

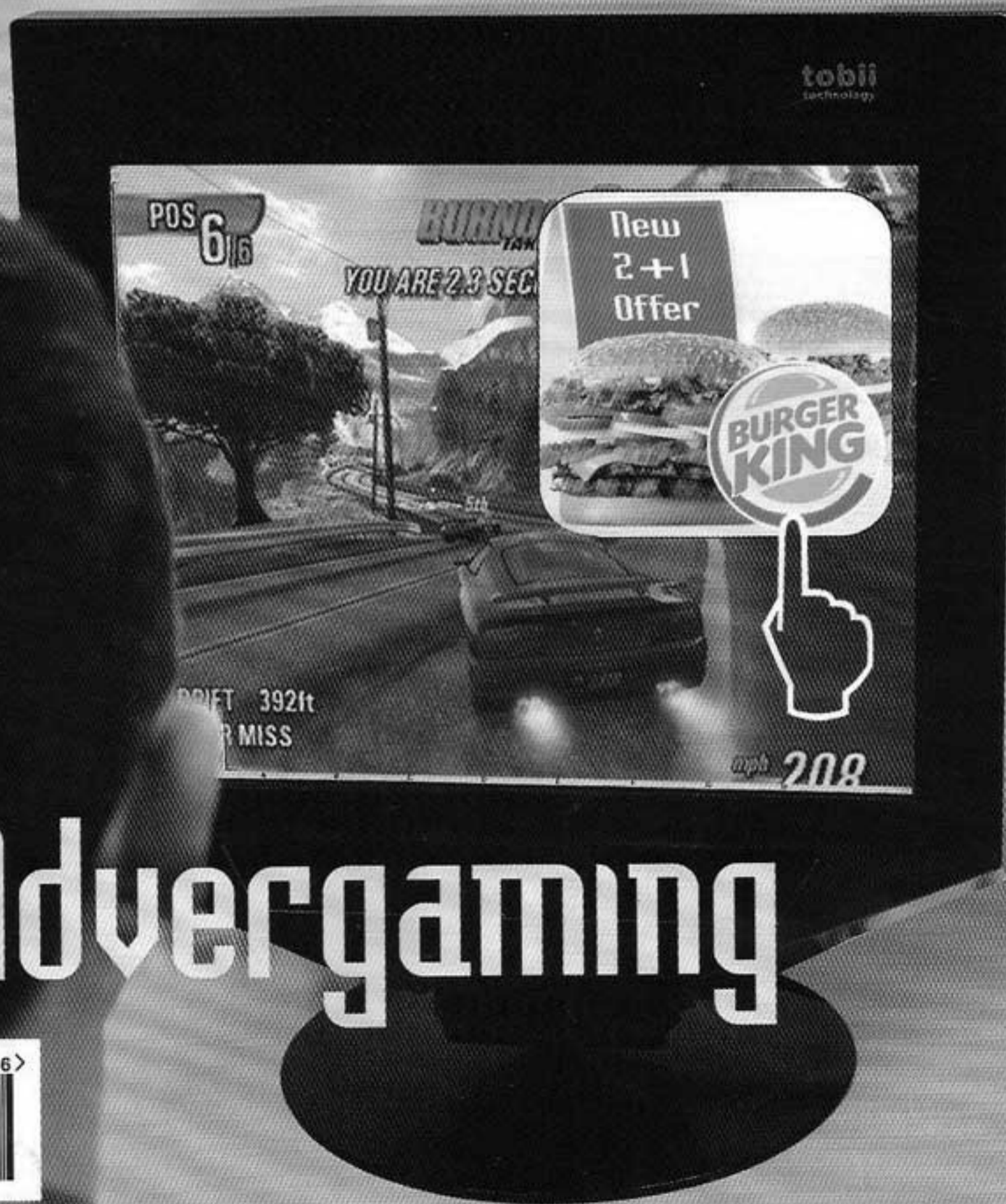
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# Baidu

## The Next Big Player in the Search Engine War

Tim Lyons\* and Joanna Pan\*\*

When most people think of search engines for the Web, they probably think of the likes of Google, MSN and Yahoo. If they really know their search engines then they may also think about the likes of "Ask Jeeves" or "Tecoma". Maybe due to their location, there is a particular one that they like or perhaps they prefer to search using an industry-based search engine. Whatever may be the case, they are probably not using "Baidu" and possibly have never even heard of it until now, though Google holds almost 2.5% of stake in Baidu.

Get ready because Baidu is set to become the biggest search engine in the world.

Now most of you will think this is a pretty bold statement given the apparent stranglehold that Google (and to some degree Yahoo and MSN) has over the search engine business. Before you jump to conclusions, though, consider these facts:

- Baidu launched on the NASDAQ last year and rose 350% in its opening day of trading—clearly there are a lot of people who think Baidu is an important player as far as global search engines go.
- There are nearly 1.5 billion Mandarin speaking Chinese globally and Baidu is the pre-eminent Chinese search engine. Mandarin Chinese is the number one spoken language in the world.
- There are 311 million English-speaking users on the Web but hot on their heels are the 132 million Chinese-speaking users. These two groups are number one and number two respectively, with the Chinese growing at over 300% in the last five years and closing the gap fast.
- The number of Internet surfers in China rose by 18.4% in a year to 103 million in June 2005, according to a report released by the China Internet Network Information Center. That number is expected to double by 2007, with most of these people are using Baidu.
- Furthermore, about 20 million people shopped online once or more in the first half of 2005. During that time, sales totaled 10 bn yuan (US\$1.23 bn) with total sales increasing by 9.9 bn yuan (US\$1.22 bn) in only the last two years.

Now before you charge off and think about optimizing your website for Baidu, there is one small problem—Baidu pretty well searches in just Chinese. Try it for yourself. Feel free to key in English words—they can be searched but that is not really what it is set up for. If you don't read or write Chinese characters, then find a Web-page with some Chinese characters and cut and paste them into the search engine. Press "search" and see just how many hits you get. Staggering, isn't it?

So if you are in a foreign business, how do you optimize your website so that a search engine like Baidu finds it? Does this mean that you have to translate your website into Chinese to be found?

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Unfortunately, the short answer is both yes and no. Yes, if you are truly serious about being found on this search tool and no if you don't mind being found by accident.

The obvious question then is "just how is Baidu ranking its Web pages?" Apparently, the answer is not as clear as if you had asked the same question about either Google or Yahoo. There are many ways of finding out about Yahoo and Google. There is no end of information sources for these two search engines. There are simple Google searches, information on the Google and Yahoo websites, discussion in online forums, articles published and so on. When the same research rigor is applied to Baidu, the results are not quite as forthcoming. Based on a study conducted by IESEG Business School in Lille, France and Chinese-based consulting firm ManageChina, the results (or lack of) with regards to this question are quite interesting:

- Searching both Baidu and Google for clues yields little by way of information on Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for Baidu.
- There are virtually no instructions to SEO on Baidu on Baidu's website.
- E-zines (online magazines), usually a rich source of information on topics such as this, are virtually devoid of discussion.

What this study revealed is that, it really just leaves expert forums such as the source of Baidu SEO information and for the most part, this is where the bulk of the information lies. Many of these forums have pointed towards some interesting clues. For example, many forum experts noted that although they didn't optimize for Baidu, they were still getting some interesting results and that they could see that the Baidu "spider" (the mechanism search engine uses to index pages) was visiting their sites. The first and most obvious conclusion should be that the page indexing in Baidu must be similar to that of Yahoo or Google, if they are producing results for these expert sites when the experts are only optimizing for Yahoo or Google and not even considering Baidu in their optimization efforts.

This would seem to be the end of it, except that time and again in these forums the mention of "paid placement" appears in discussion. It would seem that Baidu has added one little twist to the search engine placement game. Although you can optimize for keywords or phrases, you don't really need to, provided you are willing to pay for a spot at the top of a search result. Optimize or pay—or perhaps optimize and pay to guarantee top spot. While Baidu will neither confirm nor deny this last (and vitally important) fact, more and more evidences, seems to be pointing in this direction. It appears you have to pay if you want to rank in Baidu.

Don't feel obliged to rush for your check books, yet, as there are almost an infinite number of key words/terms or phrases you could search without any payment. While some of the more popular ones might be paid, there are still plenty of other "second tier" phrases that people don't have to pay for. With some simple search engine optimization techniques such as linking to other like-minded websites (and having them link to you) and placing keywords and phrases in the code of your website, you can still do quite well.

Ultimately, it will pay you to contract a SEO company that specializes in Baidu (ironically, you can find these with a quick Google Search), as the ultimate stumbling block is not the optimization of your site for Baidu but the Chinese language itself. Although the optimization techniques for Baidu are similar to Google and Yahoo, ironically it is probably the fact that Baidu enjoys it most when a website is in Chinese that is going to finish up beating you in the long run. **AE**