

PASSING THE FLAME OF CARE:  
A STUDY OF SHITU (MASTER-APPRENTICE) SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP  
IN CHINESE VIDEO GAMES BASED ON THE EXAMINATION OF JX3

by

Shenghan Gao

Bachelor of Arts, Queen's University, 2015

A Major Research Project  
presented to Ryerson University

in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Digital Media  
in the program of  
Digital Media

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2020

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## **Abstract**

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Shenghan Gao

Master of Digital Media

Digital Media

Ryerson University, 2020

Shitu, translated as Master-Apprentice, is a unique type of digital relationship that exists in Chinese massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as JX3. In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the study of the digitized social relationship in online video games, but few have studied the social interactions between the Shitu (Master-Apprentice) in video games. Previous studies (Cole & Griffiths, 2007) divide game players into 3 categories by their types of interpersonal interactions, while this research further explores the Master-Apprentice relationship as the 4th category. It demonstrates the history of Shitu relationship in Chinese culture and previous video games, then explains its features compared to other types of digital relationships, its application in in-game activities and lastly potential influences on game players and community.

## **摘要**

近年来，随着网络技术的发展与成熟，网络游戏成为了现代人生活中消遣的重要方式之一。尽管游戏中的社交互动行为已被广泛讨论，但师徒作为一种网游内独特的社交关系，至今鲜见于研究。本文以中国网游《剑侠情缘网络版叁》为例，通过游戏内外的公开数据采集与分析，探讨了网络游戏中师徒文化的形成，与其他虚拟社交关系的相似性与独有特点，以及此类社交互动给玩家和社群带来的潜在影响。

## **Acknowledgments**

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge my supervisor Dr. David Chandross, who has been supporting me throughout the whole process of my research and giving feedback. I could not have successfully found my topic and stick on the research without your passionate mentorship.

Second, I would like to acknowledge my second reader Dr. Jason Boyd, who accepted my invitation and gave me advice during the last minutes of the research.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Michael Charter, my friends and colleagues in the MDM cohort, as well as my friends in JX3 who stayed connected with me while I was abroad.

Without your support, it would be impossible to start the study.

I would also like to thank Qiaoyu Yang, who has encouraged me in my dark times, accompanied me in games during the quarantine, helped me with collecting data and making the poster.

I am appreciative of my own game master Yiming Weng in JX3, who introduced me to the gameworld and inspired me to do research on game mentorship.

Finally, I want to say thank you to my parents, your love and continued support throughout my life always encourage me to study what I am passionate about.

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## **1. Overview**

### **1.1 Introduction**

As one of the new concepts in recent decades, digital media and its content are now replacing traditional media with increasing popularity among young generations. At the same time, a big difference in social behaviour nowadays emerged, compared to the era when people were not connected digitally. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when most of the countries decide social distancing is necessary for citizens, there is also a trend for companies and schools to move their work and education online to avoid risks. A large number of researchers studied social connectedness and their patterns in various digital platforms, such as certain online communities on social media. However, only a few have recognized that in recent years, there is also a growing number of virtual communities formed in online entertainment industries. One of the examples is online video gaming. Previous studies have indicated that online multiplayer games often require cooperative team play (Vella et al., 2016) and therefore form a more permanent association with rosters and hierarchies, which is usually referred to as the guild (Williams, Caplan & Xiong, 2007). Interestingly, compared to popular western multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*, Chinese Wuxia video games have some special relationships in the virtual space, and one of them is the Shitu, which translates to the Master-Apprentice relationship in Mandarin.

## 1.2 Phenomenon Definitions and Cultural Background

### Knights for the Common People: Chinese Wuxia Genre MMORPGs

As a unique genre, Wuxia provides pseudo-historical and fantastical tales of martial chivalry(Chan, 2006) in Chinese literature and film in the past century. The "Wu" in "wuxia" refers to "martial" or "military", while the "Xia" denotes those whose behaviours are extralegal, as they have a sense of righteousness, and it grants them to devote themselves to help people by using martial arts skills (Hamm, 2005). Besides famous Wuxia films such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, in recent years, a new approach of Wuxia in video games has received growing interest again both from game developers, players and scholars. Over the past two decades, from early PC role-playing games (RPGs) such as *The Legend of Sword and Fairy* series to most recent massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), including *JX3* and *Moonlight blade*, a group of Wuxia genre video games have released. According to Chan's research, those games "steadily gained momentum in East Asian games networks, particularly within Chinese language territories"(2006). This paper will mainly examine the master-apprentice in the game *JX3*, short for *Jianxiaqingyuan3* (some papers also translated as *Legend of Knights Online 3*) developed by Seasun Games under Kingsoft Software.

### Digital Connectedness in MMORPGs

Although video gaming is often stereotyped as an isolated, antisocial activity, in fact, it expedites online and offline communications. Furthermore, according to many pieces of research, online gaming not only promotes existing friends in real life, but also new friends meet online in games. Bartle's games motivation theory(1996) points out that there is one type of

player called “socializers” who enjoy the game mainly from social activities that they participated in the game, while Yee’s research(2006) further proves for those “social-oriented players”, online social activities is one of the important components of video games. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) has promoted the #PlayApartTogether campaign to encourage people to stay socially connected from home, such as play online games while remaining physically social distancing, which again indicates that gaming can be a social activity. The genres of video games in the market are various, but this paper will mainly study a certain genre, massive multiplayer online role-playing games(MMORPGs), as it has been proved with more social activities happening, compared with other genres(Smyth, 2007). From early text-based multiuser dungeon(MUD) games to MMORPGs developed the past two decades, gamers who choose to play the role-playing genre games have a significantly higher motivation of in-game social activities, or finding social components as their predominant reason for continued play (Cole&Griffiths, 2007). Unsurprisingly, most of the sources concluded that MMORPGs are “highly socially interactive”, although the general public often assumes gamers are socially inactive with a negative stereotype on video gaming and game players (Kowert et al., 2012).

### 1.3 Chinese Video Game Industry and Ethnography

#### Gaming Industry Worldwide and in China

According to GlobalData figures, the video gaming market was worth more than \$130bn in 2018. It is predicted to become a more than \$300 billion industry by 2025, with a rapid compound annual growth rate of 13%. As the technology develops, the mobile gaming industry

has outstripped the console and personal computer (PC) markets and is predicted to take a dominant space as the 5G technology(game streaming, cloud gaming on mobile devices) comes into commercial use in the following decade. The total video gaming market in China is worth US\$26,149m in 2020, which exceeds the US's market(US\$18,425m) by approximately 50%, according to a report from Statista.com. There is no doubt that China is one of the key figures in the worldwide video gaming industry and consumption market, with over 854 million Internet users out of the 3.9 billion worldwide, and similarly, over 494 million video gamers out of the 2 billion worldwide in 2019(Travaglini et al., 2020). However, the academic studies of video gaming in China remain unassessed. Especially in the English literature, due to the language, cultural differences and limitations of the country. To advance the research in this field, this paper will examine a unique Shitu(Master-Apprentice) social relationship in the Chinese video gaming environment, and its distinctiveness compared to games developed by western countries.

### Ethnography of JX3: a Chinese Virtual Society for Young People

Since 2013, Kingsoft has tried to market JX3 to other countries beside mainland China. Its Vietnam server was once popular at its time, but as time went by, it was finally closed due to the cost of operating. Similarly, in May 2020, although JX3 launched an international server for overseas players to enjoy the game, it does not provide a multi-language version for players who cannot read the Chinese language. Instead, as the game producer, Weiwei Guo declared, “it was mainly for Chinese players who currently live overseas, such as Chinese international students etc.” As its story is based on ancient Chinese history, the game clearly targets only the population from China and East Asian countries sharing a similar cultural background.

While the general MMORPG players average is around 26(Yee, 2003), in 2019, according to the official report, the average age of JX3 players is fairly young--around 23--and its overall player age ranges from 10 to 70. Huang(2019) listed four Wuxia themed MMORPGs in China mainland market, and found that JX3 has the largest percentage of potential players aged under 19 and 20-29, while other Wuxia games' players are mostly distributed in the 30-39 range, based on the index of Chinese mainstream search engines(See Appendix A). On the other hand, among the martial arts-themed MMORPGs in the market, JX3 is one of the few games that uses a time subscription billing method. As it has no pay-to-win functions or item billing, it's more friendly for general younger players such as students who do not have a willingness to pay a lot for entertainment.

According to Nick Yee's research, 85% of MMORPG players are male, while most video games also have dominant ratios of males. Some argue that MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft usually have a higher portion of female players, which is reasonable as WoW has a female player percentage of around 36% in 2020, according to research by Venn and Demaio. Since it provides a virtual world with attractive stories for exploration and socialization, it is proved that females show greater interest in information seeking and derive more benefits from information resources in virtual worlds(Choi et al., 2012), while most males score higher on all achievement dimensions such as competition(Yee, 2006). Another research conducted by Zhonghong Ma in 2016 also proves that more than 80% of teenage males in China have played at least one online game, while the data for teenage females account for only 50% of all the female polls.

At the same time, JX3 used to have a similar gender ratio of an ordinary online video game at the beginning of its release, with 78% male players and only 22% females in 2009. However, the percentage of female players increases steadily, and finally reaches 54% in a total survey of 400,000 players, while male players only account for 46% in 2016, according to JX3's official annual report(See Appendix B).

Given the statistics in 2015, 46.26% of female JX3 players are more interested in social activities in games and 42.72% of male players reported so, Yee(2006) indicates that women score higher on the relationship dimension, such as personal self-disclosure, finding and giving support. It might be one of the reasons that the bond between masters and apprentices is usually strong and profound in JX3, compared to other games that have a similar Master-Apprentice system.

## 1.4 Literature Review

### Social Capital and Gaming

Since the macrosocial relationship strength is hard to understand and study, Putnam(2001) constructs the Social Capital concept, which formalizes the idea that networks and the associated norms of reciprocity have value. Previous studies on online gaming social capital and social relationships have different conclusions, as participants' group size and game types in researches various, but several choose to use Putnam's theory as one support of their studies, and bridging and bonding are two main measurements of the strength of those relationships (Perry et al., 2018).

## Activities and Relationship Types in Video Gaming

There are several diverse social relationship types in video gaming. Previous studies(Cole &Griffiths, 2007, Eklund&Roman, 2015) tend to divide video game players into 3 categories by their types of player to player interactions: online strangers, online friends, on/offline friends, and analyze statistics from the three categories. However, based on the social activity types, we are able to conduct a different and more detailed social type classification in gaming.

Firstly, the Guild relationship, where several players belong to the same team for a common purpose(e.g. dungeons), which require teamwork and a relatively stable and usually long-run structure of social relations. Krotoski(2004) and Benefield et al. (2016) state that based on the team-like relationship, MMORPGs encourage group interaction and involvement, which results in significant friendships and personal empowerment.

The second group is the prevailing online Friendships. The term “friendship” often subsumes nonkin, long-term associations, and acquaintances (Kowert&Domahidi, 2014). This relationship can provide social support that improves both the physical and psychological well-being of individuals. The friendship in online gaming usually appears as players often participate in in-game activities together, chat with each other and keep long-term associations in Internet-based social spaces.

Thirdly, attractions are another important group of social relationships in online gaming. Many previous studies(Cole&Griffiths, 2007, Jiang&Tan, 2019) reported that during the game playing process, players sometimes feel mutual attraction towards another player. Different from online dating, the attractions happen in games usually based on the interest in another player’s avatars and the player’s game activities. Most of the attractions do not involve physical

relationships(Jiang&Tan, 2019), although some of them ultimately developed to real-life partners(Cole&Griffiths, 2007).

Lastly, and also the rarely seen is the Master-Apprentice(MA) relationship, which only appears in most of the Chinese video games. This relationship can be found in the online multiplayer Chinese video game JX3 as an example. This dynamic appears to be specific to the Chinese culture in that it is based on the Shitu mentoring interaction in traditional martial arts. In a typical MA relationship in video games, the master usually is more experienced in the gaming content and is willing to teach the apprentice basic knowledge of the game and useful skills. Most of the time, they also provide help during apprentices' gaming life such as guiding them through a dungeon or teaching them how to appropriately use skills in the PVP(player versus player) in-game combat. Some masters also offer gifts such as in-game currency and vehicles to their apprentices as the formal building MA relationship ceremony. This relationship may affect real life in that it is a bond between video game players that is based on loyalty and continuous interaction for the purpose of improving the player's skills in the game.

### Influences of In-game Social Relationships

In general, social relationships in gaming have both positive and negative influences depending on their time playing games (Perry et al., 2018). Some positive influences include that, social activities are beneficial and enjoyable because a large percentage of players make good friends within the game(Cole&Griffiths 2007), and those who play games with their real-life friends can catalyze their existing relationships by cooperating in in-game activities(Yee, 2007). Shen and Williams(2010) also proved that game players feel “less



loneliness, and greater social engagement” when playing online video games with their pre-existing social ties, such as family and friends. In their perspective, online gaming is one way of social interacting digitally with people. Thus, people can develop effective social and emotional skills through gaming. Cole also mentioned that sometimes online interactions can develop into serious real-life friendships or relationships and one-third of game players in his research have met up with their online gaming friends. This theory is also referred to as social compensation(Kowert, 2013).

On the other hand, Sigman claims online gaming and digital socialization would negatively affect people(2008). He hypothesized that such online activities would cause a lack of real social networking, which is the physical face-to-face communication, and it may negatively affect the individual’s mental health and fulfillment. This approach is referred to as social displacement, where online and offline social interactions are regarded as zero-sum(Kowert, 2013). In Cole’s research, one-fifth participants also consider that the gaming activity would negatively influence their real-life socialization, as more time they spent on playing online games means “less time available to spend with real-life friends and family”(Cole&Griffiths, 2007).

Online social activities, including those in video gaming, nowadays remain actively debated. However, Griffiths explains one thing certain: it brings absolute benefits for those who have difficulties participating in offline social activities. For example, people with physical disabilities and have an alternative virtual space that allows them to establish friendships or support pre-existing social relationships (Griffiths et al., 2003).

## MA Relationships in Online Gaming and Its Possible Influences

There is little research studying the Shitu(Master-Apprentice) relationship in the online video gaming industry, thus the goal of this paper is to examine it and find possible influences on players and extend the findings in this field. However, there are some arguments from previous studies that have stated, video games can contribute to education and personal development. In terms of social learning theory, a recent research by Lee and LaRose in 2007 suggested that online video gaming spaces can be ideal for cognitive-social learning, as players can develop online friendships, practice flow experience and self-regulation in a decision-making process in the virtual environment. Chandross and DeCourcy also introduced the Serious Educational Games(SEGS) for health and education purposes which could engage learning and give immediate feedback to the player(2018). These kinds of games bring cognitive, motivational, emotional benefits, and contribute to many areas such as teamwork, social connectedness, and decision-making. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the MA relationship in an online gaming environment can also help for personal development and building interpersonal relationships.

## Digital Mentorship in Virtual Spaces vs. MA Relationship in Reality

In addition, there are publications on digital mentoring based on cloud learning platforms, but most of this research focuses on the mentoring relationship in educational services such as the e-learning platforms and online courses provided by universities(Yuan&Cao, 2017), instead of the entertainment industry such as online gaming. Previous researches have recognized the emergence of online learning services in recent years and its benefits, including flexibility, the

rich-media experience, as well as the shareability of the current educational resources(Anderson, 2004). At the same time, the growing e-learning market also creates a great demand of a more engaging, accessible and customizable education through game-based or gamification elements(Freitas et al. 2015), which can be met probably by adopting the MA system in video games for a joyful and personal educational experience,

On the other hand, in a 2015 research of MA relationship in the traditional martial arts area, Zhou points out that the social patterns of Master and Apprentice relationship is different as it has a unique feature of social gathering. Unlike one-on-one social connections such as friends or teacher-student, the MA relationship creates a family tree social structure where the master has a number of apprentices and each apprentice will later become the master and teach more students. This structure could also be found in online gaming MA relationships, where the senior/junior apprentices gradually form a family structure.

### Previous Research Methodologies

Most of the studies on social relationships are based on a combined quantitative & qualitative method(Cole, 2007, Yee, 2007, Perry et al., 2018), including analyzing certain amounts of interviews and surveys. Most of the participants are self-selected as game players who are willing to participate in the research. A few researchers used qualitative observation methods (Ducheneaut&Moore, 2004), by gathering data from a 3 month period of time spent in the game. Some of the research examined the social patterns in a certain game, while others remain open and allow any of the MMORPG game players to participate in their research as long as they recognize themselves as players and spend a certain amount of time in the game every

week. A large percentage of studies on social interactions in video gaming investigate only English speaking countries, and as a result, most of the game players they investigated are playing popular MMORPGs in the English language such as World of Warcraft and Star Wars Galaxies, while the Asian gaming market, especially China has been underestimated.

## 1.5 Methodology

### Research Question

The two main research questions of this study are: 1)How is MA different from co-players/game-only online friends? and 2)What are some positive/negative experiences and possible influences people get from MA? In order to answer the two questions, this research designs an observational study in the game environment, where we use keyword analysis in various channels, screen recording of Mentor Hall where all the MA ceremonies are held, and informal interviews of current game players.

### Research Method

To understand the nature of the Master-Apprentice relationship in JX3, the research adopted the observational study method and proceeded as follows. In the first place, the research examined the MA system and its features from the JX3's official introduction and public quest database. By analyzing the quests and its rewarding system, it will have an overall picture of the MA system and the game designer's intention of building the system.

Secondly, in order to examine the real experience of being involved in the MA system, I accessed the game, created a random avatar, and then logged in the game on a daily basis,

usually 1-2 hours per day over a two-month period, and progressively became a member of the community of players. As the avatar leveled up, I joined a guild and a small community with a master. All of my activities were recorded using the built-in screen recorder provided by Windows 10. This provided me with a rich set of ethnographic data, and it also deepened my understanding of the social interactions, especially the MA interactions between players in the game.

Thirdly, I went to the two main cities Yangzhou and Chengdu in the game, as I identified the two main cities as the most heavily trafficked locations where players receive daily quests and exchange game items. I randomly observed players at the battlefield area(where players can request 1v1 fight or queue for a group PVP event), entertainment area(where players chat and participate in leisure activities), general quest area(where players receive and submit daily PVE quest), and observed their conversations about MA relationships with players at the location while taking notes on their interactions. These conversations provided me with a comprehensive understanding of how different types of players interact with each other within the MA system.

In the fourth place, I used the plug-in program to monitor the master/apprentice recruitment panel. At the same time, I also monitored all the conversation channels(including world, map, current channels) and took notes of all the statements that are related to master or apprentice. Since JX3 has many servers, I studied three servers with the most population, each server for 4 hours a day and continuously for 5 days from 7 pm to 11 pm (GMT+8), which makes a total of 60 hours. In addition, I observed the players' behaviours around the mentor hall, where game players hold MA ceremonies, on a weekly basis.

Last but not least, since JX3 has a huge fan subculture industry, I collected the data from the fan works including themes and comments related to the MA relation. For example, one of the most famous fan-made short films based on a real story of JX3 players, *Snow on the Eyebrow*, tells a story of a female master who teaches a boy as an apprentice. The themes and emotions in these artworks represent the players' attitude towards the MA relationship, as well as their experience in these stories.

## **2. Nature of Shitu relationship**

### **2.1 Shitu(Master-Apprentice) in Chinese Culture: From Ancient to Modern**

#### **Teacher as the Father, Student as the Son: a Relationship Between the Old and Young**

Similar to discipleship in the Christian world, the Master-Apprentice relationship can be traced back to very early times in the history of Asian countries including China. One of the most famous examples is the fictional character Monk Tan and his four novices from *Journey to the West*, written by Cheng'en Wu in the 16th century. In real history, the great philosopher Confucius(551 BC–479 BC) also constructed the Shitu relationship with his several disciples, although the number of his followers is believed to be more than three thousand. All of the examples from literature and history records prove the pervasiveness of this kind of master-apprentice relationship, and at the same time, distinguish the difference between the MA and general teacher-student connections.

Master usually refers to those who have great achievements in a specific area and willing to pass on expertise to others, while an apprentice is a learner who studies certain skills from the master(Pawan et al., 2017). However, different from what we generally recognize as the

teacher-student relationship, the MA connection is usually stronger, as it remains lifelong and often involves personal emotions. Some argue that, to some extent, the MA imitates a father-son relationship, as the masters not only teach skills but also provide shelters and guide their apprentices morally(Zhou, 2004). In fact, the process of establishing a relationship is relatively complex. A master needs to be generally approved by people as an expert in a certain field to recruit apprentices, while the apprentice must have good personal qualities and high moral standards, and furthermore, show their sincerity of learning from the master. In traditional Asian Martial Arts practice, only after a formal ceremony to honour the master, a strict master-apprentice relation formally established(Zhou, 2004). While Western players would not have any pre-existing norms that would guide their behaviour in an MMORPG in which that relationship was a part, the Shitu relationship has its vitality in artworks and novels in Chinese culture until today. In reality, although most of the Shitu functions have been replaced and disassembled by the modern education system, nowadays, the old tradition can still be found in the Chinese society, especially in the small handicraft industry, arts industry, traditional Chinese medical science and most martial arts schools. In addition, many researchers argued that the traditional master-apprentice mode has its advantages and can be applied to the modern education system. For example, Wang(2018) points out that compared to the general school system, master-apprentice education mode is a better way for training police major students, because the police students need more practical experiences to deal with complicated situations in real life, and emotional support as they are more likely going to face dangerous occasions in their future career. In this case, the master-apprentice mode provides more benefits, while the usual college education system only focuses more on the literary knowledge. To some extent, the

Master-Apprentice system in Chinese video games replicates similar relationships from historical and practical perspectives, which results in the small scale popularity of Chinese players, as they already have a cultural background that gives them an overall understanding of the relationship.

#### More than Two Generations: Family Tree Structure Formed Based on MA Relationship

Although Master-Apprentice is a word referring to the certain relationship between two individuals, its actual contribution to society is far more profound. The master usually has more than one apprentice, while the apprentice would likely to recruit new students after finishing their current apprenticeship. The former leads to new relationships such as senior/junior brothers and sisters between apprentices, based on the date they were recruited; the latter establishes relationships between three or more “generations”, including the grandmasters, martial uncles and so on. The same process also happens in video games. By adding new players continuously, it becomes a family-tree-like structure (“Shimen”). As a result, in the game world, finding a good master does not only mean the player can learn skills from the more experienced player, but also he or she will probably be introduced to a small community obtained by the master. The familial social component adds extra value to the MA relationship.

## 2.2 Shitu in Video Games

### An Overview of Mentorship in Video Games

As a unique cultural phenomenon, the master-apprentice is rarely seen in Western video games. There are a few discussions on mentors in video games, however, most of them address the virtual key figures in games and their guidance characteristics, instead of actual people being



the mentor and interacting with other players. In the Hero's Journey narrative, Joseph Campbell(2014) identified these virtual characters as "mentors". Those characters give wise suggestions in order to help protagonists to reach their true potential, as Campbell further explains. To analyzing the certain archetype and the connection between the protagonist and the mentor, in the book *The Writer's Journey*, Christopher Vogler also points out that a mentor "represents the bond between parent and child, teacher and student, doctor and patient, god and man." (2007) As video gaming is becoming one of the new storytelling methods nowadays, a mentor-like virtual figure can be found in many video games as a guide to help the player explore the game.

On the contrary, the master-apprentice relationship seems unprecedented in video game social relation categories until the recent decade, and most of the games are based on Asian cultural background. A few western games have added a mentoring function, for example, the design of Mentoring Badge or "Mentor Tag" icon in the game *Guild Wars 2* allows veterans to use the tag and indicate to new players their willingness to give help and advice. However, this functionality did not become a full gameplay system as most Asian games do, and after it evolved into a substitute for the Commander icon, the mentor icons are mostly used to indicate the locations of events and group activities, rather than a one-on-one player help channel.

In December 2009, JX3 released its new version *Po Xiao Zhi Lu* ("The Road to the Dawn"), with its new Shitu system which contains a full series of gameplay quests and rewards. In 2015, *Fantasy Westward Journey* produced by Netnease also published the in-game Shitu system. In the following year, *Final Fantasy XIV* developed by the Japanese game company

Square Enix released its patch 3.2 with a comprehensive mentor system. In 2019, *Dungeons Fighter Online* made by Korean developer Neople adds the Shitu system to its game.

### Role Playing and Self-identity: Why MMORPGs?

By looking at the master-apprentice that exists in various video games, it is evident that most of the games adapting the MA system are MMORPGs. In fact, there are a few examples in other genres as well. In 2015, the most famous mobile MOBA(Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) game Honor of Kings in mainland China adopted the Shitu system. When team up and join the game, master and apprentice will receive additional awards, and the apprentice can seek help completing the in-game daily quest. Similarly, another Shitu system is found in Game For Peace which released in 2019, an online multiplayer battle royale game which is based on the same mode as popular game PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. Intriguingly, the master-apprentice system did not achieve huge success in these games. Role playing genre, on the other hand, seems to have more advantages when building in-game social relationships such as master-apprentice connection. The reason lies in the mechanics of role playing games. According to Bowman(2010), role playing fulfills an important part of human basic need--fantasy, where people can freely leave their socially-imposed identity roles and live a “second life” as their wish. Therefore, in video games, players are able to explore new aspects of themselves through identity alteration. What is more, in massive multiplayer role playing games, players not only interact with the fantasy world using the alternative identity, for example, a swordsman who helps the weak, but also interact with other players who have various identities. While social interactions in these games usually involve participating activities or solving problems together,

the game master-apprentice connection develops a different approach to mentorship or teacher-student in reality, with more practical, informal and personal one-on-one experiences and less conventional, didactic tellings. In this case, when a player establishes a master-apprentice relation with another player as master in the game, after a process of immersive ceremonies, activities and quests, the individual is likely to take on the role of a master and hence look after the apprentice. According to Xu's research on JX3, a player Huasheng emphasises that, although she is younger than her apprentice in reality, she often feels the responsibility of protecting the apprentice from getting hurt as a master in the game. It again proves that in the game, players are able to find new aspects of identities such as masters or apprentices when they build a MA relationship. The role playing process provides opportunities for players to interact with each other in a virtual environment with different identities, and it brings immersive experiences during the gameplay. As Bowman argues, in the external social world, some of our psyche remains suppressed, and this kind of adventure provides an outlet to find expression and grow alternate identities in a relatively "safe, controlled digital space"(2010), for example, an experienced player can choose to be a master, which acts as the mentor figure or guidance of others. Compared to real life mentoring relations, the game master-apprentice connection creates a stronger emotional bond between players, as their communication is more amicable and friendlike, often not only about learning/teaching gaming, but also involves conversations about personal lives. At the same time, they also share the same interest which is the fantasy game world. However, on the other hand, since the relationship is built in the virtual world, and the roleplay relationship is based on the player's voluntary, players are free to leave or end the

relationship without any actual punishment. Therefore, digital mentorship also faces some problems, such as false information, anonymous harassment and irresponsible communications.

## 2.3 Shitu System in JX3

### Types of Shitu in JX3

There are two types of Shitu in JX3, which are Putong Shitu(normal master-apprentice) and Qinchuan Shitu(mentor-disciples). For masters/mentors, one character in the game can recruit 10 normal apprentices in maximum but only 2 disciples, while the apprentice can have 5 normal masters but only 1 specific mentor. In the meantime, the recruitment of mentors and disciples has more restrictions: the mentor avatar's account must be approved by the game as a mentor account(since one game account can create many characters) in the game, and the disciple character's account must remain a disciple account. It ensures that a single disciple could only have one single mentor on the server, even if the player creates other game avatars on the same server. The same rule applies to the disciple's master--he could recruit only 2 disciples, no matter how many "alts" (secondary characters) the player actually creates and plays. In return, the rewards for mentors and disciples are richer, and they are able to receive rewards from the game system continuously each week, as long as they maintain the relationship. On the other hand, the normal MA relation has fewer restrictions, but at the same time, both the master and apprentice only receive awards before the apprentice reaches the full level and in the first 30 days after he reaches the maximum level.

The two types of Shitu provide opportunities for both general players and hardcore players who have different social needs, where the normal MA grants a basic need for new game

players/smurf who has previous gaming experience, and the disciples-mentor Shitu connection renders a deeper bond between players who devote more time in the gameplay. In fact, there are many examples of normal apprentices who finally decide to become disciples of the same master, after their avatars reach the full level, since they have good interactions with each other and want to continue the relationship even if the mentor has no more knowledge to teach.

### Process of establishing/ending a Shitu Relation in JX3

Similar to the Shitu relation in reality, most of the Chinese video games require the player to accomplish a series of tasks before the MA relationship formally establishes. According to the JX3 quest database, we could clearly see the quest procedure(see Appendix C). Using JX3 as an example, the player will first receive a quest from the system to find a master. After the player sends out a request taking a certain one as his master, the system will assign a quest. The apprentice is asked to serve three cups of tea for the master in front of the Mentor Hall, which represents the establishment of the MA relationship. After that, when the apprentice grows every 10 levels, he will receive a new quest from the MA quest series. Those quests include entertaining quests such as playing music to master, PVE quests such as challenging strong villain NPCs together, as well as PVP quests such as a fight with master and learning skills from him.

At the end, when finishing the apprenticeship(“Chushi”), the apprentice will need to play the flute to show gratitude. All the quests in this series can be received by the apprentice individually, but can be completed only when master is present. Every avatar has a maximum of 5 masters, and the player can apply for ending the MA relation if he is not satisfied with the

master. Similarly, the master can apply for ending the relationship if the apprentice stays offline for months or other reasonable causes.

#### Reward of Shitu Relation from the Game System

For masters, all the in-game activities he helps with the apprentice will be awarded as the Shitu Value, one of the virtual currencies in the game world. The value can be used to purchase various items in the Shitu shop. In addition, the master's Master Badge level will also grow, if the apprentice is satisfied with the master's help and clicks the "like" button when he levelling up. On the other hand, after the apprentice reaches the full level, the master will receive additional rewards for the first ten times when he accomplishes the daily quest together with the master. These rewarding settings acquire the master being present when the apprentice is in need, and thus guarantee the apprentice receive actual help.

For apprentices, before he reaches the full level, being in a team with his master will provide an encouraging buff that gives extra experience points. Therefore, the apprentice is able to level up faster when teaming up with a master. The apprentice will also receive a pack of gears after accomplishing the MA quest series, which is also helpful in levelling experience. Both master and apprentice will receive accomplishment badges, such as "first time being a master/apprentice" badge etc. when participating in the MA activities.

During the levelling experience, both the apprentice and master will receive peach and plum trees that can be planted in front of the Mentor Hall. However, the interactive item could only be used when the apprentice and master are in the same team and distance does not exceed 5 meters. In the Chinese language territories, there is a metaphor from history that compares the

process of educating a person as planting a tree, as the students sooner or later bloom in their own area and spread their knowledge to others. These system awards encourage players to socialize with others, and also enrich the gameplay experiences.

### Master-Apprentice In-game Interaction

Compared to general game friends, the MA system allows the player to have more interactions with certain players as masters or apprentices. The “Call” function is used for the master or apprentice to port each other to the place where he is. Except for a skill which takes 15 minutes to cool down, in the game, there are no fast teleporting abilities, therefore the call function in the MA system makes it rather convenient for apprentices to ask for help and masters to help his apprentice with quests such as killing a high-level monster. In addition, the MA panel not only shows the relationship between the individual apprentice and the master, but also lists all apprentices the master currently have, and the relationship the player(as an apprentice) to others, according to the time their relation established. For example, a typical apprentice may have many senior/junior brothers and sisters who are all taught under the same master. Thus, the MA panel provides a chance for the player to contact other players in the same master’s small community. The MA panel also displays the last time the avatar’s master/apprentice/senior or junior brothers and sisters are online, which provides more intimacy with each other.

### 2.4 Shitu recruitment and requirements

Compared to establishing an actual Shitu connection in reality, the game simplifies the procedure and requirement to build a digital Shitu relationship. Any player whose avatar is under

the maximum level at the current game season, or already reaches the maximum level but has not finished an apprenticeship can apply to be someone's apprentice. However, the player is able to make his own choice based on his need. In the game, JX3 provides a Shitu(Master-apprentice) recruitment system that allows players to find suitable masters or apprentices. On two separate panels, the recruitment channel randomly displays eight advertisements of master or apprentice people in the game world have posted, based on the player's choice, and the player can refresh the page every 10 seconds. As the screenshot displays, the Shitu panel has 4 sections, including my master and apprentice, master recruitment, apprentice recruitment and awards. Using the apprentice recruitment panel as an example, the panel shows the potential apprentice's avatar, name, level, class, avatar gender, guild, camp and recruitment notice. Players can post a new recruitment by clicking the left down button and entering information, and refresh the panel using the refresh button(See Appendix D).

By recording the MA recruitment system and conversation channels, we've collected 765 pieces of messages recruiting for MA relation, which contains 355 master advertisements recruiting apprentices, and 408 apprentice advertisements recruiting masters. Most of the data are from the MA recruitment panel, and a few from game chat channels(including world, map, current etc).

The study divides the master recruitment notice into following categories: the player's ID, the gender of the game character, actual gender(if specific), gameplay type, the ideal relationship with apprentice, personal features, requirements for potential apprentices, the master's class(the occupation in the game), Apprentice class requirement (if specific), a master level, and the source the advertisement comes from(MA panel or conversation channel).



Among all the 355 advertisements of masters, 28% play PVP(player versus player, a game mode refer to multiplayer interactive conflict within a game between two or more live participants) and 19% play PVE (player vs environment, refer to the game mode fighting computer-controlled enemies); 17.5% of masters also specified that they are interested in entertaining gameplay such as building and designing houses, or simply exploring the game world and stories. PVP player masters, being the largest portion of the recruitment, indicates that compared to other gameplay categories, PVP players are more likely to recruit someone as their apprentice. Besides JX3 is promoting its PVP game mode by holding both on and offline E-sports competitions in recent years, other possible reasons might include that the PVP mode encourages one-on-one communications such as an in-game fight or small-scale activities such as 3v3 arena play. In this case, the master is able to interact with the apprentice frequently and give advice by practice or observation. On the contrary, most PVE activities involve large-scale raid teamwork, which is apparently harder to teach during a dungeon experience. Interestingly, there are about one-fifth masters who enjoy entertaining gameplay, and 6.8% of them declared themselves to be “salted fish”, which means they are not experts in any gameplay modes. It could be assumed that the MA system is beneficial for all of the players, not only those who are experienced but also general players who know a little about the game and want to offer help to others(See appendix E).

As for the prerequisite for potential apprentices, 13.5% of masters specifically required the apprentice to contact them before applying. This specific requirement acts in correspondence with the traditional martial arts MA relationship where the master needs to talk or examine the potential apprentice--it is not a system designated one-way connection, but a selectable

apprenticeship which ensures both the master and apprentice will be satisfied with. On the other hand, nearly one quarter(24.5%) mentioned that they want to recruit someone who can play together. 13.5% hope their potential apprentice can often be online or do not AFK(“away from keyboard”, usually means the player quits the game and won’t log back in JX3) in a long period of time. Again, it demonstrates the MA relationship does not equalize a “helping system” where players send help quests to complete tasks, but more of a long-term online game friendship while getting help and suggestions at the same time.

In terms of self-introduction, 16% of masters believed they can teach others in specific areas, such as basic game mechanics, PVP combat skills, how to lead a 25-people PVE raid etc. The data reflects part of the nature of the MA relationship, as these masters are confidential about their experiences and skills. To be more specific, 4% of masters specified they can teach the same class as themselves. Similar to different styles or schools in martial arts, different classes(the occupation in JX3, for example, Shaolin as the warriors/tank class) in the game also provides various choices for masters and apprentices to find their best match. 3.7% specifically mentioned they have a friendly small community for apprentices(“Shimen”), where two or more generations of masters and apprentices can interact with each other. To be noteworthy, there are 8% masters who claim they are willing to play with/teach the “newcomers” with no experience of JX3 or video gaming completely. It shows that a relatively big percentage of the game community welcomes the new players by guiding them as more experienced “masters”. Finally, 5.9% of masters honestly admitted they want the master rewards from the system, and only 4% specified they want a certain gender apprentice. Both the portion accounts for small parts of all

the recruitments, which proves that rewards and gender are not the main reason when masters consider recruitments.

For apprentices, the data shows 24.3% admit they are “newcomers” to the game. It interprets that, among all the apprentices, a large part of players are recruiting masters because they are not familiar with the game, and want experienced players to guide them as a starting point. 26.5% of Them intended to play PVP and 19.6% reported wish to play PVE. The statistics are similar to the masters’ gameplay preference, which again demonstrates that MA relationship is much popular in PVP activities. However, compared to the relatively huge number of masters who are interested in entertaining gameplay, this figure only accounts for 8.1% for apprentices. In the meanwhile, more than a quarter(25.2%) of apprentices explained that they want to learn specific skills from masters. 22% of players especially want to find a same-class master, as they believe the same class master is more familiar with their own class’s skills and settings. Conversely, only 13% described they want a master to play together, and 7.9% declared they are self-independent. The data makes an opposite view of MA relationships from the apprentices’ perspective, as it becomes apparent that a large proportion of the apprentices are looking for masters based on more practical reasons.

It should be pointed out that, among all the recruitment notices, only 10% of the potential apprentices haven’t reached the full level in the current game version, which illustrates that most of the apprentices are finding masters after their levelling experiences. Although the MA quests series are designed for masters helping apprentices to level up and get familiar with the game story, in recent years, fewer players need to manually level up with the appearance of level boost and the simplification of storyline after the JX3 HD remake patch published in 2018. As a result,

new players now can easily reach the full level and find masters for further in-game training and activities. However, some players complain it makes a “snackification trend” in-game, as apprentices are losing the experience of gradually levelling up with masters’ help.

In terms of other requirements for masters, 5.4% of apprentices demand their masters have a good attitude such as being patient and nice to them, while only 2% require a specific gender master. Based on the fact that JX3 is a rarely seen MMORPG with more female players than males, the very few gender requirements in the MA recruitment system demonstrate that players regard the attitude to gaming more important than the actual player gender when recruiting masters/apprentices.

## 2.5 Shitu Interactions: Similarities and Differences Between Online Friends and Shitu

According to Xu, some players in JX3 describe their relationship with masters and apprentices as having a very strong sense of presence or immersion, since it is a role-playing game. Even if the master and apprentice do not know the real age of each other, the master will take the responsibility of taking care of his apprentice(2015). In Xu’s article, another player Qingluan also points out that, during the time when the master helped her level up, she gradually became familiar with the game from knowing nothing at the beginning. She describes this feeling as “he who teaches me for one day is my father for life” and her master was like “a real master of martial arts in Kung Fu fiction and films”. Besides, she mentions that Shimen, the small community contains many generations of apprentices and senior or junior brothers/sisters, will help and take care of each other. The connection between people in this community makes her feel involved and not lonely when she plays the game. In Xu’s research, a player Foyue

mentioned that this connection often continues to reality, as when he prepared for exams, his senior brother, who is also an apprentice of the same master, encouraged him at the time he felt exhausted, and offered him review notes to help.

On the other hand, many players reflected that the masters will provide the apprentice gifts, such as some starting fund, a horse, bags with relatively large capacity and double-exp solution for upgrading levels. All these behaviours are voluntary and not being regulated by the game system. However, players are willing to show their generosity by giving the small digital gifts and thus maintaining a good relationship with their apprentices. On the other hand, when an apprentice is involved in the community, he is able to help other new apprentices as a member of the master's community, or later become a new master who recruits more apprentices. To conclude, the master and his community behind encourage the player as an apprentice both financially and emotionally through the virtual world. The examples of JX3 players indicate that based on different situations, their interactions between masters and apprentices are various, but they have the same core, which is helping and repaying.

Similar to online friends, masters and apprentices share topics not only about the game itself, but also life matters and problems they meet in reality(Perry et al., 2018, Yang, 2019). These kinds of interactions encourage players to share experiences, both in and out of the game, and get feedback from other players. By communicating, the trust built between each other enhances the immersion of gameplay. At the same time, the feedback a player receives from others will reinforce their self-identity, because their voices are being heard and approved.

At the same time, the Master-Apprentice relationship has several differences compared to general online friends. According to the analysis of MA recruitment notices, the expectation of

masters is apparently different from an ordinary online game friend, as players want to learn about the game from the experienced ones. “There are so many quests and gameplay types in the game,” a player Shizhe said, “without someone’s instruction, I would possibly get lost in the game world and don’t know what to do.” Another significant difference is that while most online gaming friendships only remain in a certain games, masters and apprentices in JX3 usually have the opportunity to contact each other with more personal channels, including messaging applications like Wechat, QQ and sometimes phone numbers(Xu, 2015). In the case they are not in the game together, they can still have conversations with each other. The personal connection facilitates players to communicate and build trust in the virtual world.

Secondly, Yang(2019) describes that in the game, the new generation(such as apprentices) usually watch out their behaviour and words and make sure they have proper manners when communicating with the old generation(masters). Similarly, when being masters, players have a sense of responsibility to protect and take care of their apprentices, while general online friends often expect a more independent and equal relationship. “I like to teach newcomers. I have been playing this game for over 5 years and am experienced with all those game activities, and the only reason I’m stuck on (this game) is that I can help them as much as I can and enjoy the time to play with them.” The in-game master Shuhan describes. Masters in JX3 like Shuhan relish the feeling of being needed and love to take the responsibility of taking the “weak”--often players who are new to the game. Last but not least, the MA relation has a unique feature, which is its continuity. Whenever an original apprentice gets experienced and recruits his own apprentices, another “generation” is added to the family tree of the whole community. The familial structure is rarely seen in other digital relationships, as most

players/users on digital platforms merely have direct connections with one or more individuals and do not relate to other people in the meanwhile.

### **3. Impact of Shitu Relationship**

#### **3.1 Impacts on Individuals as Master/Apprentice**

For masters, the procedure of teaching and supporting others in many ways helps them to improve self-perception and build self-confidence. As Shuhan said, a master like her will feel being needed when an apprentice requests for help. At the same time, with good combat skills and enough patience and enthusiasm, a master will also gain a reputation in the game community. Similar to the new versus old generation in a master's family tree, players will respect masters as they are usually more experienced ones, regardless of the player's actual age outside of the game. The procedure of teaching and guiding apprentices could also improve their leadership skills, as the master needs to organize, inspire and communicate with other players when they take the apprentice to experience the gameplay. According to the recruitment notices from masters, we could also find that an important motivation for them to recruit apprentices is emotional support. A large percentage of masters clarified they want to have someone who continuously plays the game as a company, and participate in in-game activities together. Again, it proves that video gaming, especially MMORPGs, is in fact socially active. The intention of playing together illustrates players' social need exists to varying degrees, as the JX3 Shitu system suggests, "an active apprentice will bring lots of fun to the master" during their game journey. Like many virtual social platforms, in the online video game community, emotional support given by other players is real, even if the avatar is only a model created by a game engine. Just as

importantly, the rewards from the game system will benefit masters to a large extent, although few specify they are recruiting apprentices because of those rewards. Rewards of the MA system in the game are mostly micro-credentials such as game badges, “good master” level, as well as in-game items such as costumes, interactive folding fans and game pets. However, these micro-credentials have no influence on the normal gameplay.

With that being said, some of the impacts also apply for apprentices, including obtaining rewards and receiving emotional support. Apprentices usually gain rewards when they participate in in-game activities with masters, which is helpful for them to accelerate avatars’ development, for example, win more powerful gear and collect game currency. Emotional support, on the other hand, helps them to find confidence and feel secure in the new digital environment. In the meanwhile, the social relationship provides a personal connection and increases players’ fulfillment during the gameplay. To be noted, for apprentices, the relationship also helps them to integrate into a new community such as the virtual community based on digital games. Besides, apprentices are able to learn specific abilities such as combat skills and game mechanics during the gameplay with their masters’ guide. Based on the research, it is clear that while many players already have some experience with the game, a large number of them are looking for masters because they want to improve their performance in the game.

Interestingly, most MA relationships more or less extend to reality. Some have met one or more times in reality, but as the physical distance might be far for online game players, it only accounts for a small percentage of all the masters and apprentices. Besides, another solid example is exchange addresses and sending gifts to each other. Under an unboxing video by user Eveelynn on Bilibili(a Chinese video website) showing her apprentice’s gift, more than one



hundred of players replied to her with similar experience that they have received actual gifts from their masters and/or apprentices.

Besides the positive impacts players have reported, there are several negative effects the MA relationship brings. Firstly, the statistics show that some masters and apprentices have been disregarded. To be more specific, for masters, the disregard usually appears in forms of the apprentices taking their gifts as granted or even asking for gifts such as game currency. Although giving gifts to apprentices is an unspoken tradition for many masters in the game, it remains a voluntary behaviour. Therefore, once an apprentice asks for gifts proactively, the master often understands the behaviour as online begging and feels being offended. Another often seen example of disregard to masters is the apprentice does not listen to, or learn from the master carefully. Many masters in their recruitment notices specified that they want apprentices who are willing to learn seriously and unremittingly because they had been hurt by apprentices who did not do so. On the apprentice's side, some apprentices reported they have been "free ranged", which refers to a master recruit apprentices but does not take the responsibility of teaching or taking care of them. Finally, yet importantly, online sexual harassment is an often seen example in networked video games(Fox & Tang, 2016), which could also be applied to online master-apprentice relationships. A few recruitments in the research elliptically suggested that there are some players who recruit masters or apprentices are actually looking for sexual relationships. For example, a master's recruitment implicates the player wanting a female apprentice who can "do xoxo things". Although these recruitments only account for a very small portion of all the notices, still it will cause negative impressions and emotional distress for normal players who are looking for a general MA relationship. In addition, some of them might

cause direct harassment through the game text or voice chat, as the private chat function in the game is open to anyone even if the players are not friends, and the game voice chat is available for players in the same team. However, it could be argued that this situation is true for most online multiplayer video games, including those that do not have an MA system.

### 3.2 Impacts on Communities

Besides the impacts on players, the MA system is also helpful for building and maintaining a good community and gaming atmosphere. No need to mention that Shimen, the master's small community with one or more generations form a relatively steady organization of players, their teaching, helping and repaying behaviours contribute to a healthy social cycle as well. Some studies have investigated the impacts of guild associations in MMORPGs, since the presence of other people in the same guild creates a long association between different players(Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Similarly, the master-apprentice relationship has some comparable effects, such as creating a close distance between players and encouraging them in the same community to play together more frequently. As the player feels more involved, it is more likely that he will continue the gameplay.

However, every coin has two sides. The closer connection might cause social pressure in the community, for instance, two apprentices who have the same master may compare themselves to each other, thus can lead to teen depression and unnecessary high stress levels. Another result of social pressure is when a player gets integrated into the MA relationship, he will have a sense of obligation of being wise and helpful to the apprentice, or being assumed to

seriously learn things his masters have taught. This social bond could cause more time spent on gaming and players may find it is harder to control game time.

### 3.3 Impacts on Subculture and Arts Productions

Fan subculture, sometimes also referred to as fandom, is a part of participatory culture. Previously, scholars argued fandom is “a form of active production, not passive reception”(Scholz, 2013) because these value-adding activities are accomplished by consumers. JX3’s rich game content including texts, music and visual assets allows players to produce related arts and share them within the community of game players. According to Guo’s study on fandom culture in Chinese video games, the development of JX3’s fan subculture is the most significant among all the online Chinese video games(2019). To be noteworthy, one of the important elements of these creative arts productions is the Master-Apprentice relationship of both virtual characters and real players.

For instance, *Snow on the Eyebrow*, a JX3 master-apprentice theme short game film made by players, gained more than one million times of play in total since it first published in 2014 (See Appendix E). It was made by JX3 movie editor, a game-based moviemaker operated by the game developers and opens downloading freely by any game player who installs the game client. Similar to WoW which also owns its game moviemaker, JX3’s game managers also encourage players to “use the game’s visual assets creatively as a means of generating new content and shared culture around the game”(Lowood, 2006).

The main mood of the reviews under the film is players cherishing their memory of the time they spend with masters together. Many viewers comment on the film with their game

server, in-game masters' names and express their gratitude towards them, while others choose to share their stories with their masters in paragraphs. In addition, as the film tells a story of an apprentice growing up and finally understanding his master, many players also expressed the same resonance and regret that they did not cherish their masters' care and love when being apprentices. To some extent, the fan-made films, their comments and reviews can represent most of the game players' attitude towards the MA system and their own connection with their masters or apprentices. On one hand, the subculture arts products will strengthen the players' cultural identity, remind them of their experiences with other players during gameplay, and increase community cohesion as a whole. Furthermore, as Guo points out, many reviews have shown that people were first attracted to the stories, songs and game films made by players, then decided to play the game and became one of the players, eventually turning to apprentices or masters. The MA relationship, as well as the fan subculture of JX3, increases the popularity of the game as an example of free advertising. At the same time, the subculture reversely acts on the real gameplay and fulfills players' imagination of their ideal relationship with other players as masters or apprentices.

#### **4. Limitations and further studies**

This research studies the nature and effects of the master-apprentice system in Chinese online video games, using JX3 as an example. Although the data collection and analysis are designed as objective as possible, it still might be biased as the researcher is a player of the game. Other limitations include the inaccuracy of some statistics, as the game publishes its new patch every year, therefore some information quoted from previous research on JX3 might be

out-dated. Similarly, some of the MMORPG demographic and player behaviour data in the previous research may not be true for the JX3 and Chinese players, since the cultural background and regulations are different from popular games such as WoW in western countries.

Last but not least, the sample size of the research is relatively small, which also may lead to imprecise conclusions. As there are very few academic studies of this social phenomenon in digital games, this paper with its data summary could support further research of more precise topics in Chinese video gaming and the Shitu, Master-Apprentice or mentorship, as one type of social relationships in games.

## **5. Discussion**

Until today, the Shitu(Master-Apprentice) relationship has not been recognized by most of the game designers. However, using JX3 as an example, it could become a new virtual social tool that helps people in many ways. Similar to other digital connections in video games, the Shitu relation sufficiently reduces loneliness and isolation in life. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many organizations and communities found digital ways to keep connections online, while some individuals additionally explored close relationships in the virtual world. The impacts of the pandemic will continue in a considerable period, and likewise, accelerate our move from ordinary lives to hyper-reality. Real-life relationships are important, but the online close relationships such as Shitu can provide another chance for people to find someone who is able to help, to listen, and to share experiences with, regardless of the location, wealth and time restrictions. Additionally, besides the Master-Apprentice connection, the online gaming community contains rich social fabric that can grow a substitution of real-life connections. As

part of the research shows, it embraces normal online and offline friendships, romantic relationships, guild memberships and much more. The online gaming community will not replace real-life communications, but it can support individuals' interpersonal connections in multiple ways, sometimes further transforming the connection from online to offline.

On the other hand, based on the complete digital world design, a game creates more opportunities and various ways to interact with other players as virtual characters, which sometimes afford more sense of a real community and real-time cooperations. For example, by featuring those players who have potential willing to, or already been a master/apprentice and analyzed the possible reasons for being involved in the MA relationship, this research found that the master&apprentice quests in the game not only provide a chance for players to get to know each other, but also create a safe, friendly atmosphere where players can communicate about their issues in the game, or even in real life. Concerning the recent rise of social media controversies, the game world might give an alternative solution with less spam and trolling, while more real-time responses such as talking during gameplay, a continuous environment and emphatic communications due to its immersive metrics and interaction design.

As the research shows, although the Shitu relationship is a relatively rare phenomenon in most of the western online video games, it is often found in Asian games, especially MMORPGs. Using the Chinese martial arts theme online video game JX3 as an example, this research studied its cultural history, the in-game MA system design and its features. By comparing its features, reasons and results that MA relationship brings to players and communities, it becomes obvious that although some similarities of digital social interaction exist, the MA connection is different from co-players and game-only friends in many ways, including the purpose of joining the

relationship, the various extent of communication and support, the community size and frequency of interactions, as well as the connection difference between players in the reality. To some extent, the Asian-unique relationship also illustrates the cultural differences of interactions between individuals in different societies: the close tie between masters, his apprentices and communities in Asian games show the idea collectivism where people regard the group as the most important, the idea of “teaching is not all about skills” shows the caring and empathy between each other; Western games, on the other side, appears to be more individualistic, and not genuinely focused on community. Although there are other forms of communities such as guilds that exist in Western games as well, it could be argued that those kinds of communities are usually uniformed aiming for same in-game activities such as dungeons. Another significant cultural feature of Shitu is that the relationship usually lasts for a long period of time, some of them keep in touch even if they do not play the game anymore.

The MA relationship benefits personal development and achievement, and at the same time, it also promotes better communications and interactions in a virtual community. It is a unique model of interpersonal communication, and JX3 has made a reasonable success in developing the MA system for others to draw lessons from. As some have stated, if the console game is more about enjoying the game mechanics and its art design, then the attractiveness of online gaming is never the game itself, but the social connections the player has in it. The Shitu--digital Master-Apprentice relation originally sourced from ancient Asian martial arts culture, and now in online games, it pictures a new way for the Western game industry to encourage the positive player interaction and create a better virtual community. Into the bargain, except games, the digital mentorship could also apply to online education and other digital fields,

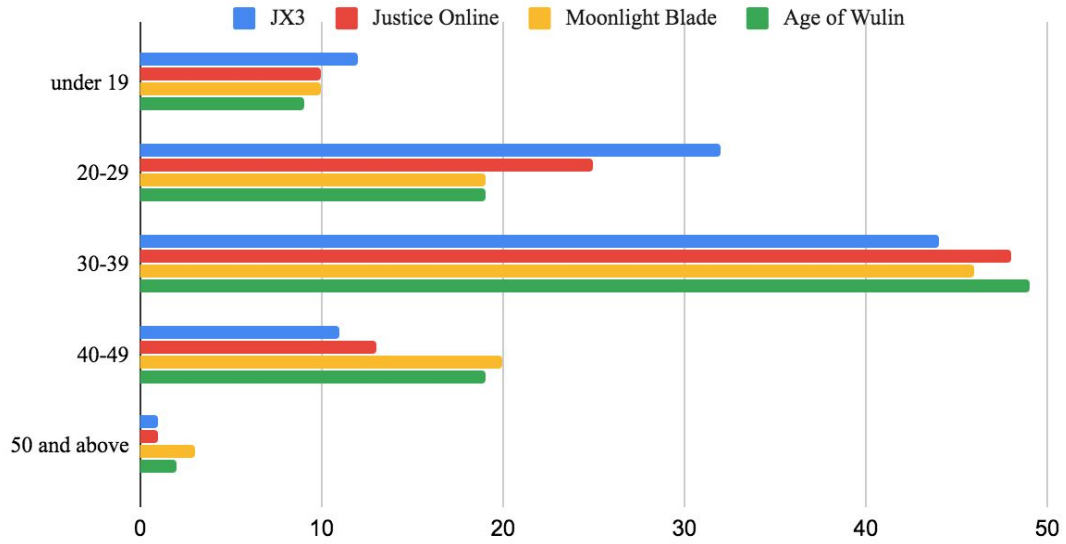
as it encourages a more personal intercommunication and forms relatively long term relationships in the digital space. Someday, these digital friends may help us get through life.



**Figure A – Four Martial Arts Themed Games Player Age Overview**

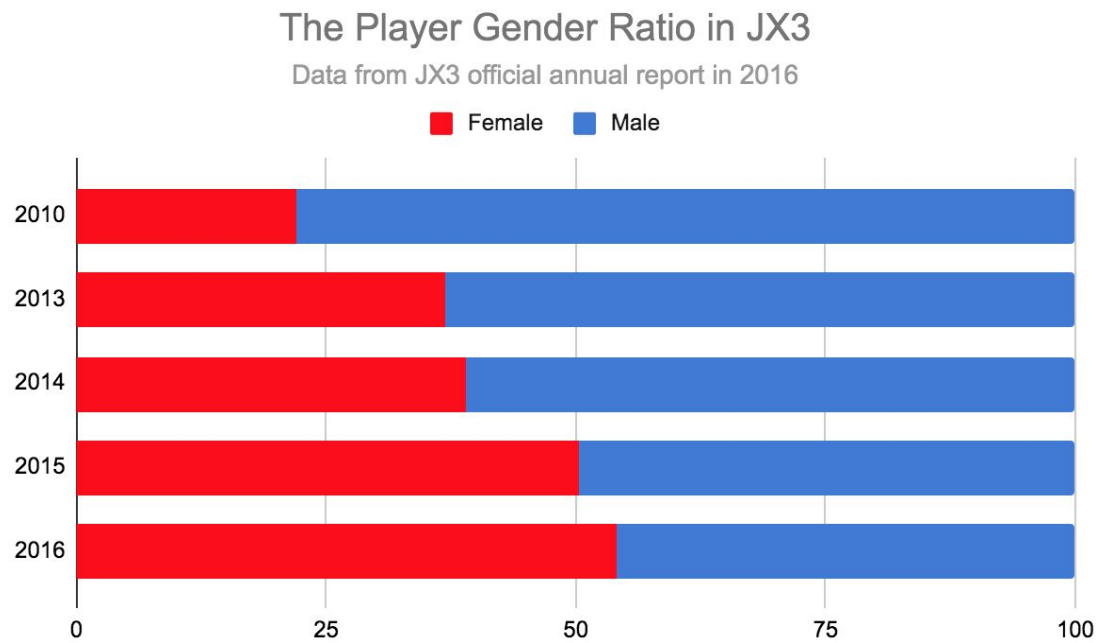
**Chinese Martial Arts Themed Online Video Games Player Age Distribution**

Data from mainstream Chinese search engines' index by Huang, 2019



*Figure A-1.* The age distribution in different martial arts themed video games in mainland China, data from mainstream Chinese search engines' index, analyzed by Huang in 2019.

## Figure B – Martial Arts Themed Games Player Age



*Figure B-1.* According to JX3’s annual report in 2016, the percentage of female players shows a significant increase between 2010 and 2016.

**Figure C – Shitu(Master-Apprentice) quests list in JX3**

任务名称	接取等级	接取NPC	任务奖励
儒侠广聚敬师堂	10级	新手镇车夫	
敬师堂前结英雄	10级	王昌龄	桃李之戒二选一
俯首作揖谢师恩	15级	门派掌门	桃李马
抚琴吹奏博欢颜	20级	门派掌门	桃李之环二选一
师徒同心迎挑战	30级	纪天下	
义薄云天解愁困	30级	纪天下	
渡尽劫波师父在	30级	纪天下	桃李之坠二选一
班门弄斧显身手	40级	纪天下	桃李之链二选一
大恩难言谢恩师	50级	门派掌门	
一文一武传师道	50级	王昌龄	
出师任务·侠义江湖	50级	纪天下	
出师任务·情谊不尽	50级	纪天下	念师恩-趣味道具伞

*Figure C-1.* Shitu(Master-Apprentice) quests list retrieved from JX3 quest database, originally published in 2009.

Quest Name	Quest Level	Quest NPC	Quest Rewards
Swordsman Gather at the Mentor Hall	10	Coachman at the Novice Village	N/A
Master-Apprentice Ceremony at the Mentor Hall	10	Wang Changling	Ring of Taoli
Bows with Hands Clasped, Appreciate Master's love	15	President of the Class	Horse of Taoli
Play Music to Please Master	20	President of the Class	Ring of Taoli
Master and Apprentice Pass the Challenge Together	30	Ji Tianxia	N/A
Solve Problems for Others	30	Ji Tianxia	N/A
Master will Always Be With You	30	Ji Tianxia	Jade of Taoli
Show off Your skill Before Master	40	Ji Tianxia	Necklace of Taoli
Appreciate Master For His Selfless help	50	President of the Class	N/A

Arts and Kungfu, Ways to Inherit Master's Knowledge	50	Wang Changling	N/A
Ending Ceremony: Chivalrous World	50	Ji Tianxia	N/A
Ending Ceremony: Care and Friendship Won't End	50	Ji Tianxia	An Interactive Umbrella

*Figure C-2.* The quests list translated. Depending on the apprentice's avatar current level, both master and apprentice will accept tasks accordingly at the same time.

Figure D – A Example of The Game Master-Apprentice Recruitment Panel

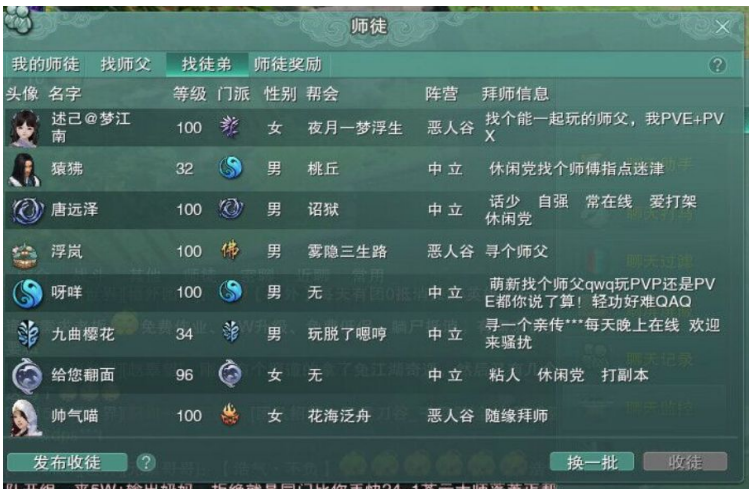
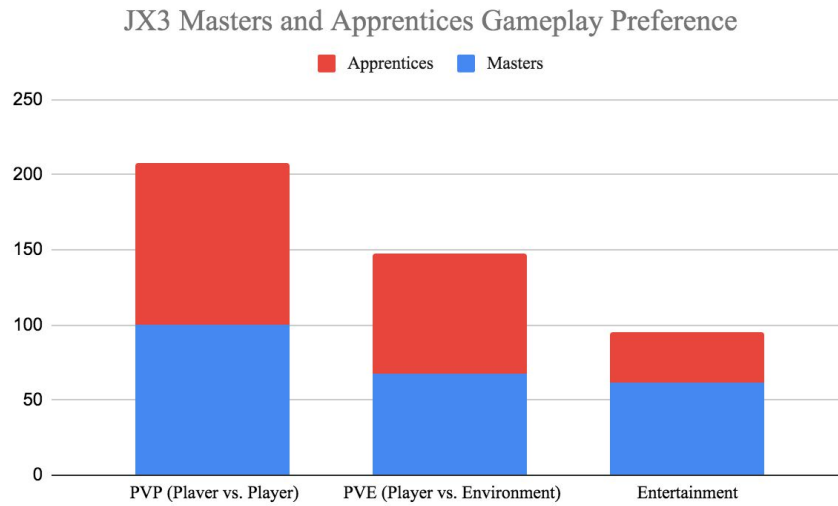


Figure D-1. A screenshot of the apprentice recruitment panel in JX3.

Shitu (Master&Apprentice)						
My Master&Apprentice		Find Masters	Find Apprentices		Master&Apprentice Rewards	
Avatar	Name (ID)	Level	Class	Guild	Camp	Recruitment information
	Shuji@Mengjiangnan	100	Wanhua	Yeyueyimengfusheng	Valley of Villain	Look for a master to play together. I play PVE and PVX (Note: PVX in JX3 means entertaining gameplay)
	Yuanfei	32	Wudu	Qingqiu	Neutral	Player of entertainment, looking for a master who can answer questions
	Tangyuanze	100	Chunyang	Zhaoyu	Neutral	Quiet Independent Often online Love fights Entertaining gameplay
	Fulan	100	Shaolin	Wuyinsanshenglu	Valley of Villain	Look for a master
	Yamie	100	Chunyang	N/A	Neutral	New player looking for a master, I can play either PVP or PVE depended on what you prefer. Ching-Kung is too hard for me
	Jiuquyinghua	34	Tangmen	Wantuoleenheng	Neutral	Looking for a mentor*** Online every night, welcome to talk
	Geininfanmian	96	Penglai	N/A	Neutral	Clingy Player of entertainment Play PVE
	Shuaiqimiao	100	Mingjiao	Huahai fanzhou	Valley of Villain	Looking for a master, leave it to fate
Publish a Recruitment			Refresh			Accept as My Apprentice

Figure D-2. The apprentice recruitment panel translated.

**Figure E – Master and Apprentice Gameplay Preference**



*Figure E-1.* A comparison of gameplay mode preference between masters and apprentices, based on the data collected from the master/apprentice recruitment system.

## Figure F – A Fan Film Example



*Figure F-1.* A scene from the player made film *Snow on the Eyebrow*, showing the master teaching sword to the apprentice.

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