Researching ambient playfulness through Happy Farm

In China, three very different but interrelated phenomena have evolved around online gaming communities. First, phenomena such as in-game protesting (Chan 2009; Hjorth and Chan, 2009) have highlighted the role of the Internet as a form of public sphere for political agency which is especially apparent in blogging culture (Qiu, 2009; Wallis, 2013). Second, the locative capability of mobiles exemplified in the rise of gamified Location Based Services such as *Jiepang* where electronic and co-present social spaces are overlaid onto the geographic and physical (Hjorth and Gu, 2012; Hjorth and Richardson, 2014). Third, we see millions of young and old people who now play simple casual, social games such as *Happy Farm* through social media such as Renren and Kaixin. It is this third phenomenon that is of special interest to this chapter on relationships.

In the social media game *Happy Farm*, players acquire, raise and sell farm produce while chatting with neighbours and exchanging gifts and favours. One of the key affordances of the game is the capacity to steal other people's produce when they are offline or not in the game, simulating a real-world scarcity of resources to compensate for the game-world's infinite resources. *Happy Farm* is an example of persistent and ambient play with many millions of players having it open on a browser all day and night while doing something else. Many of the Chinese players interviewed by Hjorth and Arnold (2013) discussed how they enjoyed the ambient quality of *Happy Farm*, having it sitting in the background (of the desktop) so that they could move in and out of the mainframe of their focus. Many *Happy Farm* players keep the game open on their desktop whilst doing other activities (such as work) to avoid being robbed of their virtual produce, and some even set their alarms for late in the night so that they can go online in order to steal when everyone else is asleep. In its omnipresence, players often found it hard to articulate how long they played it each day.

Data collected during fieldwork in Shanghai from 2009 to 2010 at Fudan University provided a perfect snapshot of the rise and fall of *Happy Farm*. Through ethnographic methods such as participant observation with students and their parents, along with focus groups, scenarios of use and interviews, we were able to gain a sense of the ways in which *Happy Farm* was helping students, parents and grandparents overcome geographic distance through co-present ambient playfulness within the fields of *Happy Farm.* For many of these students from predominantly working-class

backgrounds, the socioeconomic mobility gained through education is being transferred in unofficial ways to their parents and grandparents through cross-generational media literacy. This is particularly prevalent in the uptake of social media games.

In a curious twist to the usual narratives concerning young people's compulsive media use, some respondents even claimed that their parents were 'addicted' to games, especially parents who had retired and had 'too much time on their hands'. Many respondents also noted that their parents viewed the Internet as a contemporary version of the television in terms of its status as an entertainment medium. We became inquisitive as to whether this 'inappropriate' usage and understanding of new media was a reality or whether it was the subjective perspective of the participants. This, in turn, made us wonder about these new forms of cross-generational media literacy and attendant types of usage.

To reflect on these questions, Larissa Hjorth and Michael Arnold conducted follow-up fieldwork in June and July 2010. This time, in addition to student surveys, focus groups and one-to-one interviews, Hjorth and Arnold interviewed a specific group of students and conducted separate interviews with their parents. Through these conversations, they explored some of the ways in which these students traverse home and away through mobile and Internet technologies. In Shanghai, students often use mobile media to communicate with their parents through a variety of media, including voice calls and social media. For many of the older generation, China's oldest social media, QQ, is synonymous with being online (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4 Mobile, yet still in China

Source: Photograph by Larissa Hjorth.

Geographic mobility is increasingly common among the *ba ling hou* (generation y). In this mobility, social media games, played with both friends and family at home and also fellow students, help alleviate the loneliness experienced when absent from home. However, while these games helped people to bond, they were also marked by different usage and etiquette, especially across generations. For example, a 26-year-old female student noted that online games were becoming integral to connecting with friends and family. As she described:

> I never used to play games but now I play many (online) games with friends and family. I will play with students whilst we are in a lab waiting for experiments to be finished. I play *Happy Farm* with my mum. She loves stealing my vegetables. I also play it with my roommate and often she will say aloud, 'I'm going to steal your vegetables!' and it makes me laugh.

By the end of 2010, the *ba ling hou* were no longer ambiently playing *Happy Farm* on their PCs. Instead, they were taking up mobile gaming with the rise of smartphones and again teaching their parents and grandparents again to use different multiplayer mobile media games so that they might play together while occupying a co-present gaming space.

In 2009, 3G mobile technologies were introduced, heralding another shift in

gaming practices, including the growth of smartphone pirate industries (*shanzhai*) and the movement of gaming and gamification in social media on PCs to its convergence on smartphones. By late 2010, media-rich microblog Sina Weibo (like Twitter, but it allows for embedded video and images) dominated the scene, as, too, did a new breed of gamified location-based services, along with camera phone mobile apps such as Jiepang which began to emerge. In 2010, *Happy Farm* released its second version, but by then everything had 'gone to seed' (Millward, 2012). For the *ba ling hou,* mobile media games are essential in negotiating place and co-presence as they traverse the distance between home and away. In a negotiation of older social media like QQ and new mobile games, *ba ling hou* are continuing to teach, and be taught by, their parents and grandparents.

Understanding the rise and fall of *Happy Farm* in China helps us to appreciate the particular ways in which social media gaming has been embraced by different generations. It also provides insight into the ebbs and flows of games as part of popular culture imaginaries. *Happy Farm* highlights the rise and fall of social media games, but within a different cultural context. *Happy Farm* was the precursor to one of the first social media game successes in English-speaking contexts, Zynga's *FarmVille*. *FarmVille* helped to define Zynga's importance in the newly developing area of social games and apps and assisted Zonga's colonisation of Facebook games. Launched in the summer of 2008, *Happy Farm* soon boasted 23 million users across three social media platforms: Renren, Kaixin and QZone (Millward, 2012). By 2009, millions of parents in China were playing *Happy Farm* day and night with their young adult children who had moved away from home to study or work. *Happy Farm*, through its ambient play, afforded a type of omnipresent co-presence between family members separated by physical distance. Like having a family member in the background, *Happy Farm* helped to ease much of the loneliness on the part of both parents and their children studying away from home (Hjorth and Arnold, 2013).

This study provided insight into the cross-generational media practices being used in Shanghai to connect geographically distinct children and their parents. *Ba ling hou* often taught their parents how to use the new media and were surprised by their sometimes passionate uptake. The cross-generational usage demonstrates the ways in which the often tacit etiquette and vernacular around mobile media differs across the generations. Moreover, this study highlights how intimacy and co-presence are culturally specific with many of the mundane practices particular to the cultural and linguistic history of China, while others speak more generally to shifting

relationships to, and within, mobile media.