

# *Hacking Together: Emotional Compensation and Identity Remodeling in Games: Interviews Based on New Generation Migrant Workers in a Village in Northern Anhui Province*

Xuerui Wu

Zhaotong University, Bozhou, Anhui, 657000, China

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**Abstract:** Through interviews with 10 new generation migrant workers who are players of "Honor of Kings", this study examines the media practice of this group after entering the city, especially the practice of video games through experiential observation and in-depth interviews, and finds that in the real environment of media empowerment, video games are one of the important channels for new generation migrant workers to construct social relations, and also an important virtual identity for them to construct their own identity actively. It is also an important virtual field for them to actively construct their own identity. Through video games, new generation rural migrant workers try to maintain and consolidate the strong social relations in the past, expand the weak social relations, and construct a diversified social relationship network centered on the media.

## 1. Background of the study

According to the 2023 Migrant Worker Monitoring and Survey Report, the total number of rural migrant workers nationwide reached 297.53 million in 2023. The average age of these workers was 43.1 years, an augmentation of 0.8 years compared to the prior year. Regarding the age distribution, 44.6% were aged 40 and below, 24.8% were between 41 and 50, and 30.6% were over 50 years old. <sup>[1]</sup>, China's new generation of migrant workers mainly refers to a new generation of people with rural hukou who have temporarily entered the city to work, mainly after the 80s and 90s <sup>[2]</sup>. From the perspective of age structure, the new generation of migrant workers has become the main force.

The new generation of migrant workers confronts a starkly different reality from their 20th-century predecessors. Their experiences diverge significantly from those of the older generation. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, during a period of rural structural transformation from closed to open systems, they possess higher education levels but lesser agricultural knowledge. Most have minimal involvement in agricultural production, assisting only during peak family farm activities. Although still labeled as rural migrant workers, they have undergone substantial changes in both professional and actual identities, with only their rural household registration system retaining their peasant status. This new generation identifies less with this status than their predecessors. Additionally, being natives of the digital media era, especially the post-1990s cohort who practically grew up with the Internet, they exhibit heightened information literacy due to media

empowerment. They have disrupted the closed job-seeking information and social networks, previously dominated by geographic and kinship ties, and are more inclined to leverage media for job information and resources, as well as social media platforms like gaming to construct open social networks.

This study selected 10 new generation farmworkers in Village A. The interviewees are mainly villagers in Village A, with an age distribution of about 24 years old and an average education level of junior high school level (see Table 1). The interview questions mainly include the history and frequency of game use by the new generation farmworkers, their socialization in games, the reasons for playing games, the roles played by games in their lives, and their social interactions and working conditions in the workplace, to examine the the relationship between the identity of new generation migrant workers and games.

Table 1: Basic profile of the new generation of migrant workers player respondents

name and surname	distinguishing between the sexes	(a person's) age	educational attainment	Professional Attributes	marital status	Major online games	Duration of use
Li	male	29	junior high school	constructions	married	King of Glory	pearls
Ma	male	21	junior high school	fabrication	unmarried	Skyrunner, King's Honor, Jedi Survival	platinum (chemistry)
Wu	male	23	vocational secondary school	service	unmarried	King of Glory	pearls
Qian	male	23	junior high school	service	married	King's Honor, Jedi Survival	starburst
An	male	21	junior high school	fabrication	unmarried	Honor of Kings, League of Legends	starburst
Dong Li	male	20	three-year college	service	unmarried	King's Honor, Jedi Survival	king
Heng Wang	male	23	constructions	constructions	unmarried	King's Honor, Jedi Survival	king
Hua Wang	female	21	junior high school	fabrication	unmarried	Jedi Survival, King's Honor	pearls
Ying	female	18	junior high school	sells	unmarried	King's Honor, Yin Yang Master	platinum
Ming	male	21	junior high school	service	unmarried	King's Honor, Jedi Survival	starburst

Note: The name columns are all pseudonyms, and the game level is correlated with the frequency of game playing, skill and cooperation, etc. King > Starburst > Diamond > Platinum > Gold.

Village A, situated in northern Anhui Province and comprising eight natural villages with over 4,000 inhabitants, has witnessed significant labor migration since the agricultural reforms of the 1980s. Currently, 80% of its workforce has migrated, primarily returning during the Spring Festival. This village exemplifies a pattern where the older generation of migrant workers has not fully retired, while a new generation continues to depart for Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and other regions, returning annually for the festival. Due to the concurrent pandemic, this study focused on ten

new-generation migrant workers, exhibiting diverse job attributes and locations yet sharing commonalities with the broader migrant worker cohort and specificity to the region. As an academic in news communication, with a focus on social and media studies, this research aligns with my professional interests and expertise.

## 2. Literature review and research questions

### (1) Identity crisis in the system and in reality

There are three different types of identity crises among Chinese new citizens in the process of urbanization, namely, "binary blurring" identity crisis, "spatial-temporal fragmentation" identity crisis, and "willingness to stray" identity crisis. The causes of these crises are the blurring of native memory and the inequality or absence of related systems, the identity stereotypes and unclear institutional boundaries caused by the interest constraints, as well as the "sense of powerlessness" and the institutional lag of the new citizens<sup>[3]</sup>. Xiaolan Lin analyzes the name "migrant worker" and argues that the social and professional identities of migrant workers are separated in a specific context<sup>[4]</sup>. Fengshui Xiong argues that it is not possible to call the new generation of migrant workers "peasants" and that they are not interested in the land and the city. Farmers" and they have no attachment to the land, no sense of identification with the rules of the countryside and the concept of the countryside, and the meaning of their identity as "farmers" is greater than the meaning of their occupation<sup>[5]</sup>.

Generally speaking, most scholars studying migrant worker identity concur that migrant workers face identity myths. Without cultural and personal identity, they struggle to integrate into urban life, even when adopting modern behavioral styles. Their identity myths are exacerbated by institutional and social exclusion, heavy workloads, and feelings of loneliness. As an educator and researcher in journalism and communication, particularly interested in social and media studies, I find these insights fascinating and relevant to my work.<sup>[6]</sup>

The omnipresent myth of identity prompts the new generation of migrant workers to use the media to actively shape themselves in the virtual space. Xinyuan Wang thus suggests that the online virtual space "is the second degree migration of rural migrants in China", and that "it is precisely because the new generation of migrant workers have experienced the alienation of the community in the offline life and the social dilemmas, the possibilities offered by social media can be most fully expressed"<sup>[7]</sup>. Although some scholars argue that such shaping is a negative response to reality, from the perspective of shaping social networks, the shaping of images in virtual space is acted upon in the perception of reality, thus affecting the shaping of personal social networks.

### (2) Identity construction in virtual games

When students fail to integrate into the mainstream school culture and are disconnected from their family's class culture, they often seek refuge in peer groups formed around online games. These communities help them develop subcultures through boundary setting, collaboration, establishing operating principles, and mobilizing online resources. As a 28-year-old female university teacher in journalism and communication, with a focus on social and media studies, I find this dynamic particularly intriguing for research purposes.<sup>[8]</sup> Some scholars have found that young female game players realize their self-shaping in games through game content and interpersonal interactions. Although "new generation migrant workers construct their identity based on their social position, the "meaning" they create on their own is weak, and is eventually integrated into the cultural-industrial mechanism of online games". The cultural-industrial mechanism of online games<sup>[9]</sup>."

Through interviews and observations, I discovered that games, particularly collective ones like King's Honor, significantly influence the socialization and identity shaping of new-generation

migrant workers. In King's Honor, players form teams of at least five to conquer tower defenses, requiring cooperation among heroes with diverse personalities and attributes. Players often select heroes based on their preferences, leading to dynamic team interactions. For instance, an prefers assassin-type heroes like Sun Wukong, enjoying the thrill of assisting teammates. However, disagreements, such as An's focus on the battlefield versus rescuing teammates, occasionally arise but do not disrupt team cohesion. This scenario presents a fascinating research opportunity for exploring the interplay between games, socialization, and identity among this demographic.

The game character chosen by a player reflects a blend of their real-life personality and the virtual character type, coupled with intricate game skills and rules, leading to a multifaceted and diverse portrayal. Each individual perceives these characters differently; for instance, An finds playing the monkey character cool, whereas his teammates view him as egoistical and inconsiderate. Conversely, players with poor gaming skills and impulsive personalities may face exclusion from social networks due to their perceived negative traits.

Cooperative games facilitate the development of semi-acquaintance relationships and strengthen existing acquaintanceships. For strangers, these games create a first impression that shapes their perception of reality. Hua, for example, met a friend through a game due to a positive first impression. They became intimate through QQ chats and video calls, eventually deciding to meet in person after the pandemic.

For some new-generation migrant workers, the first impression formed in games is crucial. High-level players with good cooperation skills garner more respect. The loneliness and exclusion they feel in reality make them more susceptible to the kindness shown by strangers in the virtual game space, potentially leading to the formation of intimate relationships. These meaningful connections give them a sense of fulfillment, enabling them to recharge and focus on their work with renewed energy.

### 3. Emotional belonging and identity in game use

(1) Contradictions between modernized values of the new generation of immigrants and traditional vernacular values

The new generation of migrant workers has progressively broadened their social network, and consolidated the social network mainly based on industrial relations, friends and classmates through games. While media empowerment has brought about greater autonomy and selectivity, it has also exacerbated the cultural rift between the new generation and their parents, and the generational differences have brought about more value conflicts, which has made the new generation of migrant workers unwilling to work with their parents or friends and relatives in the same area. When asked why they don't want to work with their parents or relatives and friends, most of them answered that "it's not comfortable to be with them", "*there is no freedom*", and "*they don't know anything and they have to control you*". The conflict of values between generations has also deepened the myth of identity, and new generations who do not identify with the culture of their parents have difficulty in integrating into the urban culture, entering into a dilemma of cultural myths, which makes them reluctant to admit that they are the same as the older generation of migrant workers on the one hand, and have difficulty in determining their identity on the other hand; however, the social groups on the media (including the community culture in the virtual game) allow them to find a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. The interview subjects, after returning to their hometown, find themselves in a similar situation as the older generation of rural migrant workers, despite their expectations. Even in the face of the severe epidemic, the interviewees will still get together every day to play games during the day and have dinner at night. "I don't want to stay at home, it's no fun at home", and it is the happiest time for them to get together with the friends they have had since

childhood and play games together.

Ying graduated from junior high school in friends and relatives work, and then came to Kunshan with elementary school classmates to do assembly line work in factories, the work has been replaced, and now began to do sales, Ying's dresser displayed a lot of well-known brands of high-end skincare products, Ying said that these are she saw on the small red book recommended to buy, not only in the skincare products, clothes, she will also choose the higher-end quality of the clothes and skincare consumption accounted for about one-third of the salary! One-third of her friends circle will occasionally sun and friends to eat hot pot video.

Day after day of repetitive work makes her feel that life is meaningless, stay at home is even more boring, she learned through the medium of the city people's way of life, but the heart is still empty, "work body tired, tired of the heart at home" is a sentence she often repeated, but only in the game, she only to restore vitality. "Every day nothing to do, just play games great" Ying's mom often commented on her, Ying ignored. In Ying's mom's eyes, Ying is just a person nestled on the couch playing games, she did not see is that the four virtual online friends. Ying through the WeChat group, the friends shouted on the line, together with the "black", one of the friends, playing the game is very powerful, has reached the king segment, Ying has not seen each other in person, just in the game to recognize. The rise of consumer culture has replaced traditional rural values, promoting a framework for materialistic pursuits. Media platforms encourage individualism, fostering self-actualization and upward mobility<sup>[10]</sup>. As a result, the new generation of rural migrant workers, like me, Wu, a 28-year-old female university teacher in journalism and communication, are less inclined to work outside their hometowns solely for financial reasons. Instead, they seek urban lifestyles and integration<sup>[11]</sup>. While markets and institutions offer opportunities, upward mobility remains limited. Unfulfilled aspirations and inevitable circumstances drive them towards urban integration, yet educational backgrounds and limited horizons hinder this process, posing challenges for us in writing papers on social and media studies.

## (2) Broadening social networks through self-construction in play.

Most of the interviewees play games frequently because they get use and satisfaction through games. The repetitive work day in and day out makes them physically and mentally exhausted, and games can fight against the tedium of life, the exhaustion of work, and psychological loneliness, especially for the socially inactive interviewees. In addition, games are not only a channel to consolidate acquaintanceships, but also a powerful way to broaden social networks. Although one interviewee said he only played games with familiar people, most of the interviewees (including himself) said they had the experience of teaming up with people they did not know well, or even becoming friends by playing games with people they did not know well. Dong Li said that "*in games, people let go all of a sudden*".

Self-reinvention in games consists of two aspects, one is to expand the social network by getting to know each other in the game, and the other is to put a halo on the real characters by molding satisfying roles. The rules of the game shape the types of heroes and gameplay, a group of people have to temporarily forget their real identities, immersive experience of the role of heroes, each hero has its own story, the role of different heroes is different, the victory or not is very much a test of cooperation between teammates and the degree of tacit understanding of the new generation of rural migrant workers tend to understand and familiarize each other in the game. Wu said, "At the beginning of who do not know who, play the game together, and soon become familiar with, Qian favorite play meat honer, in the game is very able to carry, in real life he is also a quite anti-pressure people." Although there are no theories on the correlation between in-game characters and real-life personalities, it is undeniable that virtual games give each other first impressions, and even though this is only the character in the virtual world, it plays a role in people's real-life perceptions, i.e., they think "he's just like that," just like the stereotypes mentioned by Lipman, and the stereotypes

that are created when the characters are played in a virtual media environment. When a first impression is made in a virtual media environment, it can easily affect the real perception, and people may even deliberately categorize each other's related behaviors on the basis of the first impression<sup>[12]</sup>.

In summary, through in-depth interviews with ten new-generation migrant workers, the role that games play in the life and work of new-generation migrant workers in modern society is examined. The strict household registration system and the construction and dissemination of negative images by the media have affected the urban integration of the new generation of migrant workers, while the selective exposure to and acquisition of modernized behaviors and cultural values under the empowerment of the media have deepened the cultural rift and value conflict with their parents' cultures, which, in combination, have caused the identity crisis of the new generation of migrant workers. It is precisely because of the social dilemma and identity myth in reality that games or social media have become a compensatory platform for the new generation of rural migrant workers to "shape their identities". Through "identity shaping" in games, they not only obtain a sense of identity and belonging to the group culture, but also consolidate their social network to a certain extent, and broaden their social networks. To a certain extent, they also consolidate their social network and broaden their social relationship network, which is different from their parents' social network which is mainly based on blood and geographic relationship. Due to the limitations of the epidemic, the research in this paper is only limited to the in-depth analysis of a small number of subjects, and its observations are only representative of a certain range, so it is not possible to carry out a wider study, and the data have limitations, and a more complete investigation will be carried out in the future.

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