idle, "I Like Chinese," *Monty Python's Contractual Obligation Album* (1980)

China) by acquiring the Chinese *World of Warcraft* license. Launched in June 2005, the Chinese version of *WoW* immediately drew hundreds of thousands of concurrent players, and is now China's largest online game. But The9 has done a poor job coping with the crowds, and there are frequent disconnects and terrible lag (an unintentional metaphor for Chinese bureaucracy, perhaps?). Because Chinese players pay by the hour, including the hours it takes to log in and join a server, infuriated customers have called for a boycott, so far in vain. *WoW* continues to grow in China as everywhere else, outstripping the native Chinese MMOGs for the same reason that nobody writes about, or cares about, the native Chinese MMOGs.

It's because, basically, they suck.

You're No Good, You're No Good, You're No Good
"The biggest knock against Chinese game developers (from the Western game developer perspective) is that Chinese game developers don't know how to make the game fun," writes Pacific Epoch analyst Sheng Koo. "Part of the reason may be Chinese game developers didn't grow up playing

Dungeons & Dragons and other various paper-and-pencil roleplaying games, board games, card games, tabletop miniature games, etc."

Erick Wujcik, an American game designer who now runs the design division at Ubisoft China in Shanghai, agrees. "The Chinese have no tradition of hobby gaming - or rather, they do, but the games they play were perfected 3,000 years ago." In the 1970s, while Western gamers struggled to understand, clean up, and vary the obtuse rules of first-edition *D&D* and SPI wargames, the Chinese were still playing mahjong, weiqi (go), shogi, Chinese dominoes, and (yes) Chinese checkers. How could you possibly improve the design of go? Chinese gamers found little chance to develop their design instincts, until they got to play Korean and American games in China's 265,000 internet cafes.

Now, they're catching up. Fast.

Insourcing
"Korea created the Chinese [MMOG] industry," says Wujcik. "In 2004 70% of Chinese [MMOG] income went to South Korea. The Chinese government woke

up. They're very aggressively promoting the [MMOG] game industry."

OK, but when "the Chinese government" promotes something, **who** exactly does the promoting? It's hard to say. A report by the interactive entertainment industry research firm DFC Intelligence lists a hair-raising alphabet of niggling bureaucracies: "the State Press and Publications Administration (GAPP), the Ministry of Information Industry (MII), the Ministry of Culture (MoC), the State Copyright Bureau, the Ministry of Public Security, the Bureau of State Secrecy, the Commission of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration (SASAC), and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT). These agencies all have a hand in controlling the game industry through regulations that not only are constantly changing, but often conflict."

Still, somehow or other, the Chinese game industry is being promoted. Check the PDF report called "Analysis of the Development of Chinese Online Game Industry," written by Qun Ren and Xiaosong Yang, students in business and computer animation at Bournemouth

University (U.K.). The report lists several recent government initiatives:

- A school of game software created in October 2003 at Sichuan University in Chengdu, capital of southwestern China's Sichuan province, plus online gaming departments in 10 other universities.

- A technical college and 15 training centers for internet games, set up in August 2004.

- National online game development bases in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangdong province and Sichuan province.

- A 1-2 billion renminbi (U.S. $120-240 million) program announced by GAPP in October 2004 to sponsor development of 100 online games in the next five years. The MII has also appropriated funds to support some domestic online game companies.

In addition, EA, Ubisoft and most of the other big Western game companies have set up Chinese divisions, mostly in Shanghai. Each of these companies employs hundreds of workers.

All of this demonstrates the classic Chinese "human wave" method of problem-solving. In software production, this approach usually doesn't work. But in MMOGs, where content is king, this may be a key to eventual Chinese dominance. It depends on whether Chinese developers actually learn how to make fun games, either through all these state-sponsored programs or, more likely, just by playing the games to death.

It'll probably happen. Out of 200 million or more players, you have to think some of them will develop real talent. Sure, it may take decades. But China has decades. It's been around for 3,000

years already, and for most of that time it was Earth's most advanced culture.

Chinese designers will get better. Then, we'll see interesting stuff, and Westerners will finally talk about, and play, these games. Take off your blinders; the future is red. [COMMENTS

Allen Varney designed the PARANOIA paper-and-dice roleplaying game (2004 edition) and has contributed to computer games from Sony Online, Origin, Interplay, and Looking Glass.

The national academies' report points out that China and India combined graduate 950,000 engineers every year, compared with 70,000 in America; that for the cost of one chemist or engineer in the U.S. a company could hire five chemists in China or 11 engineers in India; that of the 120 $1 billion-plus chemical plants being built around the world, one is in the United States and 50 are in China.

- Fareed Zakaria, "How Long Will America Lead the World?" *(Newsweek)*

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The Jade gamer

by Spanner

Do you ever wonder if we have too much choice?

We hear tired clichés all the time about competition being good for the consumer, and I'm in full agreement when it comes to buying fruit and vegetables at the market, but looking across the sprawling techno-vista of available computer and videogaming opportunities, I find myself staring into a particularly noisy abyss.

Right now, I'm quite keen to buy a new game system, and like the obedient consumer I am, I find myself asking a question previously uploaded into the decision matrix of my brain by the Gibson-esque industry: "PlayStation, Xbox or that new Nintendo thing whose name we do not speak?"

Don't get me wrong; I'm not going off into my usual "retro gaming" rant. These three systems demand serious investigation, yet it quickly becomes obvious that our apparent overabundance of choices all lead back to the same two or three sources: products cleverly

designed to complement each other at every turn and drown the market in an astronomically expensive advertising competition, keeping the smaller players from joining the elitist videogame suppliers club.

While visiting China Town in Manchester, England, I saw a Java sticker on the door of a Chinese newsagents/VCD/magazine shop with the word "games" written underneath it. Inside were two girls, three lads and the shop assistant, all standing around or leaning on the counter thumbing away at their mobile phones. After a few minutes of pretending to look at the magazines (one of which should have been on the top shelf – oops) and trying to catch a peripheral glance at their phone screens, I decided to ask about the "Java games" ad on the door.

The assistant told me - without looking up from his phone - that they sold mobile games. He was far too busy to elaborate on this, so I enquired of the other customers if that's what they were playing.

I know a basic, broken smattering of Chinese and was able to decipher that they recently arrived from Wuhan, and were indeed playing a new game which was tearing up the mobile gaming charts back in the motherland (the translation of its name was beyond my limited understanding of Mandarin, however). The shop assistant curtly asked if I wanted it, and being the old campaigner that I am, I decided it would be valuable research for a forthcoming *The Escapist*

article I had planned. For the benefit of you, the reader, I set about getting this game onto my mobile phone.

For the price of two and a half pounds, he hit the internet for a few minutes, then handed me a scrap of paper with eight letters and a number written on it – I was to text the letters to the number (the SMS was a further £1.50), and then I'd receive my game. In truth, I was losing my bottle, as everyone's heard horror stories about bottomless money pits when it comes to "texting for

ringtones," but you are dear to me, reader, so I persevered.

To my immense delight (and equally immense relief), it turned out to be an Easternized version of *Metal Slug*! My round-eyed excitement was not shared among the shop's other residents, but I really didn't care; this game rules! An hour later, the bell above the door announced a new customer, and I awoke from my phone related reverie, realizing I'd suddenly become one of the shop's virtual Terracotta Warriors of the Mobile Gaming Army. I wished them all a breezy *zaijian* (goodbye), and headed off to the train station. I almost missed my stop, which is the **only** stop I might add, from staring

intently into the mobile phone screen I'd never before given a second thought.

Could it be that I **actually found** a new game platform in the midst of those magnificent seventh generation consoles waving their triple processor, 3-D extreme temptations under my nose while a dazzling entourage of handheld beauties danced a seductive, overpriced advertising campaign on the shelves next to them? Surely, my Chinese experience was not a unique one.

I dug a little deeper into the distended landfill of available Chinese software and came to realize there are contemporary

the **escapist**

gaming platforms out there, which, despite being driven by the consumer, are prolific enough to rival the big boys who can afford those multi-billion dollar advertising budgets and massively expensive retail shelf space. China, it seems, is a haven for the perplexed, jaded gamer.

With traditional market leaders unable to find a finger hold in such a prolific, yet low-profit industry, the particularly discerning Eastern gamer is in a position

and game developers - has found an entertainment outlet that provides **real** choice. It doesn't take a large team of programmers, artists and musicians millions of dollars to create a new game for a mobile phone, and buying the latest titles is a simple matter of having them sent to your handset at any time of day, the storefront being nothing more than a couple of bars of signal strength.

Despite an estimated 40-50% of the world's PCs (and a significant portion of

communication tools to become available to an otherwise disconnected populace, it also provides the main source of new games, even when those titles are paid for in person at a retail store, as I discovered in Manchester.

Clearly one of the major contenders for the much anticipated boom in Chinese videogames, mobile gaming highlights another more personal divergence from the way we in the West play our games. While we sit on our sofas and in our bedrooms for hours on end as we indulge our computer entertainment addictions, the Chinese are (as the platform's name suggests) going mobile with their playing experience.

Buying the latest titles is a simple matter of having them sent to your handset at any time of day, the storefront being nothing more than a couple of bars of signal strength.

to dictate to the manufacturer what they want to play; inversely proportional to the way our computer and videogame shelves are filled by gigantic corporations who tell **us**, the lowly Western gamer, what we will and won't enjoy.

The Chinese player - who for the most part is unable to afford (and is therefore unsupported by) the big name consoles

individual PC components) being manufactured in China, the majority of the population is in no position to own their own computer. In the same way that a lack of affordable gaming systems has influenced the massive proliferation of mobile games, the lack of a PC has lead to an unprecedented growth in WAP and wireless internet access. Not only does this allow an aspect of the internet's

When the console/computer is always in your pocket, there is no restriction as to where the games are bought or played. Mobile gaming is becoming something of a social experience for the Chinese; gathering together to play the latest craze, or thumbing away at a game while out on the train or shopping, like my collective of Java junkies in China Town. Granted, there may not be much eye contact and these groups of mesmerized mobile fondlers might not be replete with

poignant conversation, but they are at least congregating with other, tangible gamers while playing. Perhaps, it's not the ideal way to spend your formative years, but young people across the world have known considerably more personally and socially destructive pastimes than tapping away at a phone keypad. With such a monumental number of players, it's never hard to find other like-minded people to get together with and play, and as popularity grows, so does the subscription to more advanced network services.

China Mobile, the largest mobile phone service provider in China, has reported an average of five million new subscribers a month, and although it is struggling to keep up with the network load, it's also pouring millions into upgrading the services to meet expectations of the game-playing youth; desperately trying to predict the next technological gaming sensation. The Java and WAP games being developed in China, Korea and Japan (with Europe and the U.S. now getting in on the action) are becoming more detailed and in-depth playing experiences, and with over 400 million mobile phone subscribers in China alone, a great deal of investment is going into ways of using this immense wireless network for multiplayer gaming.

This trend for a more social gaming scene has also led to a totally unprecedented number of online gamers who go to internet cafes to access their MMOGs. Just as with mobile gaming, this practice, perhaps, isn't as socially interactive as playing sports, for instance, or ballroom dancing, but there has to be some benefit from at least playing in public with other dedicated participants. I must confess to finding a particular attraction to this side of communal game-related gatherings, as they garner a reputation for being seedy, back alley, digital dens of iniquity; harboring an intensely addicted gaming fraternity similar in nature to the sordid, grief-hole town center arcades of my own misspent youth.
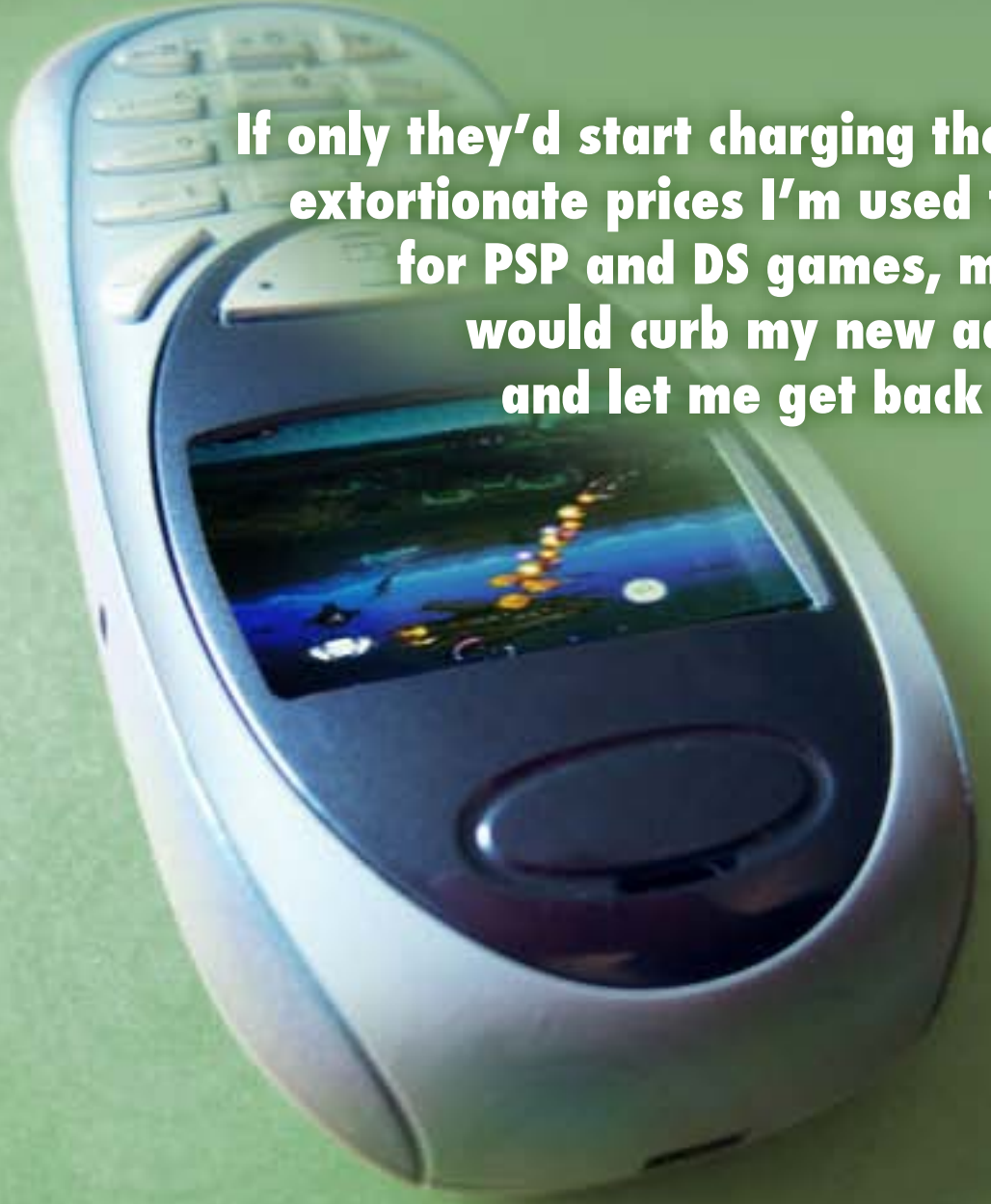
These MMOG access cafes are so popular, the Chinese government has felt it necessary to curb online playing time with a virtual curfew of around five hours, though it doesn't stop the players switching to a different roleplaying game once their time is up. Reports of people lining up for hours on end to get online, while others remain at their screens for 24 hours and more, are not in the least bit uncommon. In one particularly unpleasant case, a severely addicted roleplayer murdered a fellow gamer for selling a valuable weapon lent to him, after the police said it was not within the law to protect a person's virtual property.

Mobile phone technology in China is still a ways behind the U.S. and Europe, who

With such a monumental number of players, it's never hard to find other like-minded people to get together with and play.

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have been making considerable investment into the wireless communication infrastructure for a lot longer, and even the West has yet to establish decent mobile access to the virtual world of the MMOG. The potential for crossover between the two technologies holds a monumental appeal, however, and has already begun in some small way for the more adventurous Chinese gamer.

Companies are appearing that provide information and statistics about various persistent worlds, quests or messages to players via their mobile phones, allowing them to keep a watchful eye on their alternate realities while away from the internet cafes. This first step in linking China's two major gaming avenues is an important one, and is key to the consumer-driven-investment communication revolution that is sweeping through the country.

If only they'd start charging the kind of extortionate prices I'm used to seeing for PSP and DS games, maybe it would curb my new addiction and let me get back to work, but in the meantime, I'm just

going to have to get used to squinting at my fantastic new game platform for 18 hours a day. I don't remember the last phone call I made, but for the first time since I owned a ZX Spectrum in the mid-'80s, I can at least say that I have an abundance of choice when it comes to deciding which game I'll play next.

But this wonderful gaming platform offers more than just choice; it finally allows players to enjoy a liberty that handheld systems have been striving to realize since electronic games were first conceived. My very introduction to the world of mobile games demonstrates the potential for communal gaming anywhere there is a surplus of mobile phone users, not just in China. We've had worldwide gaming communities for some time now, and mobile phones are offering us the chance to rediscover a wealth of local game playing unity; the chance to once again come face to face with other players. **COMMENTS**

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

You Play My Language?

by Patrick Dugan

An exotic stranger smiles at you. You approach with a coy ease, looking up and down at the gorgeous visuals this person is putting on, intrigued by the prospect of an intense interaction. You say hi, casually introduce yourself, maybe tell a joke, but there is a problem: This person does not speak your language.

Whether you're trying to hook-up in a bar or are looking for a group in *Guild Wars*, you can't play socially if you can't speak the language. Language exists in games in two forms: strings of text, and interfaces. Good translation of embedded game narrative has been the gold standard of making a title fit for an international audience, but new forms of play and interface design are about to change that.

It's easy to localize a game with a concrete, static interface. The internal logic doesn't change, only the text. Socially oriented forms of play, such as MMOGs and dramatic systems, aren't so easy; while embedded text assets may still be involved, social play typically demands a linguistic interface, or "toy language." When it comes to social games,

one must consider localization from **the beginning of the design process.**

There are three approaches to designing a linguistic interface: logographic, pictographic and alphabetical. By themselves and in concert, these approaches present different pros and cons in terms of a game's overall system design and in terms of making that design trans-cultural.

Logographic – a language of symbols that stand for specific concepts and words. The earliest written languages were logographic, but the best modern example is Chinese, which requires a reader to memorize 2,000 symbols in order to be proficient. It takes Chinese school children the better part of their education to accomplish this. While the Chinese characters have to encompass an entire society's vocabulary, not all logographic languages have to be so expansive. In fact, almost all game interfaces are logographic languages, typically consisting of a dozen verbs and a hierarchy of abstractions.

Chris Crawford's Storytron technology takes the logographic approach,

requiring hundreds (even thousands) of verbs to enable user interaction with a dramatic world.

The interface, called Deikto, is structured around a basic sentence composed of a subject, verb and direct object, with the verb being the most crucial component. The logically simple cause and effect relationship of the core grammar, while not as intuitive as watching Master Chief shoot an Elite, is a straightforward representation that anyone with basic literary competency in any language can wrap his head around.

Identifying the representation calls on other linguistic forms, either with alphabetical language (Joe – Punch – Fred) or pictographic icons (an image of Joe's face – an image of clenched fist – an image of Fred's face). Icons are great in theory (they suggest the relevant nouns and verbs irrespective of language), but due to the sheer number of icons necessary to create an entire language, they're infeasible to use in a game interface.

Pictographic – the use of symbolic images to represent specific objects. The most famous example of this in natural

language is a significant portion of the Egyptian Hieroglyphic, with its almost comic book-style conveyance. Pictographic language can be described as an ideal dressing for the logographic guts of an interface - icons can do great things to simplify and streamline a conventional interface. But where does pictographic language come into play for socially oriented games? It seems like the most direct approach to language has a snug home in the most direct approach to social gaming, the massively multiplayer space.

World of Warcraft is one of the most successful MMOG ever made, one that enjoys a strong fan base in China. It's possible that this trans-cultural success can be directly attributed to how the interface consists of familiar icons that fit within the logic of the franchise's fictional world. Unfortunately, the game's textual elements, which appear in nominal mission assignments that few people take the time to read, do little to aid players interested in socializing with others of different nationalities.

A soon-to-be-released MMOG, *Tabula Rasa*, strives to remedy that, using a full pictographic language to both inscribe

lore, and to help users of all languages organize their efforts. Basic shapes and stickmen-representations constitute a large number of glyphs that have fairly self-evident meaning, even when taken together to form phrases.
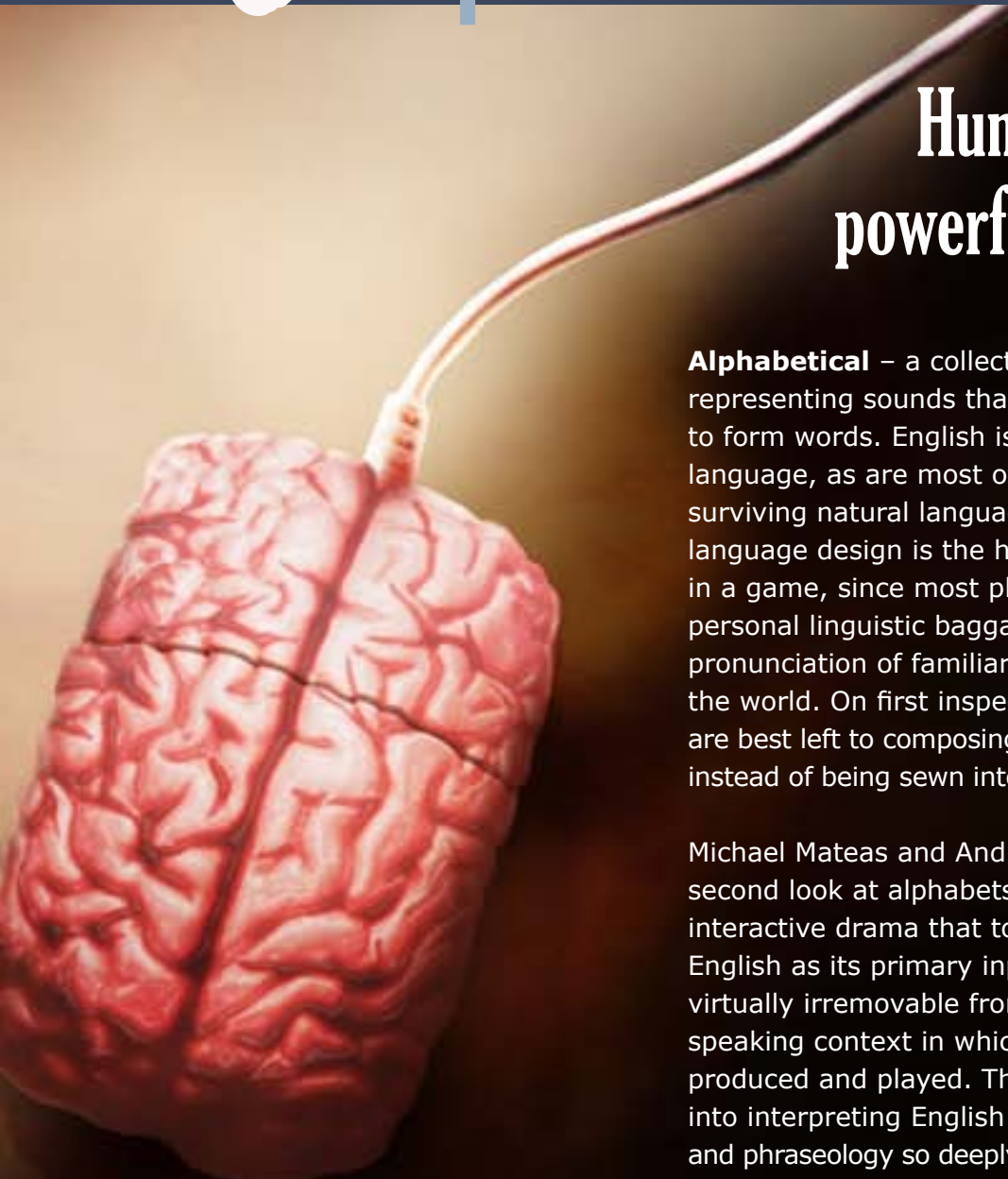
The system was designed by Richard Garriott, the man most famous for the *Ultima* games. He seeks to pose moral and social challenges to players from different cultural backgrounds. The game's content and foundation is a logographic interface, enabling the usual spatial navigation, combat and leveling

Richard Garriott seeks to pose moral and social challenges to players from different cultural backgrounds.

that we've come to love in MMOGs, leaving the pictographic language to serve only as a means of communication. It seems like an interesting invention, though only time will tell if *Tabula Rasa* plumbs any new social depths.

Human pattern recognition is more powerful than any AI system yet made.

Alphabetical – a collection of symbols representing sounds that come together to form words. English is an alphabetical language, as are most of the world's surviving natural languages. Alphabetical language design is the hardest to pull off in a game, since most players carry their personal linguistic baggage (e.g., pronunciation of familiar lettering) into the world. On first inspection, alphabets are best left to composing embedded text, instead of being sewn into an interface.

Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern took a second look at alphabets in *Façade*, an interactive drama that took strings of English as its primary input. *Façade* is virtually irremovable from the English speaking context in which it was produced and played. The system is tied into interpreting English syntax, idioms and phraseology so deeply that to translate

it for a Chinese-speaking audience, Mateas and Stern would have to re-design the game from the ground up.

Alphabetical interface design seems like a lost cause, but here's another approach: Any form of alphabetical input must simplify to a discrete unit, a logogram. The current technical impossibility of natural language processing requires all input to filter into a very specific system. So, the real aim of an alphabetical system isn't to simulate an in-game conversation, it's to offer players more verb selections than a 12-button controller, a Deikto-esque GUI or an MMOG's icon tray can facilitate. This means that an in-game alphabet doesn't have to be tied to any cultural context, but instead must be carefully designed to be consistent with a game's internal logic.

A design I'm currently developing utilizes the Celtic alphabet, Ogham, as an interface in an Irish magic school, where different letter combinations evoke spells and simple social cues. I'm divorcing the alphabet from its original phonetic use and designing my own alphabetical logic to be consistent with the game's world and its magic system. This means that a Chinese person could play it, needing only a translation of the game's embedded text to help him learn the interface.

No matter what approach is taken to designing the linguistic elements of a game, remember that human pattern recognition is more powerful than any AI system yet made. An elegant interface, and the play it supports, will reverberate as a universal language. `COMMENTS`

Patrick Dugan is the next Patrick Dugan. He's currently working on a tightly constrained, extremely stylized drama game for the Nintendo DS, and beginning to mess around with Storytron. Follow his scratchware autuership at King Lud IC.

the escapist

MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"What is your favorite type of Chinese food?"

Thomas Wilburn, "How China Cheats at the Videogame Industry"
General Tso's Chicken, without a doubt. It's spicy, greasy, and unapologetic - plus, the General himself was a fascinating historical figure. But here's the sad twist: like so much of American Chinese food, **it's not really Chinese**. It was invented in New York City. Imagine my surprise and disappointment when I sat down for my first meal in the Middle Kingdom!

Allen Varney, "Red Blindness"
Dim sum, as served from wheeled carts in hectically crowded restaurants. Get there at just the right time, at just the right table, and a flotilla of carts will load you with thirty plates of food before you have so much as sat down. "There is a tide in the affairs of dim sum / Which, taken at the flood, leads on to gluttony."

Spanner, "The Jade Gamer"
Being a connoisseur of fine ales, I'd have to say my favorite Chinese food is probably a bottle (or three) of Tsing Tao with a side helping of jiu and a Singha for desert. Ohhhh, my aching liver.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor
Chicken fried rice and a spring roll.

Joe Blancato, Associate Editor
Mongolian beef, but only when it's spicy.

Russ Pitts, Associate Editor
Crab Rangoons. Cream cheese + crab = mouth orgasm. But they have to have real crab in them, otherwise they're Whitefish Rangoons, and who would eat that?

Jon Hayter, Producer
Cat fried rice and a spring roll.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor
I tend to stick with veggies when eating Chinese. Beyond that, no preference.