

“Choose-Your-Own- Ethnography”

making teaching strange and China
familiar through educational
videogames

Andrea E. Pia, Phd
LSE Anthropology
Oxford, 7th December 2017

Background

- Six months of fieldwork in Lingshui, Beijing Municipality, PRC (2007-2008), plus one month follow up in 2009;
- Originally conceived as a web-documentary;
- Main inspiration: Le Monde's 2007 web-documentary *Voyage au Bout du Charbon*;
- Gamification Initiative supported by LSE LTI INGNITE! Grant 2016-17.

Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Books as Teaching Tool

- Games position players within deeply immersive storylines and environments that draw players' attention towards specific pedagogical goals (Farber 2015);
- Multiple-choice mechanic helps retaining students' interests attention over time;
- Incorporate ways of presenting information to students that directly interrogate their willingness to explore and act upon such information and reinforce learning;
- Gaming and Learning share kinship (Huizinga 1938, Vygotsky 1978);
- Role-playing challenges one's own default assumptions, values and enhances appreciation of complex social phenomena (Blank 1985; Squire&Jenkins 2003; Squire 2005; Kardan 2006);
- Learning requires a strong and immediate motivations to acquire new knowledge. Having fun is one such motivations (Gee 2003).



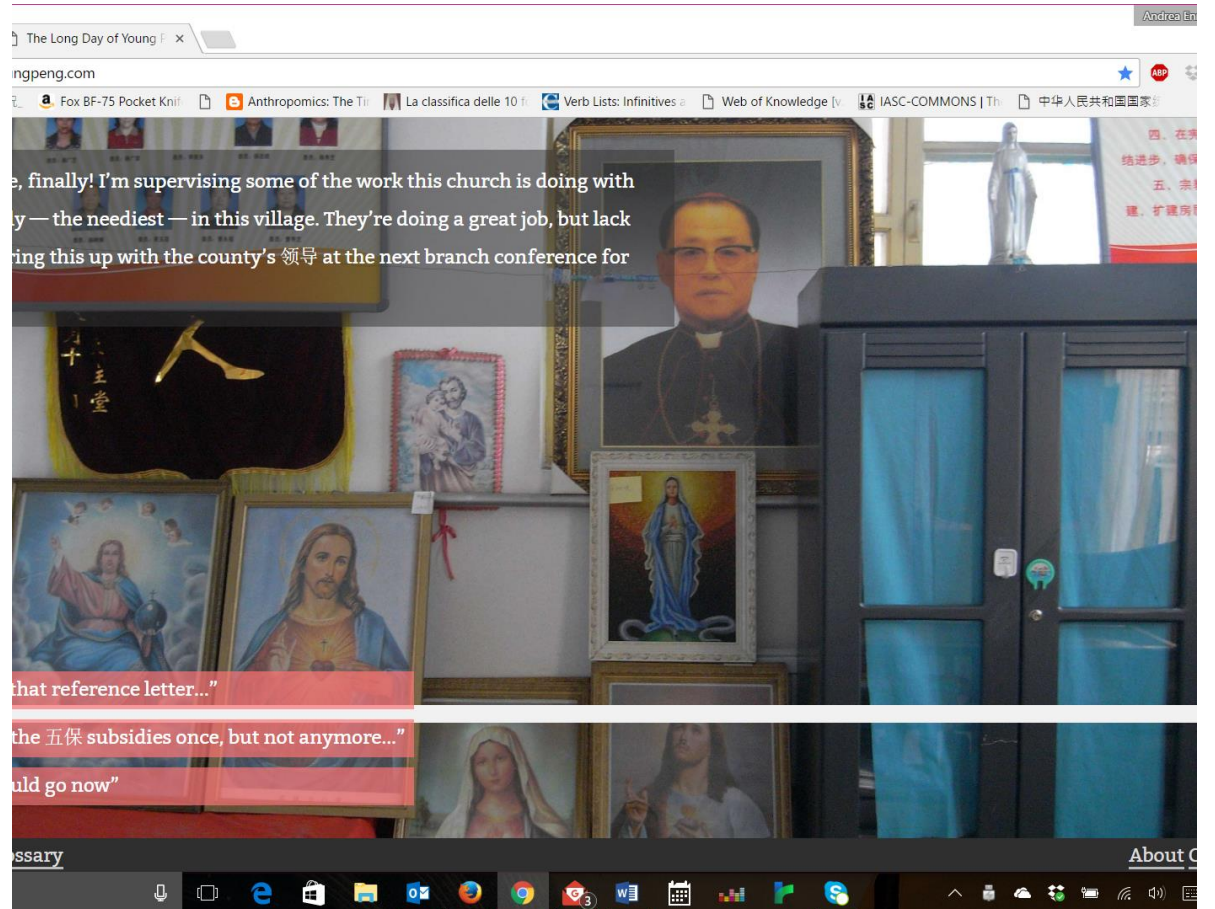
The Game

Based on [Twine](#)

Storyline is divided in seven different scenarios that broadly map onto seven of AN447 Lent term lectures;

Holistic approach: many aspects of contemporary Chinese society will appear clustered together (as in fieldwork);

- Aims:
 1. Previous cohorts highlighted difficulties in articulating connections across lecture topics;
 2. Think creatively about comparison;
 3. Think critically about the ethnographic method *viz* other social sciences.



Teaching Method

- Played during seminars in groups of three-four students on iPad devices during five consecutive weekly seminars.
- Game would save students' progresses in the game and students kept playing in the same group until they reached one of the game's seven possible endings.
- After 15 minutes of gaming groups mixed together and discussed in pairs what they thought relevant about the game;
- Remainder of class spent on a diverse set of teaching activities that would bring topics and readings from different weeks in relation to the game's storyline.
- Students asked to report on why they took one decision and not another.

'One of the most important aspects of the game's value was the conversations it spurred in class, especially between western and Chinese students. It opened up to a shared discourse unlike any other class activity or class discussion I had participated in.'

'An Interesting insight into the life of a migrant, particularly in Beijing. Having lived in Beijing you often take for granted the difficulties faced by rural migrants.'

'The Peng game really helps me understand and connect the topics we learnt and the discussions in the class were really interesting. The only problem for me was when playing the game, me and my peers thought too much about making the choices, maybe because we all wanted to avoid the "bad endings."'

'I really love this game and I play this game in my own time, I even recommend this game to my friends. But I do not feel this is a good way to study in seminar. At least for me I'd prefer conventional form of seminar. Thank you for amazing game anyway!!!'

- ## Feedback

via class survey (37 respondents):

The game stimulated interesting discussion in class: 96% either agreed or strongly agreed;

Collaborative Learning: 93% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed;

Welcome addition to class activities, 90% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed;

Helped students to draw connections among readings and topics: 87% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed.

Interesting Results (for Anthropology): *Comparison, Reflexivity and Ethical Reasoning*

The gaming environment interrogates students' ethical agency and interpretative capacities. How would a Chinese migrant behave in this situation? Should I send remittances home or keep them to myself?

- *In this light, videogames place players in a so called “ethical gym” where ethical or un-ethical choices are experienced as separated from their consequences (Bittanti 2005, Felini 2012);*

The game itself shows Peng thinking comparatively in many situations. This prompted students to think along similar lines about AN447 material and its pedagogical goals.

- *Class discussions revolved around the question of whether Peng's positionality may have an impact on his as well as on the class's own interpretation of migration, precarity, discrimination and social change.*