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Chinese video game market as an opportunity for Polish game producers

The aim of the article was to verify if Chinese game market can be attractive for Polish game producers, and which part of this market is the most promising and gives the biggest growth opportunities. The second goal was to identify major barriers to entry on the Chinese game market, and to find out if this obstacles can be overcome. Analysis of the growth of the Internet access and penetration ratio has shown that online game market in China has a potential to become the biggest in the world. Video game market research has shown that not only its growth potential is extraordinary, but it is already second largest in the world. Further analysis helped to establish that it is online and mobile game market that is the most promising for Polish game developers. Several barriers to entry were identified, but none of them is too problematic to stop game producers from expansion to Chinese online and mobile game market.

Chiński rynek gier komputerowych jako możliwość rozwoju dla polskich producentów gier komputerowych

Celem artykułu było zweryfikowanie, czy chiński rynek gier komputerowych może być okazją do rozwoju dla polskich producentów gier oraz która część tego rynku jest najbardziej obiecująca i daje największe możliwości wzrostu. Drugim celem było zidentyfikowanie najważniejszych barier wejścia na chiński rynek gier komputerowych oraz sprawdzenie, czy jest możliwe pokonanie tych barier. Analiza wzrostu liczby ludności z dostępem do Internetu oraz wskaźnika penetracji wskazują, że chiński rynek gier internetowych ma potencjał, aby stać się największym na świecie. Dalsze analizy pomogły w ustaleniu, że rynki gier internetowych oraz gier na telefony komórkowe są najbardziej obiecujące z punktu widzenia polskich producentów gier. Zidentyfikowanych zostało wiele barier wejścia na chiński rynek gier internetowych i gier na telefony komórkowe, ale żadne z nich nie są na tyle wysokie, aby zatrzymać ewentualną ekspansję polskich producentów gier.

Keywords: China, video games, online games, mobile games, internet, barriers of entry

Klasyfikacja JEL: R320, R340, O330, Z100

Introduction

Video game market is one of the fastest growing in the world. According to DFC Intelligence forecasts, the global market for video games is expected to grow

from USD 67 billion in 2012 to USD 82 billion in 2017 [DFC Intelligence, 2012a]. The online game market is the biggest driver of growth for the whole video game market. It is expected to grow from USD 19 billion in 2011 to USD 35 billion by 2017 [DFC Intelligence, 2012b]. It includes online playing and distribution of games. Fast expansion of Internet usage for gaming and low barriers of entry make this market a great opportunity for many innovative companies and creative people. As it is potentially the biggest in the world, and not yet as developed as in western countries, Chinese market seems to be most promising in the whole world. The question is, if people already have access to the Internet and how this situation will change in the future. Another problem is, whether Chinese Internet users have sufficient income to spend money on games. Finally, it has to be identified, if there are any specific entry barriers to this market that will be hard to overcome by Polish game producers.

1. Number of Internet users and Internet penetration rate as the major factors influencing growth potential of the online game market in China

In recent years China became the biggest Internet market in the world. Moreover, as large part of population still does not have access to the Internet, the growth potential is still great.

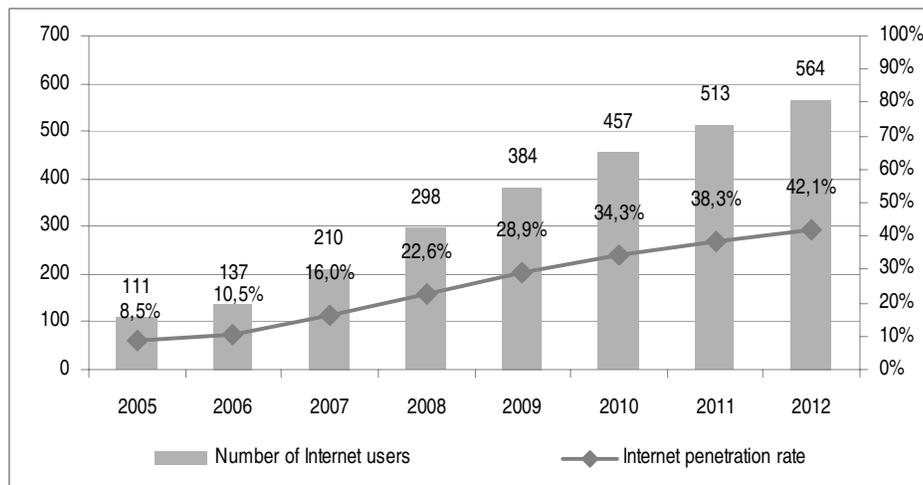


Fig. 1. Individuals using the Internet in China (in millions) and Internet penetration rate (percentage)

Source: [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013].

By the end of December 2012, China has had 564 million Internet users [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013], which represents around 23% of all Internet users in the whole world [International Telecommunication Union, 2013]. Great number of Internet users in China makes it potentially also the biggest market for online gaming. What is more, the number of people using Internet is increasing. The average percentage of growth during the years 2005-2012 was 26.1, which is very high pace. The growth is slowing down due to market saturation, but it is still very fast compared to the other countries. In 2012 there were 50.9 million new Internet users more in China, which makes nearly 10% more than a year before. According to China Internet Network Information Center research [2013], only 13.4% of Chinese, who did not use Internet in 2012 consider using it in the next six months. This statistic is keeping a gradually declining trend and it used to be 17.0% during 2011. Nevertheless, the potential of growth is still very big as the penetration rate reached the point of 42.1% in 2012, leaving the rest (776 million) of Chinese not using the Internet yet [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013].

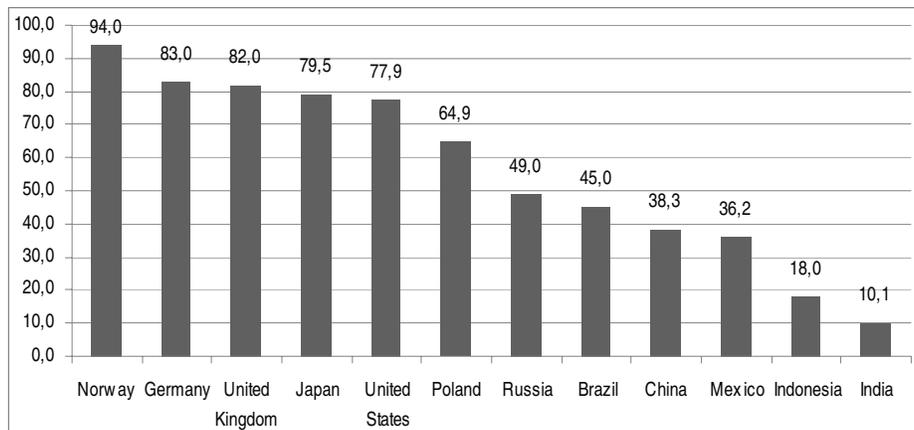


Fig. 2. Percentage of individuals using the Internet in chosen countries, 2011

Source: [The Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2012].

In comparison with the other countries, China still has relatively small Internet penetration rate. Cross-country data show that in 2011 there are many both developed and developing countries with higher percentage of people using Internet than China (38.3%). Some of the developing countries with relatively big population and higher Internet penetration rate than China were Russia (49%) and Brazil (45%). On the other hand there were some populous societies with lower percentage of individuals using Internet, like Mexico (36.2%), Indonesia (18%) or India with surprisingly small percentage of 10.1. Data shows clearly that that Internet access is connected with the stage of development of the country as vast majority of economically advanced countries have higher

Internet usage ratio. Some examples are Germany (83%), United Kingdom (82%) and USA (77.9%) [The Broadband Commission for Digital Development, 2012]. Economic growth may encourage more people to use Internet, and China is one of a few countries that show stable and dynamic economic growth. Even during the crisis years of 2008-2011 GDP growth in China fluctuated between 9.2% and 10.4% [World Bank, 2013].

In recent years Internet in China has become not only more popular, but also cheaper. According to the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of the People's Republic of China, average broadband fee decreased by over 30% in 2012, which made Internet access available for more Chinese consumers. Increasing household income and lowering prices of Internet access in future years will certainly make Internet more popular and available for Chinese people. What is more, Chinese authorities undertake some additional efforts to make Internet available for the society. According to Miao Wei, the minister of MIIT, announced in 2013 that Chinese government will launch a campaign aiming to add 35 million fiber to the home users, over 25 million fixed broadband Internet users, and 18000 rural broadband sites. Moreover, MIIT will provide broadband access or upgrades for 5000 schools in poor rural areas. Not only the number of households with broadband will increase but also the quality of the connections. It is expected that the bandwidth ratio will rise and for over 70% users it will be 4M or higher [ChinaWirelessNews.com, 2013]. Governmental efforts to provide Internet access concentrate mainly on rural areas, where only 23.7% of people used Internet. The needs for help are smaller in the cities, where by the end of 2012 about 59.1% of population were active Internet users. This situation started to change slowly from 2011 as the Internet usage growth rate in rural area has become slightly higher than that in urban areas [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013].

Not only there is a growing number of Chinese citizens using Internet, but also they tend to spend more time online. In 2011 average user spent 18.7 hours weekly online. During one year this number went up by 9.6% to 20.5 hours [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013]. It is still less than in USA, where average user spends 26 hours online every week [WSL Strategic Retail, 2013], so also in this field Chinese market has substantial growth potential. Both the number of Internet users in China and the perspectives of growth in this field are great. It gives online gaming sector in China promising prospects for fast development. That potential may encourage Polish companies to enter this already largest, and still fast growing Internet market.

2. Personal income of Internet users in China as a factor influencing attractiveness of online game market in the country

Another factor that influences attractiveness of Chinese online gaming market is personal income of Internet users. Online game producers can base their businesses on many models and gain their revenues not only by selling games, but for example on advertisement. However, if their clients do not have enough money, it will be hard to gain substantial profits.

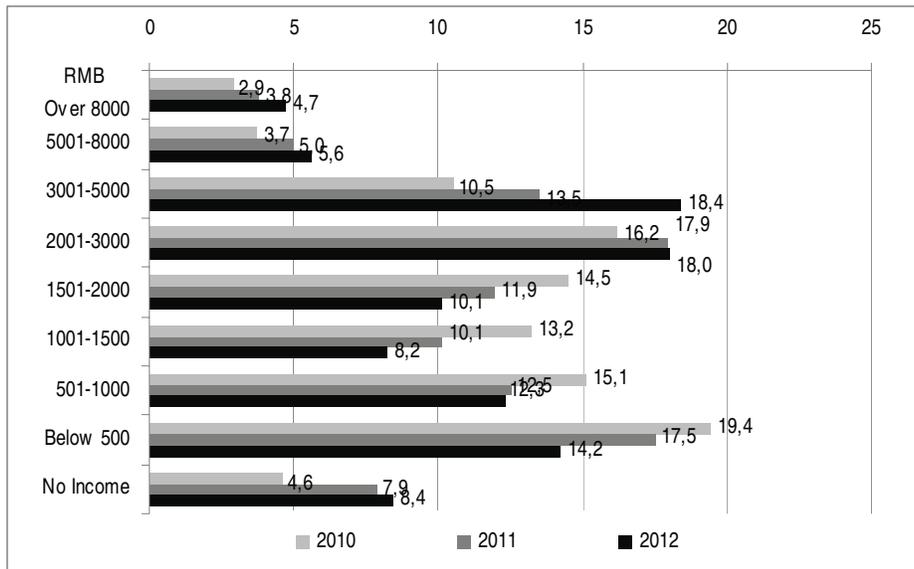


Fig. 3. Personal monthly income structure of Internet users in RMB

Source: [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013; China Internet Network Information Center, 2012].

The percentage of Internet users earning more than RMB 3000 monthly has grown systematically during the years 2010–2012. In 2012 there were 28.8% Internet users earning more than RMB 3000 monthly [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013], which was around USD 480 [XE Currency Data Feed, 2013]. It may seem not much for European or American citizen, but the cost of living in China is much lower than in developed countries and people earning more than RMB 3000 usually can afford to spend some money on entertainment. What is more, Chinese government plans to encourage domestic spending to make Chinese economy independent from the demand for its exports. Chinese President, Xi Jinping, said that China is going to “rebalance its economy towards a domestic consumption-led model rather than an export-driven model” [BBC News Business, 2013]. This may lead to higher spending also in the

online game sector. Year by year, the Chinese earn more money and use Internet more often. This will probably make Chinese video game market the most promising in the whole world, and a great opportunity for Polish companies to increase their revenues.

3. Global and Chinese video game markets and their growth perspectives

Video game market is one of the fastest growing in the whole world, and China is one of the major countries that are responsible for that dynamic expansion. Analysis of revenues on the global video game market differ from each other, but it seems that all of them predict further development. DFC Intelligence reports forecast that video game market is expected to grow from USD 67 billion in 2012 to USD 82 billion in 2017 [DFC Intelligence, 2012a]¹. PricewaterhouseCoopers experts are even more optimistic. They expect that global spending on video games will expand to USD 83 billion in 2016, growing at a 7.2 percent compound annual rate [PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012]².

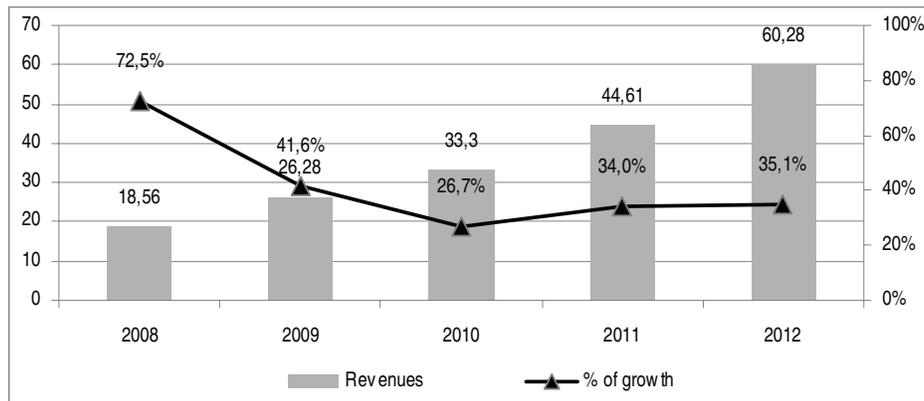


Fig. 4. Chinese game market sales revenues in billions of RMB and percentage of growth

Source: [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013].

¹ This forecast includes revenue from dedicated console hardware and software (both physical and online), dedicated portable hardware and software, PC games and games for mobile devices such as mobile phones, tablets, music players, and other devices that enable their users to play games as a secondary feature.

² According to this forecast, video game market consists of consumer spending on new console games (including handheld games), personal computer games, online games, and wireless games as well as video game advertising. The category excludes spending on the hardware used for playing the games.

According to Chinese governmental reports, revenues of video game sector in China recorded 35.1 percent year-on-year growth and reached RMB 60.26 billion in 2012, which had been around USD 9.7 billion [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013]. This great growth is much higher than PricewaterhouseCoopers or DFC Intelligence forecasts. What is more, growth rates were going up beginning from 2010, which might indicate that the market is far from saturation.

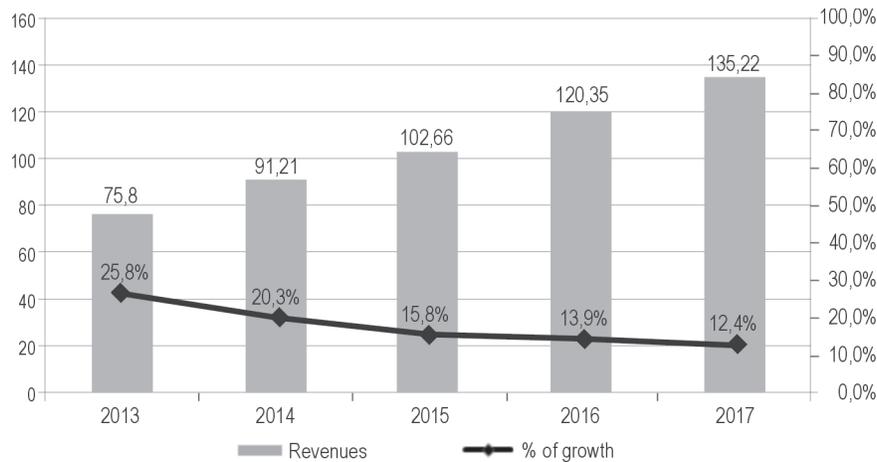


Fig. 5. Chinese game market sales forecast for the years 2013–2017 in billions of RMB and percentage of growth

Source: [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013].

Chinese analyses predict that growth of the game market revenues will systematically slow down. Nevertheless, it will not fall below 12.4% until 2017, and such level of growth is still relatively high. During five years, between 2012 and 2017, revenues will more than double reaching RMB 135.2 billion, which will be around USD 22 billion, assuming that exchange rates will not change³.

³ On the 12th of April 2013 one CNY was worth USD 0.16, according to Xe Currency Converter, www.xe.com.

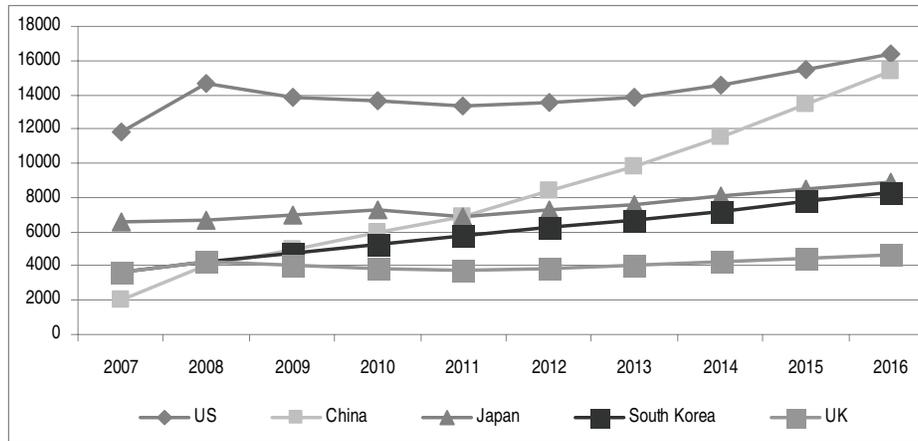


Fig. 6. Revenues of video game market by country in millions of USD, the forecast starts in 2012

Source: [PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012].

According to PricewaterhouseCoopers [2012] estimations, Chinese video game market has already become second largest in the world, overtaking Japan in 2012. As the growth will probably continue in 2016, revenues of Chinese and US video game markets should be very similar. However, this estimation of growth is much more conservative than Chinese. No matter how big the growth will be, all of the predictions show that Chinese market will become one of the most attractive for software companies. Expected growth is a great opportunity for Polish game producers that will be able to enter this extremely dynamic market.

4. Global and Chinese online game markets and their growth potential

The market of online games is a part of the whole video game market that is the fastest growing and expanding. The report *Online Game Market Forecasts* estimates worldwide revenue from online games to reach USD 35 billion by 2017, up from USD 19 billion in 2011 [DFC Intelligence, 2012b]. Global spending on online and wireless games will overtake console and PC games in 2013, and will be 36% larger by 2016 [PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012]. Resulting from the growth of the number of Internet users and their income, online game market in China is the biggest and one of the fastest growing in the whole world. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers [2012], in 2011 it accounted for 35% of a whole global online game market and it will be around 44% in 2016. Playing online is extremely popular in China in comparison to other countries. Around 94.5%

of game sales on the Chinese market in 2012 were online games, bringing in RMB 56.96 billion which was around USD 9.1 billion, 5.4% mobile games and only 0.1% single games [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013]. The number of online players grew up 3.5% from 2011 and accounts for 335.7 million in 2012. Data reveals that 59.5% of Internet users played online in 2012, whereas in 2011 it was 63.2% [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013]. Why smaller percentage of Internet users play games online? This might be connected with changes of the Internet access modes.

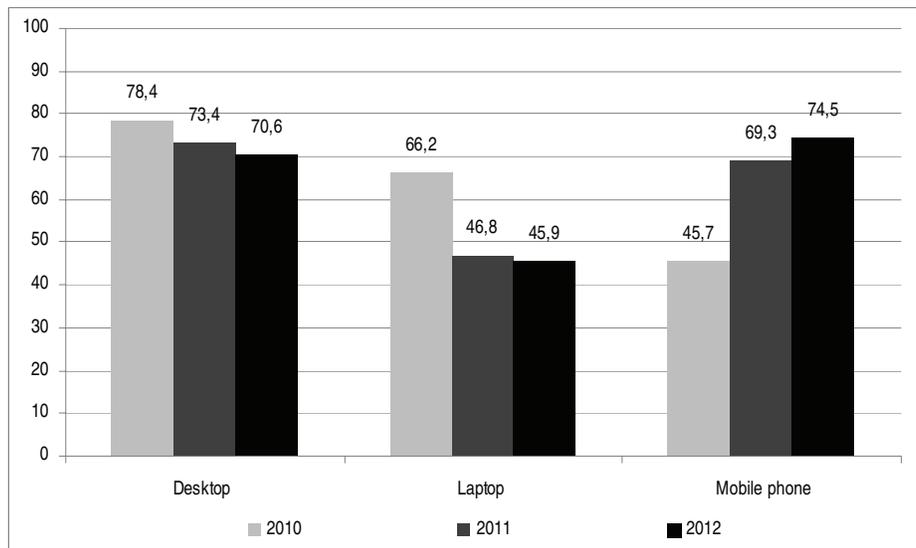


Fig. 7. Percentage of users of Internet access devices

Source: [China Internet Network Information Center, 2013; China Internet Network Information Center, 2012].

Since 2012 more people access Internet by mobile phones than by desktop or laptop computers. Limited size of screen and other obstacles that come with playing on the mobile phone (like lack of keyboard, mouse, or other easy-to-use game controller) brought a big challenge for local game producers. China Internet Network Information Center report [2013] suggests that they did not manage to create games that will be attractive enough for Chinese mobile Internet users. This brings the biggest opportunity for Polish game developers, especially ones that are specialized in online mobile phone games. Number of people accessing Internet from their mobile phones was growing so fast that local game producers did not manage to catch up with it. The amount of mobile phone game players grew up by 73.7% during the year 2012, but still there is only 89.1 million of such people in China. This number may seem to be big, but

by the end of December 2012, China has had 422 million mobile phone Internet users, 64.4 million more than at the end of 2011. It means that only 21.1% of those people played games, which is a very low share compared with overall 59.5% of Internet users that play online [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013]. This leaves a great market opportunity that can be filled either by local or foreign game producers.

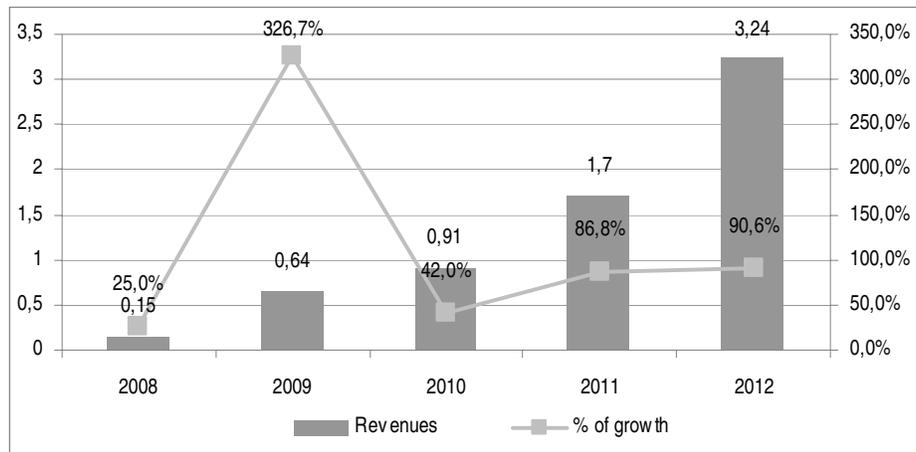


Fig. 8. Chinese mobile phone game market sales revenues in billions of RMB and the percentage of growth

Source: [中国版协游戏工委 (GPC) 国际数据公司 (IDC) 中新游戏 (伽马新媒 CNG), 2013].

In 2012, the Chinese mobile game market sales reached RMB 3.24 billion (USD 525 million), accounting only to 5.4% of the whole game market. It is probably one of the fastest expanding markets in the world, with a year-on-year growth rate of 90.6%. There is no doubt that the growth will continue, as this market is very young and far from saturation. The growth of 326.7% in 2009 proves that the market is not yet fully developed and one-time events, like launching a new game, can make big changes to the whole national business. Chinese mobile phone game sector is the most attractive for producers from all around the world, including Poland.

5. Entry barriers to Chinese online game market

Chinese market has some high entry barriers, but it can be treated as an opportunity for companies that will learn to overcome these obstacles. Usually markets with high entry barriers have few players, and thus high profit margins [Selling, Stickney 1989].

Some of the most important barriers that companies from Poland would have to overcome to succeed in Chinese market are cultural ones. The major components of culture are [Rai, Rumina 2010]: knowledge, beliefs, values and norms, folklores, myths, legends, aesthetics, art, architecture, tools of communication, and food. As all of the above components are much different in China and Poland, games produced for Polish market might not succeed in China. The first barrier to overcome, which is also one of the hardest, is language. Majority of young people living in China speak Mandarin, which is official language taught in schools [Norman, 1988], so probably most of game producers will concentrate on developing games in this dialect. Sometimes it may not be easy to translate the game properly to Mandarin as some of the Polish terms and phrases do not exist in Chinese. It may require long time and relatively big money to make a good translation. Polish game developers also have to remember that Chinese people may not know European legends, myths, and stories, and the world created in games has to be understandable for Chinese consumer. Also symbols that are obvious for European or American game player may seem strange and incomprehensible for Chinese. Additionally, aesthetics is different than Western, and what seems nice for Polish player might look ugly for Chinese.

Polish and Chinese cultures have many differences, but when we compare G. Hofstede's [1988, 2007] cultural dimensions of China and Poland, we can find some similarities. Both countries score high in the dimension of power distance. It means that both societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. In organizations power is often highly centralized, and subordinates expect to be told what to do. Both societies are rather masculine than feminine. It means that achievement, success, and competition are important values for the people in Poland as well as in China. In schools, companies, and other organizations, success in both countries is being defined by the winner or the best person in field. On the other hand there are some cultural dimensions in which Poland and China are very far from each other. Polish people are rather individualistic, whereas China is an example of collectivist society. In China people belong to "in-groups" that take care of them in exchange for loyalty, while in Poland individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. This may influence behavior of game players in both countries. Chinese players would probably prefer multi-player team games, and games designed for Polish market might be better for single players. Another cultural dimension is uncertainty avoidance, which is very high in Poland and relatively low in China. It means that Chinese people are more willing to take risks and are less threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations. The biggest difference between Poland and China can be found in long- and short-term orientation. Chinese people are very long term oriented, whereas Poles demonstrate short term orientation [Hofstede, 2007]. Polish players will probably look for fast results and possibly they will be less patient than

Chinese, who may be more persistent. The differences in cultural dimensions prove that games designed for Polish clients may have to be adapted for the needs and habits of Chinese players. When Polish companies will learn more about Chinese culture, this obstacle can change into an opportunity and competitive advantage.

Culture can affect not only the popularity of the games, but also the way of doing business. One of the characteristics of business relations in China is that they are often based on Guanxi [Yadong, 2007], which is defined as connections, social capital, personal network [Gold, Guthrie, Wank 2002] or relations and particularistic ties [Jacobs, 1979]. These ties can be based on long-term friendship, family relations, ethnicity, membership in common clubs or organizations [Ostrowski, Penner 2009]. Although if a company has some strong core competences, it is possible to operate without Guanxi, it is much easier if company has such social capital [Guthrie, 1998]. The initial lack of Guanxi will be a big challenge for Polish game producers, but it is possible to overcome. Western companies are able to learn how to build such relationships with Chinese partners and use them as sustainable competitive advantage [Worm, 2008].

Not only culture, but also other barriers can make Chinese online game market hard to conquer. One of the main obstacles is piracy. According to Business Software Alliance study [2012], as much as 77% of software used in China in 2011 came from piracy. The problem might be even more disturbing in mobile phone game market. Zhang Zhao [2011] in his publication in China Daily revealed that only 1.4% of the mobile games used in China in 2011 were legal versions. This obstacle can be to some extent overcome by anti-pirate software or models of business based on advertising (than games will be free for users and there will be no motivation for piracy).

Similar to the piracy is the problem of imitation. In China, more than 20% of game software on Apple's iOS, and nearly 40% on the Android platform (two most commonly used mobile phone operating systems) are copycat versions of the originals [Zhang, 2011]. When a game succeeds on Chinese market, instantly similar products appear. The difference between original game and imitation is usually so small that clients usually prefer cheaper version of a product. Chinese intellectual property rights law is not efficient enough to stop this shady business. This situation might change in the future as Chinese government officials claim that they will take steps to protect rights of foreign firms. Mr. Xi, who became president in 2013, said China would "protect the lawful rights and interests of foreign-invested companies" [BBC News Business, 2013].

The only Polish company that entered Chinese market is Can't Stop Games, which is based in Wrocław. Their game "Pirates Saga" is available through game portal Weibo, and on 15 April 2013 had over 123 thousand Chinese users [Weibo, 2013]. According to Ziemowit Poniewierski, vice-chairman of Can't Stop Games, some of the most important problems with entering were connected with legal issues. To get a permission for distribution of the game the company

had to supply full documentation of the game, including the code, and data about the firm itself. Then the game had to go through the certification procedure, which took some time. Another issue were technological barriers, as Chinese portals are designed differently than European ones. The example of Can't Stop Games shows that both legal and technological barriers are not so high to stop companies from entering the market. Moreover, Polish software providers who are not certain of their capabilities to overcome the barriers of Chinese market can use the help of companies like Yodo1 that specialize in facilitating the entry to Chinese Internet market, especially mobile gaming market. On the Yodo1 webpage the company claims that their team has helped more than 60 western firms to start their operations in China [Yodo1, 2013].

Although there are many barriers of entry to the Chinese online gaming market, and they are much higher than in other countries, none of them would be able to stop Polish game producers from entering this promising market. Obstacles can be seen as opportunities and when company will finally overcome them, they can be used as protection from competition.

Conclusions

Online game market is a part of video game market that is depending on Internet access. China recently becomes the biggest country in the world in the number of Internet users. What is more, Internet penetration rate is still small, compared to more developed countries, so the market has still strong growth potential. As Chinese economy is growing, also the income of Internet users is going up. Politicians try to sustain economic growth by stimulating public consumption, so macroeconomic situation seems to be very good for game producers. Chinese video game market is already the second largest in the world, and it is still growing very dynamically. Analysis of Chinese game market shows that the most promising part of that market is the one of online and mobile games, which is already growing on the very high pace but still has a great growth potential. According to analyzed data, Polish companies that would like to enter Chinese game market should invest in Chinese online and mobile games which give the biggest perspectives of growth.

Although it seems very attractive, there are several barriers of entry for Polish game producers to the Chinese online game market. Especially important are cultural barriers. Such components of culture like language, aesthetics, myths and legends, which often form a core of many games, are completely different from Polish. What is more, problems may appear due to differences in the dimensions of culture and the lack of Guanxi. Also software piracy, imitation of games by unfair competition, and insufficient intellectual property rights protection can affect companies in negative way. Legal barriers may slow down the process of entry to the Chinese market, as the procedures are complicated

and take a lot of time. There are also some technological barriers, as Chinese portals are designed differently than Polish or European. Despite those barriers of entry, Chinese market of online and mobile games seems very promising for Polish game producers and may be a great growth opportunity.

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