

Resistance and Digital Communication: How Gaming Platforms Become Alternative Infrastructures of Communication in Surveillance States

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This article examines the transformative potential of online gaming platforms, particularly PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (PUBG), as unconventional yet vital channels of communication among Uyghurs living in exile and those in East Turkestan, a region subject to intense Chinese state surveillance. In contexts where traditional modes of interaction are suppressed by authoritarian control, Uyghur individuals have creatively repurposed digital games not just for entertainment but as fragile tools of reconnection and resistance. Through interviews with young Uyghur women in Türkiye and close analysis of their in-game experiences, the study explores how PUBG became a temporary lifeline for communication, how speech was adapted under the threat of surveillance, and how such platforms were eventually compromised by state interference. By centering the voices of those navigating life between repression and exile, the article reveals the quiet ingenuity of digital resistance and challenges conventional assumptions about the political potential of play.

Keywords: digital surveillance, platform infrastructures, resistance practices, subversive gaming

Reimagining Communication Through Gaming

In an era marked by increasing digital surveillance, censorship, and authoritarian control over information flows, online gaming platforms have emerged as unexpected yet powerful venues for communication, particularly within politically occupied or highly restricted territories. While historically dismissed as mere entertainment, multiplayer digital games such as *PUBG: Battlegrounds* (commonly known as PUBG; PUBG Studios, 2017) can function as what Castells (2012) terms "networks of resistance": spaces where fragmented, ephemeral, and tactical forms of sociopolitical engagement emerge (p. 9). In such contexts, gaming becomes more than leisure, providing temporary infrastructures of contact in environments where ordinary modes of interaction are suppressed, monitored, or criminalized.

This article investigates how online games have been reappropriated as tools of subversive communication in contexts where traditional modes of expression are suppressed or policed. Within these

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Date submitted: 2025-12-04

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virtual terrains, players engage in what Raley (2009) describes as tactical media: adaptive, mobile, and improvisational acts that operate within, but not always in direct coordination with, broader networks of resistance. These tactics are less about organized opposition and more about what McGranahan (2016) terms refusal, the everyday, situated practices of “making do” under constraint that subvert dominant systems not through direct confrontation, but through withdrawal, redirection, and subtle defiance. In this sense, gaming becomes a form of communicative praxis: not merely escapist play, but a space where participants transform limited affordances into opportunities for expression, covert connection, and solidarity.

The central argument of this article is that games are not politically neutral. They are contested terrains of meaning-making, capable of sustaining micro-publics in the face of occupation. Through direct interviews with Uyghur PUBG players and ethnographic accounts, I reveal how these platforms enable individuals to resist erasure, maintain community bonds, and express grievances that would otherwise be silenced. In doing so, the article contributes to a growing body of research in critical media studies, digital resistance, and postcolonial Internet geographies. Scholars have long argued that games are expressive and rhetorical forms capable of shaping political subjectivities (Bogost, 2007) and that tactical media can serve as fleeting yet powerful interventions in oppressive systems (Raley, 2009). Moreover, platform capitalism and resistance in gaming cultures are increasingly seen as sites of contestation and negotiation (Postigo, 2016; Taylor, 2018). This analysis is further situated within broader discussions of data infrastructures and digital control (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

Building on research showing how Uyghur-language forums foster oppositional consciousness under surveillance (Clothey & Koku, 2017) and how digital infrastructures in Xinjiang shape social and political identities (Byler, 2022), this article adds ethnographic evidence of Uyghur PUBG (PUBG Studios, 2017) players turning gameplay into a site of relation, survival, and refusal. It also engages broader questions surrounding the governance of digital spaces, the role of corporate moderation, and the ethics of platform power. The politics of speech in gaming environments are entangled with larger struggles over censorship, profit, and geopolitical authority. By examining how Uyghur players have reimagined communication through gaming, this article foregrounds the radical potential of play in the digital age. Games are not simply entertainment; they are evolving communicative infrastructures that can become lifelines in occupied digital worlds.

The article proceeds in nine parts. It first situates the case within the broader context of surveillance, exile, and gaming governance. It then offers a methodological and reflexive account of how this research was conducted under surveillance conditions. From there, it outlines key theoretical frameworks connecting games to resistance and platform power before turning to the ethnographic sections that trace how participants entered PUBG (PUBG Studios, 2017), communicated under watch, and ultimately lost that fragile channel of connection. It concludes by reflecting on the limits, risks, and ethical stakes of using commercial platforms as infrastructures of survival.

Surveillance, Exile, and Gaming Governance

Occupied and heavily surveilled regions, such as Palestine and East Turkestan, are not only sites of territorial and political control but also arenas where information, communication, and identity are

rigorously policed. In East Turkestan—a name preferred by Uyghurs themselves, emphasizing resistance to Chinese state narratives (Witteborn, 2023)—the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has established one of the most technologically intensive systems of social control in the world. Facial recognition networks, DNA collection programs, AI-driven monitoring tools, and comprehensive Internet filters are deployed to discipline, surveil, and erase the Uyghur population (Human Rights Watch, 2019; Qiang, 2019).

As Darren Byler (2021) documents, state violence extends far beyond the physical confines of so-called “reeducation camps” into everyday digital life. Online activity, from sharing a Quranic verse to using encrypted messaging apps, is treated as evidence of disloyalty or separatist intent, rendering even routine communication potentially criminal. These digital mechanisms of surveillance create pervasive fear, silencing dissent and fracturing social networks both inside and outside the region.

Yet, within these tightly controlled spaces, Uyghurs are finding ways to resist and communicate. Heavy surveillance on mainstream messaging apps like WeChat and QQ has prompted reliance on unconventional digital platforms, including gaming environments, which have emerged as unexpected sites of subversion. In these spaces, quiet forms of resistance persist, demonstrating how digital infrastructures, while oppressive, can also generate creative avenues for survival and expression.

Online games, unlike encrypted messaging apps or VPN-based platforms, are often framed globally as apolitical, recreational, and commercially innocuous spaces. This perception can offer a kind of protective camouflage for communication. However, such a characterization requires careful qualification in the context of China, where the gaming industry operates under extensive regulatory oversight, including licensing regimes, content restrictions, and data governance frameworks that align platform operations with state priorities. Major companies such as Tencent play a central role in mediating access, enforcing compliance, and structuring the conditions under which communication occurs. In this sense, digital game environments are not external to surveillance infrastructures but embedded within a tightly managed media ecosystem. Yet their interactive, fast-paced, and multimodal communicative affordances may still produce fleeting conditions that users perceive as comparatively less scrutinized than explicitly political platforms.

One of the most widely used of these is PUBG (PUBG Studios, 2017), a multiplayer battle-royale game developed by the South Korean company Krafton and distributed in China by Tencent. The game’s central premise—players parachuting onto a shrinking battlefield, scavenging for resources, and fighting to be the last survivor—operates through a logic of elimination and survival that mirrors the precarious realities of life under surveillance. For Uyghurs, however, PUBG’s global reach and Tencent’s ownership paradoxically made it both accessible and dangerous: accessible because of Tencent’s integration with Chinese digital infrastructure, and dangerous because of its entanglement with state-aligned systems of data governance and monitoring. Yet within this ambivalent terrain, the game became a makeshift tool for Uyghurs attempting to re-establish communication with friends and family back home, its in-game chat features offering a brief and fragile channel of connection under the guise of play.

The article further examines communication across exile. The research was conducted with Uyghur women living primarily in Türkiye, a major site of Uyghur diasporic life. That location matters analytically as well as methodologically. Exile made these interviews possible, yet it did not place participants outside the

reach of repression. Their communicative choices remained shaped by the dangers faced by relatives back home and by the risk that even indirect contact could expose loved ones to heightened scrutiny. Communication across exile was therefore structured by uneven, but entangled forms of danger. Participants were navigating their own conditions of precarity while calibrating what they asked, how they asked it, and whether they should ask it at all.

Interview narratives reveal that many Uyghurs in exile began playing PUBG between 2017 and 2021, not out of interest in gaming, but because they heard that relatives were online. After 2021, intense Chinese surveillance largely curbed these connections. However, for a time, the game provided a loophole, an unassuming interface through which real conversations, no matter how brief or coded, could occur. As one young Uyghur woman, Guli, shared, "I started playing it only for this reason. . . I found my cousin through this game and asked him about my family." Another respondent, Nur, described how she found family members by following their usernames shared through passive social media activity on platforms like QQ, explaining: "They knew that I was visiting their profiles, hence posted their usernames from the game. That's how we could contact each other."

These connections, however, were always shadowed by the threat of surveillance. Participants described how ordinary Uyghur speech had to be carefully adjusted because even familiar greetings, religious expressions, or direct references to detention could feel dangerous. Everyday language became coded: "prison" was replaced with "hospital," and questions about family members were asked through indirect phrases that only trusted listeners could interpret. These small linguistic shifts show how communication through PUBG depended not only on access to the platform but also on shared knowledge, caution, and emotional restraint.

Methodology and Positionality

This article draws on digital ethnography and semistructured interviews conducted between 2023 and 2025, following IRB approval, with five Uyghur women in exile whose accounts directly inform this analysis. Rather than offering a comprehensive account of Uyghur digital life, it presents a focused ethnographic examination of how participants navigated communication, fear, and familial separation through PUBG amid surveillance and political repression. Interviews were conducted in person and through encrypted messaging services, and all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Conversations were open-ended and participant-led, often unfolding through fragments, memories, and emotionally charged narration rather than through a rigid interview protocol.

My positionality shaped every stage of this project. I approached this research with a relational awareness of how surveillance, displacement, and political repression structure everyday communication. This orientation did not erase the differences between researcher and participant, nor did it grant transparent access to participants' lives. It did, however, shape the project's ethical and interpretive lens, grounding the work in caution, accountability, and attentiveness to the conditions under which people speak, withhold, and endure. What emerged through the interviews was not only an account of digital practice but also an affective grammar of loss, endurance, and constrained communication across politically fractured worlds.

Because of the extreme risks faced by participants and their family members still living in East Turkestan, this study was designed to be minimally extractive. No digital traces such as screen recordings, metadata, or chat logs were collected. Instead, the analysis relied on oral accounts, emotional memory, and recurring discursive patterns in how participants described communication through the platform. This limits claims to comprehensiveness but reflects the realities of researching heavily surveilled communities, where collecting seemingly routine digital materials may intensify risk or reproduce extractive logics. These methodological constraints are not merely limitations, but windows into the very systems of control that make such storytelling both urgent and fraught.

This article, therefore, treats silence, hesitation, euphemism, and narrative fragmentation as meaningful forms of testimony rather than deficiencies in the data. The article also suggests a broader lesson for scholars studying tightly monitored environments: Methodological restraint can be an ethical and epistemic strength rather than a weakness.

Theoretical Framework: Games, Resistance, and Platform Power

As part of my framework for understanding activist uses of nonactivist media, I draw on Ethan Zuckerman's (2008) cute cat theory of digital activism. The theory posits that digital platforms designed primarily for entertainment or everyday sharing can become critical infrastructures for activism when repurposed by users under surveillance. Because these platforms are valued for their mundane uses by a broad public, regimes incur greater costs when censoring them outright. This makes them strategic sites for subversive expression, particularly in high-surveillance contexts like East Turkestan, where traditional avenues for communication are criminalized. Building on this theory, I analyze how marginalized communities creatively exploit the affordances of commercial platforms not only to communicate but also to survive digitally.

Rita Raley's (2009) concept of tactical media is equally important. Tactical media are temporary, mobile interventions that exploit existing infrastructures to subvert them. Uyghur use of PUBG fits squarely within this framework: voice chats, in-game rituals, and username signals become subversive tactics embedded within commercial gaming infrastructure.

This article also draws on critical game studies that situate gaming within global systems of empire, resistance, and militarization. Games are not apolitical spaces; they are deeply embedded in and often reflective of geopolitical struggles. Helga Tawil-Souri (2007) demonstrates how pro-Arab video games circulated on Palestinian screens act as cultural and political interventions, challenging dominant media representations and asserting agency under occupation. Similarly, Sulafa Zidani (2021) highlights how humor and memes serve as tools of aesthetic resistance in Arabic-speaking digital cultures, offering alternative modes of expressing dissent. Together, these interventions show that games and digital media are not merely leisure activities, but contested terrains of political meaning-making and resistance.

Finally, platform governance is central to this analysis. As Gillespie (2018) argues, platforms are not neutral containers, but are governed by opaque rules, investor pressure, and geopolitical alliances. Although PUBG is owned by Krafton, formerly Bluehole, and developed by PUBG Studios, Tencent plays a

central role in its distribution and operation within China. Tencent's entanglement with Chinese state surveillance makes PUBG a site of both opportunity and danger. Surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) ensures that every digital gesture is both connective and extractive.

Through these theoretical lenses, this article reads games as what Alexander Galloway (2006) calls allegories of control, but also as unpredictable zones of resistance where hidden transcripts (Scott, 1990) emerge through whispered speech and pixelated presence. As Byler (2025) argues, this complex interplay of global capital and geopolitical competition creates an imperial in-between, a space where surveillance and limited access coexist, enabling forms of digital resistance that might otherwise be impossible.

Gaming as a Subversive Platform: Uyghur Voices and Tactical Play

Games as Third Spaces of Subversion

Digital games have long been theorized not merely as entertainment but as social and political spaces that enable alternative forms of interaction, identity-making, and resistance. Drawing on Ray Oldenburg's (1989) concept of "third places"—informal public gathering spaces distinct from home and work—scholars have explored how online multiplayer games function as virtual third spaces where marginalized users can build community, express identity, and enact agency beyond the gaze of institutional power. T. L. Taylor (2006) explores how games like EverQuest (Verant Interactive & 989 Studios, 1999) become rich social environments that extend beyond mere gameplay, offering players a meaningful sense of presence and belonging. Similarly, Mia Consalvo (2007) investigates the social dynamics of online gaming, highlighting how players navigate power, rules, and relationships in ways that reflect broader societal structures. Bonnie Nardi's (2010) ethnographic study of World of Warcraft (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) illustrates how online games operate as immersive social worlds, enabling players to form sustained connections and carve out spaces of expression and community, particularly when traditional public spheres are foreclosed by surveillance or repression.

Nick Robinson (2012) argues that digital games are deeply entangled in the military-entertainment complex, often functioning as tools of persuasion that embed rather than escape dominant logics of militarism and state violence. Yet, in highly securitized environments, these same platforms can be tactically reimagined and repurposed by marginalized players. For Uyghur exiles, war-themed games like PUBG (PUBG Studios, 2017) paradoxically offer a space where the boundaries between simulation and survival blur. In this context, a militarized digital landscape becomes a covert corridor for familial contact, affective resistance, and fleeting moments of freedom beyond surveillance.

This article also draws from Nancy Fraser's (1990) and Adrienne Shaw's (2015) insights on counterpublics and identity work within media systems. Gaming spaces, particularly when appropriated by users with limited access to mainstream discourse, can function as counterpublics: parallel communicative arenas where suppressed voices engage in meaning-making, cultural preservation, and critique. This understanding of games as socially contested environments also resonates with Kishonna Gray's (2020) work on marginalized users in digital gaming, which shows how gaming spaces are structured by race, gender, and exclusion even as they can be repurposed for community, resilience, and alternative forms of

presence. The Uyghur use of PUBG as a hidden transcript of resistance situates this study at the intersection of platform studies, affect theory, and postcolonial digital geographies, offering a new vocabulary for understanding how games can both reflect and subvert regimes of power.

Gaming With Purpose: Reconnecting With the Homeland

Interviews conducted with young Uyghur PUBG players highlight a powerful, often heartbreaking transformation of the platform. The participants were not habitual gamers. Most of them began playing around 2020, almost two years after the formal launch of the game, driven not by fun but by necessity. One 20-year-old female participant, Zohre, explained that she started playing PUBG at age 17 with one explicit goal: "To find my relatives and friends back home." She added, "I started to play it only for this reason."

Zohre discovered that some of her family members in East Turkestan were subtly signaling their availability by posting their gaming usernames on other Chinese social media apps like Xiaohongshu (Rednote). It was an indirect, but intentional act. In an environment where traditional social media was too risky, and phone lines were either tapped or dead, PUBG emerged as an unlikely sanctuary.

The interactions that followed were cautious and brief. "I found my cousin through this game and asked him about my family," Zohre shared. Others waited in the game's lobby or login screen at particular times, hoping their relatives would appear. In these silent digital rituals, presence itself became an act of resistance, a signal of survival, and an anchor to memory.

Communicating Under Watch: Coded Speech and Algorithmic Fear

Despite its promise, communication through PUBG was never free of danger. Participants perceived surveillance as ever-present, even in the simulated chaos of a digital battlefield. "Yes," Nur responded when asked if she felt watched, "we might be watched by the Chinese police anytime. I always felt nervous while playing, thinking they were watching us."

Users developed symbolic language and metaphors to convey sensitive information. Guli explained that if someone had been arrested or detained, their in-game status would be described as being "in the hospital," a thinly veiled euphemism understood clearly by those within the Uyghur community. "If relatives or someone we knew were in prison," said Guli, "they told us they were in 'hospital.' That's how we understood which family members were still in detention and who was out."

Similarly, terms like "school" or "studying" were used to refer to reeducation camps. One player, Gulnaz, recalled:

One day in 2019, I was able to connect to my brother and I asked about my parents. He said they were fine and told me not to worry. But soon after, when I asked about my other brother and mother, he said, "they are studying." I wonder if he meant they're in the "reeducation camp?"

These fragments of coded speech reflect what Michel de Certeau (1984) termed “tactics,” minoritarian maneuvers within systems not designed for resistance. Every conversation required emotional labor, constant self-monitoring, and the haunting uncertainty of surveillance. These communicative maneuvers also echo what Hasan et al. (2025) describe as creative visual and textual tactics developed under layered digital surveillance, where meaning must be carried through indirection, shared context, and strategic incompleteness rather than direct declaration.

These constraints extended beyond euphemisms. Words like “Allah,” “InshaAllah,” and “Assalamualaikum” were deliberately avoided for fear that they might trigger automatic keyword detection. Before mass internment and intensified surveillance, these words were common parts of daily Uyghur conversation. Under these conditions, even routine language became dangerous. Communication through PUBG was often brief, partial, and emotionally compressed. The point was not to say everything, but to say enough. Enough to ask after someone. Enough to indicate a condition indirectly. Enough to register presence without drawing attention.

The Disappearance of Contact

Over time, even this fragile digital thread was severed. As awareness grew among Chinese authorities that PUBG and other online games were being used for communication, families inside East Turkestan began disappearing from game servers. “No, I don’t play it anymore,” Nur said. “It was detected or suspected that we can contact our families this way, and thus taken under tighter control.” Another participant, Aygul, a 31-year-old Uyghur currently living in exile in Malaysia, echoed this: “Since 2021, my relatives left the game, as it became suspicious after a while.”

The act of leaving the game and logging off permanently was not a personal choice, but one driven by coercion. It marked the reclosure of a digital window, the end of a loophole that had offered temporary warmth, presence, and hope.

As one player, Nur, later described it: “They (friends and relatives in East Turkestan) told us we should delete the game, too. That’s when I stopped playing. I didn’t want to, but I had to.”

Gaming as Digital Resistance

These stories complicate our understanding of what counts as resistance. There were no slogans, no hashtags, no bold speeches. There were pauses. Login icons. Careful sentences. Silence. And yet, within these constraints, Uyghur PUBG players enacted forms of digital resistance, not through direct confrontation, but through the quiet refusal to disappear.

Their actions resonate with James C. Scott’s (1990) theory of everyday resistance: small, improvised acts that may seem inconsequential in isolation but, taken together, subtly undermine the totalizing logic of domination. In this context, simply logging into a game to say “I’m okay” became subversive. A virtual battleground was transformed into a fragile sanctuary, a space where presence, however fleeting, became profoundly political.

For participants, surveillance in these digital arenas was not speculative; it was certain. The players knew every word might be intercepted, every phrase monitored. This awareness shaped their communication, its language, tone, and even its timing. The emotional toll of sustaining these pixelated connections inside a combat game was immense. Yet, for a time, the illusion of proximity outweighed the risk.

Eventually, players stopped appearing, and the game lobby, once a liminal space of hope, grew empty. Family members and friends ceased logging in, not because the desire to connect waned, but because the channel had become too visible, too compromised, and too dangerous.

In such moments, logging off was no longer a mundane gesture; it became symbolic. It marked not just the loss of contact, but the closing of yet another corridor where Uyghur voices could exist, quietly, beyond the grasp of repression.

The use of games like PUBG in East Turkestan embodies a stark paradox: in one of the most surveilled regions in the world, a commercial combat game briefly became a lifeline. Uyghur players transformed a tool of militarized entertainment into a medium of survival, kinship, and refusal. These micro-acts of defiance, encrypted, ephemeral, and intimate, extend Scott's everyday resistance into the domain of hidden transcripts: those submerged narratives and gestures of dissent that thrive in spaces presumed apolitical or inconsequential.

Platform Fragility, Deplatforming, and the Limits of Resistance

While gaming platforms such as PUBG provided Uyghurs in the diaspora with a digital backchannel to their occupied homeland, the very structure that allowed for such tactical use was also deeply embedded within global systems of surveillance, censorship, and authoritarian appeasement. The irony at the heart of this article is that the same platforms that momentarily enabled expression also carry the power to erase it. This is the deplatforming dilemma.

The concept of deplatforming, removing individuals or content from digital platforms because of perceived violations of terms or external political pressure, has become a flashpoint in global debates over digital rights and platform governance. For marginalized communities, however, deplatforming is not only a legal or policy matter. It is lived as disappearance: the shrinking of visibility, the narrowing of communicative routes, and the loss of spaces that had briefly become usable.

Tencent, the Chinese technology conglomerate behind Tencent Games, is connected to PUBG through the co-development of *PUBG Mobile* by LightSpeed Studios of Tencent Games and KRAFTON, and its position within China's platform governance system is further complicated by reported state "golden share" arrangements in a Tencent subsidiary (LightSpeed Studios, n.d.; Reuters, 2023). Thus, its alignment with state surveillance policies and its role in content moderation raise urgent questions about how corporate infrastructures can become extensions of authoritarian power. Within this environment, Uyghur users are engaging in resistance inside spaces that are structurally unsafe.

Western-based platforms have also bowed to geopolitical pressure. References to Uyghurs, Tibet, and Taiwan have reportedly been removed or altered in game-related contexts, while public expressions of solidarity with persecuted communities have been met with recasting, suppression, or moderation (Hernon, 2025; Pearson, 2025). Whether such examples emerge in commercial gaming, fan cultures, or platform ecosystems more broadly, they underscore the instability of relying on global entertainment infrastructures for political speech.

Participants also described forms of algorithmic speech control and self-censorship within the platform. Certain phrases, such as “Assalamu alaykum” and other religious invocations, appeared to trigger delays, muting, or freezing of communication. While moderation in gaming voice and chat remains under-researched, similar practices have been documented on social media platforms where Uyghur content is frequently shadowbanned or algorithmically downranked. As Gillespie (2022) argues, platform governance operates not only through deletion or banning but also through forms of reduction that diminish visibility without fully removing content. This framework helps make sense of the muted, delayed, and partially suppressed communicative experiences participants described.

Aygul described how users began replacing overtly religious or political terms with euphemisms. “We used ‘hospital’ instead of ‘prison,’” she said, “and we avoided saying Allah or Islam. We knew it could be monitored.” The psychological toll of self-censorship, even in a game, reflects the deeper trauma of life under panoptic threat.

The reach of this repression does not stop at the national border. Uyghur users in Türkiye, Europe, and North America have described losing access to accounts, disappearing from groups, or encountering platform behaviors that mirror broader patterns of digital authoritarianism without borders. This globalized infrastructure of suppression poses critical questions about platform governance: Who controls the rules of communication? Who is held accountable when platforms become proxies for state repression? And how can vulnerable users, especially stateless or exiled communities, find sanctuary within a system built to exclude them?

Games are no longer just leisure domains. They are cultural battlegrounds. The stories of Uyghur PUBG players show that games can be both emancipatory and exclusionary. They are simultaneously the space where people found their cousins and the space where silence eventually returned. The deplatforming dilemma is not simply about being kicked off a platform. It is about losing the last communicative bridge to an otherwise inaccessible world.

Risks, Limits, and Ethics of Resistance via Gaming

The stories of Uyghur players using PUBG as a backchannel to family in East Turkestan are moving, but profound risks also mark them. Resistance in digital spaces, especially for stateless or persecuted populations, always comes at a cost. As much as these platforms provide temporary hope, they also expose players to new layers of surveillance, psychological stress, and ethical ambiguity.

For the young Uyghur women I interviewed, gaming was never about escapism. It was a haunted practice, one conducted under the constant fear of being overheard, monitored, or flagged by unknown digital eyes. Several participants described feelings of deep anxiety while speaking, knowing they were likely under state surveillance. "I always felt nervous while playing," Guli said, "thinking they were hearing us." This persistent unease reflects what sociologist David Lyon (2018) calls the emotional fallout of surveillance: the way monitoring regimes generate self-censorship, anxiety, and internalized repression. Even in seemingly playful environments like video games, Uyghur players were forced to carry the burden of state scrutiny. These conditions rob digital communication of spontaneity and intimacy, replacing them with fear and control.

There is a tension in using a militarized, commercial gaming platform like PUBG, a game designed around killing, looting, and war, as a tool for human connection. The same virtual map that becomes a reunion point for separated families is also filled with violence and hypermasculinity. This paradox raises ethical questions: Is it appropriate, or even responsible, to normalize resistance through a space architected for combat and profit? Some might argue that transforming violent games into subversive tools is an act of creative reappropriation, a way to weaponize the master's tools. Others may caution that such gamification risks trivializing the seriousness of the oppression faced by Uyghurs, making their resistance seem like a subplot in a digital fantasy rather than a life-or-death struggle. This is not a simple issue. But it is one that scholars and activists must confront as platforms increasingly mediate activism, community-building, and survival.

One of the most sobering aspects of the Uyghur PUBG testimonies is how fragile the resistance became. Over time, players began logging off permanently, not by choice, but because of growing suspicion and threats. Once the Chinese state identified that PUBG was being used to circumvent censorship, the loophole closed. This reflects a core limitation of platform-based resistance: Users are always guests in someone else's infrastructure. Unlike encrypted tools developed for activists, commercial games are owned, monitored, and modifiable by private corporations, often ones with ties to authoritarian regimes. In such contexts, even a whisper can become dangerous. Furthermore, as awareness spreads that Uyghur exiles are using games to communicate, these platforms may become honeypots, digital traps designed to expose rather than protect. Without guarantees of security, the very act of reaching out can become a liability.

Another ethical dilemma arises around visibility. While some forms of resistance depend on exposure, hashtags, streams, and digital protests, others thrive on silence. Uyghur players often had to choose between speaking and staying connected. Speaking too much risked the safety of their loved ones. Saying too little meant losing them altogether. This ethical tightrope challenges traditional understandings of activism, which often equate visibility with power. For Uyghurs in exile, silence was not submission; it was a strategy. And yet, it also came with the heartbreak of absence, including the painful decision to delete the game once relatives signaled that the channel had become too dangerous.

Conclusion: Toward a Radical Digital Commons

In the shadows of surveillance and silence, Uyghur players found each other in the most unexpected of places: a war simulation game built for global entertainment. In occupied spaces where religion is criminalized, language is erased, and contact is dangerous, PUBG became more than a pastime. It was a tool, a fragile, makeshift infrastructure for remembrance, connection, and resistance.

This article has shown how online gaming, often dismissed as apolitical or escapist, can serve as a vital communicative bridge for marginalized communities. Through firsthand testimonies, we witnessed how Uyghurs used the voice chat and user interfaces of PUBG to reconnect with loved ones across borders, despite knowing they were being watched. We also traced how that lifeline eventually snapped, how even a digital refuge can be colonized by surveillance.

The Uyghur case exposes the deep ambivalence of digital platforms. On one hand, they offer subversive potential, enabling what Raley (2009) calls tactical media: temporary, inventive actions carved out of restrictive systems. On the other hand, these same platforms are complicit in enforcing the very control they seek to escape, bowing to authoritarian pressure and prioritizing market access over human rights. Commercial gaming environments, especially those enmeshed with state-linked corporate infrastructures, are not neutral zones of play. They are infrastructures of both connection and control.

What Uyghur players enacted through PUBG was not merely resistance. It was a form of radical presence. A refusal to disappear. Logging on became a declaration: "I'm still here," even if only as a pixelated avatar or a silent message. These small acts of presence, forged in fear and fragility, became infrastructural refusals, gestures of survival and dignity against a system engineered to erase them.

This study calls on platform scholars and game designers to think differently. What if games were not merely products of leisure or tools of monetization, but were imagined as ephemeral infrastructures for survival? What design ethics might emerge if the most vulnerable users—stateless, surveilled, or exiled—were centered from the start? To build a truly radical digital commons, we must recognize games as terrains of struggle, not just for play, but for presence. This means demanding accountability from platforms, resisting extractive logics, and honoring digital spaces as potential sanctuaries. Until then, we must listen to silence, to code-switching, and to whispered goodbyes spoken through gameplay. Because in the world Uyghur players inhabit, even saying "I'm okay" is a kind of defiance and a blueprint for how digital resistance survives.

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