

We are Alone but not Alone

——Exploring Motivations for Paying Others to Playing Video Games Together

Yahui CAO

City University of Hong Kong
Hong Kong
iuhay.c@my.cityu.edu.hk

ABSTRACT

The paid co-playing practice is a form of transaction in which gamers pay co-players to play video games with them, which indicates that gamers as customers demand playing video games with others. The majority of the previous study reveals that social factor is one of the motivations for playing video games, while few research goes deeper to focus on the motivation for playing video games with others especially in the payment transaction. This study adopts digital ethnography with data collecting from online forums to investigate the motivations for using the paid co-playing service to play video games with others. Three motivations were identified as advancing in-gaming experience, decreasing emotional cost, and gaining emotional satisfaction. This study provides the foundation to understand the pattern of co-playing in the paid co-playing practices and enriches related research on motivations of social gaming behavior.

Keywords

motivations, paid co-player, video games, paid co-playing practice

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, video games have become an important medium in people's daily lives. People's work time and leisure time, social and political activities are always linked to it (Taylor, 2006, Yi, 2004). People play video games in various ways, influenced by the type and feature of video games, platforms, devices, player types, etc. Also, people engage in video games in various ways, such as solo gaming, social gaming, live streaming, eSports, golden farmer etc. Among them, new consuming demands were found, which contributed to a new industry – paid co-playing services. Paid co-playing service, is a video game practice in China in which customers pay gamers to play video games with them.

There are four subjects that matter in paid co-playing practices, paid co-players as workers, paid co-playing platforms as platform labor intermediary, customers as employers, and video games as workplaces. Paid co-players dedicate to play video games with gamers who order them accompanying voice chat. Paid co-playing platforms are platform labor intermediary to facilitate *paid co-playing* transactions with electronic payment for real-world currencies (Van Doorn, 2017). Paid co-playing platforms display profiles and personal information (photo, voice cut, game titles) of *paid co-players* to appeal customers. The customers of paid co-players is also act as the paid co-players' teammate in the game. Video games are taken as a service platform/workplace for paid co-players to play with their customers. Paid co-playing platforms will choose diverse game titles to provide paid co-playing service. Almost all those games are computer games and mobile games, like *League of Legends*,

Teamfight Tactics, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds. Playing games online and teaming up to playing games together are two critical characteristics for games being game titles of paid co-playing. Paid co-playing practice is popular among gamers in China, while related research on motivation is little as paid co-playing practice contains in-gaming activity and other social activity as it contains interactions among people. Paid co-playing practices satisfy gamers' demand of playing games with others, as well as expand this demand. Gamers pay attention to the game experience. In gaming activities, teammates' and opponents' performances will affect gamers' game experience and satisfaction (McGloin et al., 2016). Gamers' demand of achieving a satisfying game experience has laid the foundation for the birth of the paid co-playing platform. The paid co-playing platforms are dedicated to improving gamers' gaming experience by providing highly skilled and considerate paid co-players for gamers to choose and play with. paid co-players as service workers are dedicated to improving customers' game experience by offering their gaming proficiency in forms of considerate and caring communication through voice call online while playing games together.

Throughout research on motivations of playing video games, social factor is essential. People play games with friends, family members, and strangers online and offline in different types of games and different contexts, which help to enhance the emotional enjoyment of playing video games, developing social bonds, and sustaining relationships with others (Kaye and Bryce, 2012). Previous research topics of video game motivation reveal the importance of the social factor in gaming activity, while why do people desire to play with others is less examined (Warmelink and Siitonen, 2011). Related research on co-playing primarily focuses on non-reward game activity, which cannot explain paid co-playing practice as a rewarded game activity in a whole scenario. In the paid co-playing practice, gamers' identities who use the paid co-playing service are not only a gamer but also a customer. Comparing with playing with non-rewarded players, customers who use the paid co-playing services have more expectations on paid co-players' performance. However, related research is still rare. Therefore, this study adopts digital ethnography to investigate the motivations of customers who use the paid co-playing service. This exploration reveals the main motivations for using the paid co-playing service, which are identified into three elements: advancing in-game experience, decreasing emotional cost, and gaining emotional satisfaction. From game experience perspective, gamers use the paid co-playing service to decrease the difficulty of the games and avoid encountering negative acts in games. Most of the female gamers use the paid co-playing service service to escaping from toxic and misogynistic environments in the games. From a social interaction perspective, this study proves that the paid co-playing service as a transaction provides access for gamers to decrease emotional costs with acquaintances. It also proves that playing with strangers may have no relatedness to develop. All in all, this study provides the foundation to understand the pattern of co-playing in the paid co-playing practices and enriches related research on motivations of social gaming practice.

MOTIVATION FOR PLAYING VIDEO GAMES IN PREVIOUS STUDY

Gamers' motivation has been covered extensively in research referring player typologies, game mechanics, behavioral typology, gamer mentality etc. The most well-known player taxonomy is proposed by Bartle (1996). Throughout exploring *MUDs* (a multiplayer computer game), he divided player type into four types: achievers, socializers, explorers, and killers, and placed these four player types into each of four quadrants. Bartle argued that games motivate players are related to these four different playing styles. Killers tend to disturb other players' game experience; Socializers is motivated by developing relationships with other players. Achievers tend to achieve the aims and accomplish tasks in the virtual world. Explorers are motivated by exploring the virtual world and the potential possibilities. Bartle's taxonomy provides

a starting point for exploring player motivations in online game research, and the four-player type is widely used in game design. Yee (2006) conducted a survey based on Bartle's dimensions on a group of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players. Ten motivational components were identified instead of the four proposed by Bartle. These motivational components were categorized into three categories: achievement, social, immersion. The following trend is to differentiate the intrinsic and extrinsic nature of motives. Common intrinsic motives are entertainment, fun, curiosity, exploration, and seeking the experience of flow (Hsu and Lu, 2007, Chiou and Wan, 2007). Whang and Chang (2004) point out that the differentiation between single-oriented players and community-oriented players is still in the same dimension. Single-oriented players view any game as a single-player game and prefer to act alone even in a game with rich social features. Community-oriented players represent the part of a player community that appreciates the social aspect of playing and embrace it with great enthusiasm. There is a third type of player, namely "the off-real world player," that tends to play a role instead of appearing as their real-world self. Recently, Kallio et al. (2011) presented a shift from "players typology" to "mentalities typology," . The argument is that the play style depends on so many variables, such as the company where the game is played and the time available for playing.

MOTIVATIONS FOR CO-PLAYING

From the early parlor games (Aarsand, 2007), online computer games, to mobile games, video games are expanding their social feature which makes gamers play games with others whenever and wherever they want (Kowert and Oldmeadow, 2013, Stenros et al., 2009). In early 2006, Nintendo released Wii console to encourage family members to play together. Massively multiplayer online (MMO) games construct online social communities in games for gamers to interact with other people. Steam as computer platform featured social networking functions to link online gamers (Stenros et al., 2009). Nowadays, many mobile games take social media accounts as access for users to login on. Users in games can invite and play with friends on social media platforms. Social feature as an in-game feature is just an access for gamers to play together. While it did not exhibit the motivations for playing video games together. Previous research mostly focuses on social factors when concerning gamers' motivation. However, the motivation for playing video games with others isn't the same as the social factor of gamers' motivation for playing games. Little research investigates gamers' motivation for playing with other gamers and the impact of the co-playing activities. Understanding the motivations for co-playing helps to figure out the potential demand and motivations of the paid co-playing customers, which is relevant to understanding the paid co-playing practice.

Game mechanics force gamers to play together

Game features motivate gamers to seek co-players to play with them. Different game characteristics shape gamers' experiences, attention, and involvement in different ways (Sherry et al., 2006). Wood et al. (2004) identified many structural features that are important in appealing gamers to play with, which includes sound, graphics, background and setting, game duration, rate of play, advancement rate, use of humor, control options, game dynamics, winning and losing features, character development, brand assurance, and multiplayer features. Among them, multiplayer feature, referring to various multi-player options, communication methods, building alliances, and beating other players, which will influence players' behavior of playing together. For example, many games design different positions and characters which take different but indispensable roles (attack, defense, support, etc.) Gamers should work as a team containing several characters to play with the opponent team. While sometimes gamers' preference or ability difference to characters and positions would make it difficult to play with others (Harris et al., 2016). Beznosyk et al. (2012) divide casual cooperative games into "loosely-coupled" interaction games and "closely-coupled" interactions

games. Loosely-coupled games refers to those “do not need close collaboration” between gamers, while “closely-coupled” interaction games refers to those “require close collaboration”, gamers each action would affect their co-players directly. Beznosyk et al. (2012) found that gamers tended to achieve higher sense of engagement and exciting game experience.

Social component: sustaining or expanding relationship with others

Engaging in video games with others has been revealed to expand to new social relationships with strangers or to sustain and improving current relationships with friends, family members and so on (Eklund, 2015b, Taylor, 2006, Domahidi et al., 2014). Eklund (2015b) conducted an empirical study to investigate social video gaming habits with different co-players. She divided co-playing practices into three social contexts: gaming with friends, gaming with family and gaming with strangers online. Her research reveals that different social gaming context did affect the pattern when gaming together.

In family context, parents may treat playing video games with their children as an activity to make their relationship closer and facilitate family communication (Wang et al., 2018). When family members play video games together, they tend to choose simple and interesting games that may be suitable for every family member to avoid disputes. In the research, over 40% of participants reported that video games brought fun and happiness to their families. This study revealed that co-playing in the family context is often used to facilitate social bonding or connection. In the context of playing video games with friends, teenagers tend to play games with members of their pre-existing social circles in order to assimilate into their peer group (Wang et al., 2018, Lenhart et al., 2015). Eklund (2015b) found that rural gamers were more likely to play game with family members than urban gamers. He explains that because of the long distance from friends and other social activities, families living in rural areas tend to spend leisure activity with their family members. This result further reveals that social motive is one of the motivations for playing together. In the context of playing with strangers, MMOs provide social communities for gamers to play with strangers, which helps to build a sense of social need to belong in the guild or in the game (Ryan et al., 2006, Yee, 2006, Williams et al., 2008, Harris et al., 2016). Women are often invited by their romantic partners to play video games (Yee, 2006), which tend to make their relationship closer.

Other motivations for playing with others

Children play games together when they feel stressed, which indicates that playing games with others may help to escape the real life and get relaxed (Verheijen et al., 2019). Besides, In research on family gaming activity, participants found that playing together with their children is a good way to cultivate their children’s ability on teaching teamwork and cooperation and parents (Wang et al., 2018). Comparing with playing games with friends, gaming with strangers takes little time, which is more accessible, especially in the games featuring online community (Yee, 2004, Eklund, 2015a). However, gaming with strangers often encounters anti-social game experiences (Eklund, 2015a). In order to avoid such an experience, women prefer to play with people they are familiar with, rather than strangers (Eklund, 2015b).

For those players who have achievement and immersion motivation for playing video games, gaming with acquaintances will be much easier to meet those motivations comparing with gaming with strangers (Eklund, 2015b). Research shows that gaming together can improve players’ game performance (Bowman et al., 2013) especially when players were at the same place (Gajadhar et al., 2008). While, playing a

cooperative video game with acquaintances will improve commitment to game goals more than playing with strangers (Peng and Hsieh, 2012).

Above all, former research on motivation for playing games and playing games together helps to build the foundation for exploring why do people use paid co-playing service. Three motivations identified by Yee (2006) were also found that they may influence behavior of people playing games together. There are still some new motives found in the practice of playing games together, such as avoiding sexual harassment, improving game experience and performance and so on. However, related research on playing games together is little. This research conducts exploratory research on motivations of paid co-playing customers, which will not only contribute to understanding the paid co-playing practice through identify the need of paid co-playing customers, but also helps to enrich related work on gamers' motivation for playing together.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research intends to answer the question: why people use paid co-playing service to play video games with others. Given the paid co-playing practice takes place online in recent years, which has not been examined sufficiently. We adopt digital ethnography to explore this newly game practice, which is the ethnographic research on online practices and communications and on offline practices shaped by digitalization (Murthy, 2008, Varis, 2016). This study is mainly based on digital ethnography (Boellstorff et al., 2012, Spradley, 1980, Taylor, 2018), including the discourse analysis of the reports collected from the online forums, and in-depth interviews with the paid co-players (Huberman et al., 1994).

Paid co-playing is a still an emerging game practice, which is popular in China. What we observed is paid co-playing customers who often make comments and report their experience on online forums. To achieve a whole picture of customers motivation, we take agents not only those people who purchase paid co-playing services, but also those who provide such services and bystanders into consideration. The paid co-players' experiences of providing paid co-playing service will offer a third-party perspective on paid co-playing customers' motivation.

The research is adopted content analysis involving ethnographic data collection via online forums. People construct their online experience on various platforms, and people's discourse influenced by different cultures of the online planforms (Taylor, 1999). Going where the community leads is important in doing digital ethnography. Paid co-playing customers and providers may not be likely to accept interview or telling their real-life friends about their paid co-playing experience, but they are avid to share their own spaces and practices of paid co-playing practice with others on online annoyance community to achieve others' attention, understanding and a sense of identity (Taylor, 2018). Thus, we choose "Hupu", "Douban", "Zhihu", "Baidu community", "NGA online community" as the internet-based communities to investigate the online social behavior and discussion content of the paid co-playing practices. These five online forums have different cultural contexts and user profiles. Hupu is famous for full of crowding sports and esports fans. Douban is an online forum for enjoying cultural life, which appeals the literary youth. "Zhihu" is designed for users to ask and share their answers. Baidu community helps people who prefer the same thing to get together and communicate. NGA online community is an online forum designed for gamers, which divides the group by different game titles. These five forums are the most popular forums which contain posts concerning paid co-playing practices. We adopt "the paid co-playing service" as the keyword to apply content retrieval on these forums, then code and analyze those discussion content from game motivation and co-playing motivation perspectives (Yee, 2006, Eklund, 2015b).

Besides, we use participant observation on the paid co-playing platform “Bixin”, which is one of the most famous paid co-playing apps in China, to identify paid co-playing customers’ motivation to purchase paid co-playing service.

FINDINGS

Digital technology and the Internet have impacted how people play together. From family console games to online mobile games, playing with others is not limited to a small living room. People play together at any time and at anywhere (Huizinga, 1950). Paid co-playing practice as a new game service exhibits a new form of playing together. (Yee, 2006) identifies three motivations for playing games, including achievement component, social component, and immersion component. As paid co-playing practices are for playing games, thus we identify the motivation for playing with paid co-players from the three motivation model (Yee, 2006).

Advancing in-gaming experience

Enhancing achievement in video games safer and easier

In the paid co-playing platform, there are many games for customers to seeking co-players. Almost all the games are collaboration games and competition games, which allow gamers to play with others. Some of the games have the random system to auto scramble the team. However, the random system cannot make sure the gamers in the team are powerful, skillful and share the same goal with other gamers. Previous research revealed that for those players who have achievement and immersion motivation for playing video games, gaming with familiar people would be much easier to meet those motivations than gaming with strangers. Although the paid co-player is a stranger to the paid co-playing customer, it is better than teammates assigned by the random system because the paid co-players show their rank scores on their profile which help customers to confirm the paid co-player’s skill. For example:

I invited a highly skilled paid co-player to make sure I can pass the qualification match to the next rank level. (Hupu user 1, 2021. 03 replied)

I have played hundreds of matches with many paid co-players. For me, the function of male paid co-players are “skilled bodyguard for win + guidance + praise”. I never talk about my personal affairs. We just focus on games. Losing match will ruin my good feelings, while pay to paid co-player will let me play games easier and more comfortably. I can play whatever character I want. He will protect me and carry my game. If I killed an enemy, I would hear “666” such praise from my periwan provider. Playing games with a reliable paid co-player, my performance in the game will be enhanced because he will immediately remind me of any information of energy and teach me the technique of playing characters (Zhihu user 1, 2020.08 replied).

Sometimes, a customer may invite several paid co-players as a team to pass the qualification match. It is indicated that paid co-playing customers invite paid co-player is to decrease the level of difficulty of video games. In addition, a rank is not only stands for a gamers’ skill level but also stands for the reputation and game capital in the game community. Thus enhancing achievement in games will also supply gamers senses of achievement and gratification (Kou et al., 2016).

Avoiding anti-social and hostile act conditions in games

Video games and the gamer community are often taken as a toxic and misogynistic environment (Gray et al., 2017, Paul, 2018, Tang et al., 2020). When examining motivation for co-playing, we learned that gamers especially female gamers report that

they often encounter anti-social game experiences when gaming with strangers (Eklund, 2015b). In order to avoid such experiences, women prefer to play with people they are familiar with, rather than strangers (Eklund, 2015b). In the paid co-playing practice, we also found this phenomenon.

Sometimes, we invite paid co-players is because we don't want to experience hostile acts from random teammates. We have played *League of Legends* for many years. We often encounter many kinds of negative acts, such as game leveler (who play others' account to help to improve the level of that account) , robot, away from keyboard players, which not only ruin one match, but also affect our feelings. Inviting paid co-players may decrease the probability of encountering negative acts in game to a certain degree (Hupu user 2, 2021.03 replied).

I died many times in a match, and one of the teammates spout insults at me. Then my paid co-player battle with that guy and win the match. She gave me the materials I need in the game and praised me after finishing the match. When I play games by myself, I was like a robot without emotion. But this time, I gained so much love and consideration. (although I purchase it [smile emoji]. (Douban user 1, 2021.06.03)

Some players reported that they use paid co-playing service to avoid being dissed by teammates, especially when they perform not well in game. Although they are not good at playing games, but their paid co-player didn't spout insults on them, but random teammates or familiar people may do such action. Therefore, we can conclude that paid co-playing service improves customers' game experience by helps customers to avoid anti-social and negative act conditions, which is a motivation for gamers especially not skilled gamers, to use paid co-playing service.

Decreasing emotional cost of any social relationship during gaming

Previous research on co-play revealed that gamers have different attitudes toward gaming with friends and with strangers. Gamers treat playing games with friends as a social activity, while they didn't take playing games with strangers as a social activity (Eklund, 2015b). Thus, we analyze customers' motivation for using the paid co-playing service from two perspectives: strangers and friends.

Avoiding hurting relationships with friends or familiar people in real life

Existing research on social interaction in video games revealed that playing video games with people may expand to new social relationships with strangers or sustaining and improving current relationships with friends, family members and so on (Eklund, 2015b, Domahidi et al., 2014, Taylor, 2006). However, playing video games with people also could influence their relationship toward worse. People's mood and behavior displayed in co-playing games will influence friendship quality (Verheijen et al., 2019). When they play competitive games, their friendship quality may decrease. When people play collaboration games, their friendship quality may not improve. There was also more negative, dominant, and submissive behavior and a greater imbalance of power between friends in the cooperative condition (Verheijen et al., 2019). This phenomenon is observed by a female gamer's self-describing about why she uses the paid co-playing service.

I have played *Arena of Valor* since February 2020. In the beginning, I play this game with my boyfriend and his friends. When the team is not going to win, my boyfriend would be angry at me and say my mistakes many times in the team voice call, which makes me feel embracing. Last

week, I saw that one of my boyfriend's friends said that my preferences and capabilities is not as good at them, which make feel that I am not a good gamer, and I am useless when playing with them. I didn't want to play with them anymore. So, I pay for paid co-playing service to improve my ranks. (Douban user 2, 2020.04 replied)

Research has shown that failing common goals will decrease their friendship quality (McGloin et al., 2016). Many gamers who have similar experiences make comments to support and comfort her. Research revealed that ranking tier and corresponding match have detrimental effects on self-esteem among gamers of different levels of skills (Eklund, 2015b). The paid co-playing services provide a way for customers to avoiding hurt relationships with familiar people in their real lives during gaming.

Paying for decreasing emotional costs during gaming

Social interactions are often “charged” with emotion. While playing with paid co-players may avoid emotional costs, which motivates customers to use paid co-playing services, which is reflected in paying for decreasing social pressure, paying for not owing someone, and paying for avoiding social interaction. What we should notice is that paid co-playing practice is a form of transaction. Paid co-players provide service, while paid co-playing customers pay to consume it. From paid co-playing customers' perspective, they have no relatedness with paid co-players when the transaction is over. They feel no pressure when playing games with paid co-player because they pay the reward to them. While in the real life, gamers should sustain relationships with familiar people they play games with, which will increase their psychological burden of social relationships. Here are three cases below for understanding customers' desires.

Paying for decreasing social pressure

I like playing games, but not a skillful player. When play games with teammates no matter they are strangers or acquaintances, I worried that my game performance may let them lose a match. In fact, I'm very eager to play games with someone. So, I use paid co-playing service, which make me play games without pressure. (Zhihu user 2, 2021. 05 replied)

Paying for not owing someone

I am a beginner of *Arena of Valor* (a 5 players vs 5 players team competition game). I was eager to practice and improve my technique. I have many friends who also play this game. In the beginning, they can create a new account to play the game with me. But they also have their account which ranks are higher than mine, so they cannot always play to accompany me. I think pay to a paid co-player can also help me and teach me. I don't want to burden them and owe them (Zhihu user 2, 2021. 06 replied).

Paying for avoiding social interaction

I played games with a paid co-player. After finishing a match, he wants to become my friend on other social media and said, “see you tomorrow.” I?????I don't want to play games tomorrow. I almost froze at that moment. I didn't know how to say. I just want to avoid this ind of embarrassing condition when playing games. (Zhihu user 3, 2021.07 replied)

From my observation, many people said they feel a little social anxiety (Lo et al., 2005). They play games for fun, but they don't want to become their teammates' burden,

especially those familiar with in real life. They feel no pressure when playing with the paid co-player because they don't recognize the paid co-player in real life. Some of them reported that they just play video games with them. They don't want to enhance their relationship with paid co-player. In this point, the paid co-playing service provide a way for gamers who want to play video games together, which is featured by anonymity, less media richness, less relationship, real-time audio interaction. Thus, playing games without emotional cost is a motivation for using paid co-playing service.

Gaining emotional satisfaction in the paid co-playing practices

Research on motivation for co-playing indicates that social motive is one of the motivations for playing together. In the context of playing with strangers, MMOs provide social communities for gamers to play with strangers, which helps to build a sense of social need to belong in the guild or the game (Ryan et al., 2006, Yee, 2006, Williams et al., 2008). The paid co-playing service is accompanying customers to play games. Many players don't need to improve their achievement in games, but they desire to accompany others. In this way, customers may gain emotional satisfaction from paid co-playing practices in the virtual world.

Desiring for enjoying social interaction with others and filling time to avoid boredom.

A lot of gamers report that they play games with paid co-players for killing boring time. Some of them are people who live alone. For example, a paid co-player reports that one of her customers lives abroad. Playing with paid co-players allows him to have a chance to speak his native language with people who live in his motherland. Gamers also play with paid co-players because they feel alone. Previous research reveals that younger gamers are more likely to game with friends (Kallio et al., 2011), while older gamers tend to game alone (De Schutter, 2011).

I play games with paid co-player is because my bros and I have jet lag (one at NA, one at EU and one in Australia). Sometimes it's boring to play *League of Legends* on my own at night. I will invite a girl paid co-player to play games together for two hours. I just want to talk with someone. Girl's performances in The All Random All Mid game are not bad. But paid co-playing service is not chape, so I just use this service occasionally. [doge emoji] (Hupu user 3, 2021.03 replied)

From this example, we found that paid co-playing platform provide a convenient access for gamers especially those older gamers to find co-player. In my observation, many paid co-playing customers who were graduated for not a long time and live alone have the motivation to use paid co-playing services afterwork.

Pursuing sensory experience and constructing sexual fantasy

Voice is the primary way for customers to approach and imagine the paid co-players. There are thousands of paid co-players that gamers can choose to order them to play video games. After going through several paid co-players' homepages, I find that many gamers comment on game paid co-players' voices. Also, the platform classifies paid co-players' voices into different categories. For males, there are the voice of the little boy, the young boy's voice, the voice of mature man, the voice of the considerate guy, the voice of the emperor, etc. For females, there is the voice of the little girl (loli), the young girl's voice, the charming woman's voice, the voice of the queen, etc. Belin et al. (2011) define voices as auditory faces, displaying socially relevant information on persons, including speech, identity, and affect. Schirmer and Adolphs (2017) point out that voice can influence the emotional perception of others.

I like listening to pretty voices. I am not rich, but I think inviting paid co-player is not as expensive as buying milk tea or snacks. Listening to pretty voices makes me feel happy (Zhihu user 4, 2021. 06 replied).

During our observation, we found many posts on the forums asking the question like “do you think paid co-players and paid co-playing customers can become a real couple?”, “I am into a paid co-player. What should I do? ” or “Do you agree your girlfriend or boyfriend works as paid co-player?” A paid co-player reports her experience on the online forum said that many male customers require her to call them special names like brother, little brother, boss and so on. She is so tired of dealing with the relationship with some customers. Many female paid co-playing customers reports that some male paid co-player may play as a considerate boyfriend. We can see that some of the paid co-players and some of the paid co-playing customers try to construct a romantic relationship when engaged in paid co-playing practices.

Playing together for entertaining

Playing with others contains interaction, which could be a constant entertainment source, compared with playing alone. Previous research points out that MMORPGs’ social attempt is successful because gamers can see many interesting interactions caused by thousands of gamers (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). When co-players are dedicated to displaying humor and interacting with gamers, gamers feel fun, as one’s emotions will influence others during interaction (Koskinen & Meriläinen, 2021). Many gamers said that inviting paid co-player is for fun. Both paid co-players and customers mentioned that paid co-players should be voluble and gregarious with high emotional intelligence.

A gamer reported his experience as a paid co-player on the Zhihu forum. He posts his chat record with his customer. A friend of his customer asked her to invite a paid co-player for her. Her requirement is that he should be humorous and praise her when playing games. Besides, in order to enhance the entertainment elements of live streaming for audiences, many games live streamers invite paid co-players to play with them.

Gaining appreciation and compliment from others during gaming

Video games are often assumed to be men’s territory (Consalvo, 2008, Ruberg, 2019). Women are marginalized and not welcomed, especially in competitive games or professionalized games. They are just accessories to games and gameplay (Witkowski, 2018), which also embody in the paid co-playing practice. Some male gamers cannot gain admiration when they play games on their own. The paid co-playing service provides a way to satisfy their need. During gaming, paid co-players take an essential role which not only support customers but also work as bystanders to show their appreciation, compliment and admiration to paid co-playing customers., which will let customers feel a sense of achievement (Freeman, 2016).

I want to play games with young girls, help them win the games, show my skilled capacity. I also want to hear girls’ pretty voice. Besides, it is easier for me to find that kind girl with the appropriate ranking tier on the paid co-playing platform. Playing games is for fun. Most of the boys want to achieve praise, admiration from girls. We can gain a double sense of achievement if we win a game and gain praise from the girl team. (Hupu user 4, 2021.03 replied)

Some people play games with paid co-player not to improve their rank tier, but for other purposes. They require those girls who play not as good as them to show they are powerful and strong. (Hupu user 5, 2021. 03 replied)

However, male gamers need to gain others' appreciation and compliments, female gamers also have such needs. But the form of their representation is different. Comparing with male gamer who likes to gain appreciation and compliment from paid co-player of the opposite sex, female gamers just want to achieve appreciation and compliment no matter who praise them. For example,

I played with a nice female paid co-player. She gave me the materials I need in the game and praised me after the match. (Zhihu user 5, 2021.06 replied)

This paid co-playing customer post her experience with the topic “female paid co-player knows girls a lot”, many comments express agreement. One gamer said that male paid co-players are also good at comfort girls' game experience. During our observation, many gamers mentioned praise during gaming. This result confirms that liking of a teammate increases after receiving positive performance feedback (McGloin et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

In this research, we have explored the motivation for paid co-playing customers using paid co-playing services. The paid co-playing service is not only a game activity but also a form of transaction. In order to identify the particularities of motivation for using paid co-playing services, we take game motivations and motivations for co-playing into consideration. The main motivations for using paid co-playing service are identified into three elements: advancing in-game experience, decreasing emotional cost, and gaining emotional satisfaction. Paid co-playing customers mainly have two desires. One is concerning game experience, the other one is concerning social interaction, which containing the latter two motivations. The result shows that gamers use paid co-playing service to decrease the difficulty of the games and avoid encountering negative acts in games. Furthermore, most of female gamers use paid co-playing service to escape from toxic and misogynistic environments in the games. In addition, this research finds that paid co-playing practices may let customers away from social interaction and emotional cost and let customers engage in social interaction to gain emotional satisfaction. This finding enriches the related research on motivations for playing together. Paid co-playing service as a transaction, provide *access* for gamers to decreasing the emotional cost with familiar people. It also proved that playing with strangers may have no relatedness to develop.

During the observation, many gamers mentioned the price for inviting paid co-playing. Many factors may influence the price, such as gender, skill level, voice, and so on. Price will also influence the paid co-playing customers' choice, which could be considered in future study. Also, most of the comments and posts about paid co-playing on the online forum belong to some famous competition games, like *Arena of Valor*, *League of Legends*, *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds*, etc. Motivations on playing other types of games like casual games need to explore deeply.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aarsand, P. A. 2007. Computer and video games in family life: The digital divide as a resource in intergenerational interactions. *Childhood*, 14, 235-256.
- Bartle, R. 1996. Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD research*, 1, 19.
- Belin, P., Bestelmeyer, P. E., Latinus, M. & Watson, R. 2011. Understanding voice perception. *Br J Psychol*, 102, 711-25.

- Beznosyk, A., Quax, P., Lamotte, W. & Coninx, K. The effect of closely-coupled interaction on player experience in casual games. *International Conference on Entertainment Computing*, 2012. Springer, 243-255.
- Boellstorff, T., Nardi, B., Pearce, C. & Taylor, T. L. 2012. *Ethnography and virtual worlds*, Princeton University Press.
- Bowman, N. D., Weber, R., Tamborini, R. & Sherry, J. 2013. Facilitating game play: How others affect performance at and enjoyment of video games. *Media Psychology*, 16, 39-64.
- Chiou, W.-B. & Wan, C.-S. 2007. Using cognitive dissonance to induce adolescents' escaping from the claw of online gaming: The roles of personal responsibility and justification of cost. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 10, 663-670.
- Consalvo, M. 2008. Crunched by passion: Women game developers and workplace challenges. *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on gender and gaming*, 177-91.
- De Schutter, B. 2011. Never too old to play: The appeal of digital games to an older audience. *Games and Culture*, 6, 155-170.
- Domahidi, E., Festl, R. & Quandt, T. 2014. To dwell among gamers: Investigating the relationship between social online game use and gaming-related friendships. *Computers in human behavior*, 35, 107-115.
- Eklund, L. 2015a. Bridging the online/offline divide: The example of digital gaming. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 53, 527-535.
- Eklund, L. 2015b. Playing video games together with others: Differences in gaming with family, friends and strangers. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 7, 259-277.
- Freeman, G. Making Games as Collaborative Social Experiences: Exploring An Online Gaming Community. *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing Companion*, 2016. 265-268.
- Gajadhar, B. J., De Kort, Y. A. & Ijsselstein, W. A. Shared fun is doubled fun: player enjoyment as a function of social setting. *International Conference on Fun and Games*, 2008. Springer, 106-117.
- Gray, K. L., Buyukozturk, B. & Hill, Z. G. 2017. Blurring the boundaries: Using Gamergate to examine “real” and symbolic violence against women in contemporary gaming culture. *Sociology Compass*, 11, e12458.
- Harris, J., Hancock, M. & Scott, S. D. Leveraging asymmetries in multiplayer games: Investigating design elements of interdependent play. *Proceedings of the 2016 Annual Symposium on Computer-Human Interaction in Play*, 2016. 350-361.
- Hsu, C.-L. & Lu, H.-P. 2007. Consumer behavior in online game communities: A motivational factor perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 1642-1659.
- Huberman, A. M., Miles, M. B., Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. 1994. Handbook of qualitative research. *Data management and analysis methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 428-444.
- Huizinga, J. 1950. *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture* (p. 1938). Boston, MA: Beacon Press.(Original work published).

- Kallio, K. P., Mäyrä, F. & Kaipainen, K. 2011. At least nine ways to play: Approaching gamer mentalities. *Games and Culture*, 6, 327-353.
- Kaye, L. K. & Bryce, J. 2012. Putting the fun factor into gaming: The influence of social contexts on the experiences of playing videogames. *International Journal of Internet Science*, 7, 24-38.
- Kou, Y., Gui, X. & Kow, Y. M. Ranking practices and distinction in league of legends. Proceedings of the 2016 annual symposium on computer-human interaction in play, 2016. 4-9.
- Kowert, R. & Oldmeadow, J. A. 2013. (A) Social reputation: Exploring the relationship between online video game involvement and social competence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29, 1872-1878.
- Lenhart, A., Smith, A., Anderson, M., Duggan, M. & Perrin, A. 2015. Teens, technology and friendships, Pew Internet and American Life Project.
- Lo, S.-K., Wang, C.-C. & Fang, W. 2005. Physical interpersonal relationships and social anxiety among online game players. *Cyberpsychology & behavior*, 8, 15-20.
- Mcglain, R., Hull, K. S. & Christensen, J. L. 2016. The social implications of casual online gaming: Examining the effects of competitive setting and performance outcome on player perceptions. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 59, 173-181.
- Murthy, D. 2008. Digital ethnography: An examination of the use of new technologies for social research. *Sociology*, 42, 837-855.
- Paul, C. A. 2018. *The toxic meritocracy of video games: Why gaming culture is the worst*, U of Minnesota Press.
- Peng, W. & Hsieh, G. 2012. The influence of competition, cooperation, and player relationship in a motor performance centered computer game. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28, 2100-2106.
- Ruberg, B. 2019. Representing sex workers in video games: feminisms, fantasies of exceptionalism, and the value of erotic labor. *Feminist Media Studies*, 19, 313-330.
- Ryan, R. M., Rigby, C. S. & Przybylski, A. 2006. The motivational pull of video games: A self-determination theory approach. *Motivation and emotion*, 30, 344-360.
- Schirmer, A. & Adolphs, R. 2017. Emotion Perception from Face, Voice, and Touch: Comparisons and Convergence. *Trends Cogn Sci*, 21, 216-228.
- Sherry, J. L., Lucas, K., Greenberg, B. S. & Lachlan, K. 2006. Video game uses and gratifications as predictors of use and game preference. *Playing video games: Motives, responses, and consequences*, 24, 213-224.
- Spradley, B. W. 1980. Managing change creatively. *The Journal of nursing administration*, 10, 32-37.
- Stenros, J., Paavilainen, J. & Mäyrä, F. The many faces of sociability and social play in games. Proceedings of the 13th International MindTrek Conference: Everyday Life in the Ubiquitous Era, 2009. 82-89.
- Tang, W. Y., Reer, F. & Quandt, T. 2020. Investigating sexual harassment in online video games: How personality and context factors are related to toxic sexual behaviors against fellow players. *Aggressive Behavior*, 46, 127-135.

- Taylor, T. 2006. *Play between worlds*. Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Taylor, T. 2018. *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*, Princeton University Press.
- Taylor, T. L. 1999. Life in virtual worlds: Plural existence, multimodalities, and other online research challenges. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43, 436-449.
- Van Doorn, N. 2017. Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand' economy. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20, 898-914.
- Varis, P. 2016. Digital ethnography. *The Routledge handbook of language and digital communication*, 55-68.
- Verheijen, G. P., Stoltz, S. E., Van Den Berg, Y. H. & Cillessen, A. H. 2019. The influence of competitive and cooperative video games on behavior during play and friendship quality in adolescence. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 91, 297-304.
- Wang, B., Taylor, L. & Sun, Q. 2018. Families that play together stay together: Investigating family bonding through video games. *New Media & Society*, 20, 4074-4094.
- Warmelink, H. & Siitonen, M. Player Communities in Multiplayer Online Games: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research. DiGRA Conference, 2011.
- Whang, L. S.-M. & Chang, G. 2004. Lifestyles of virtual world residents: Living in the on-line game "Lineage". *CyberPsychology & behavior*, 7, 592-600.
- Williams, D., Yee, N. & Caplan, S. E. 2008. Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of computer-mediated communication*, 13, 993-1018.
- Witkowski, E. 2018. Doing/undoing gender with the girl gamer in high-performance play. *Feminism in play*. Springer.
- Wood, R. T., Griffiths, M. D., Chappell, D. & Davies, M. N. 2004. The structural characteristics of video games: A psycho-structural analysis. *CyberPsychology & behavior*, 7, 1-10.
- Yee, N. 2004. Hours of play per week. *The Daedalus Project*, 2.
- Yee, N. 2006. The demographics, motivations, and derived experiences of users of massively multi-user online graphical environments. *Presence: Teleoperators and virtual environments*, 15, 309-329.
- Yi, M. 2004. They got game: Stacks of new releases for hungry video enthusiasts mean its boom time for an industry now even bigger than Hollywood. *San Francisco Chronicle*, A1.