

Learnings from the case Maple Refugee: A story of free-to-play, probability, and gamer consumer activism

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INTRODUCTION

This work-in-progress paper provides an overview of South Korea's most disruptive gamer activism events, the "Maple Refugee" incident in South Korea. Provoked by the online game *Maple Story* (Nexon, 2003) in 2021, the incident saw tens of thousands of players participate in online and offline protests against the industrial norms of free-to-play (F2P). Despite its societal and industrial impact, however, the incident has received little coverage in English. Thus, this contribution aims to highlight what provoked "Maple Refugee" by tracing pieces of historical evidence through an extensive translated collection of secondary sources – news coverages, fan posts, streamer videos, and the game company's public statements and recordings. Co-authors from various disciplines (game studies, law, and human-computer interaction) are analyzing the case with a particular interest in the risk of undisclosed probabilities creating a vulnerable in-game economy (Paul 2011; Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022; Xiao et al. 2021). The case also raises the issue of game consumerism (Dubois and Weststar 2022; Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022; Wilhelmsson et al. 2022) and gamblification of games (Abarbanel 2018). Upon completion of the research, all

documented materials will be shared publicly in a chronicled timeline of the incident to inspire further academic inquiries and geographically diversify the game research landscape.

CONTEXT

Founded in 1994, Nexon became one of the first online game companies to adopt the F2P business model. The company's 2D side-scrolling adventure PC-based MMORPG *Maple Story*, released in 2003, is one of the longest-operating and most financially successful F2P games (see figure 1). One of the most controversial monetization features of *Maple Story* is the so-called "Chu-Op" (abbreviation of "additional stats" in Korean) system, which allows players to upgrade each of their 25 in-game gears in a randomized way. However, this requires an extensive amount of consumable items and real money. Prior to the incident, Nexon never revealed the probabilities behind the Chu-Op system – nor that of any other randomization mechanism. Instead, players relied on years of theorycrafting on online discussion platforms (e.g., Anonymous user 2020) regarding what Chu-Op stats are more challenging to acquire and thus more valuable as opposed to those that are more common and therefore undesirable.



Figure 1: In-game screen of *Maple Story* (From *Maple Story* Instagram, published 2021).

MAPLE REFUGEE

On 18th February 2021, *Maple Story* announced the following patch update: "The Chu-Op system has been fixed such that all additional stat upgrades will be granted with *the same probability*" (emphasis added) (Nexon 2021). This meant a drastic change against the players' crafted theory and thus a massive in-game economy fluctuation. Soon after, a group of *Maple Story* players formed a task force team and began crowdfunding to organize a series of truck protests (see figure 2), while referring to themselves as "consumers of the game" in their public statement (Anonymous user, 2021). A wide range of player activism campaigns also spread

across other F2P game communities in Korea, whose players shared similar negative sentiments towards the game studios' business model (e.g., *Lineage M* (NCSOFT 2017), *Mabinogi* (Nexon 2004), *Fate/Grand Order* (Aniplex & Netmarble 2017)) (see figure 2). Rallies of protesting trucks with bittering messages from the fans began occupying the Pan-gyo district, an area where major Korean game corporations – including Nexon – are located. Players also sent their trucks in front of Seoul's national assembly building, along with media and political campaigns that demanded legislative grounds for mandating probability disclosure in games. Their crowdfunding and campaign actions were organized online, as the country was under strict social distancing measures due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This pushed Nexon to publicly disclose the game's probabilities for the first time on 5th March 2021¹. However, the disclosures revealed more exploitative design features of which players were previously unaware. This quickly shifted the discourse into fundamental structural debates about the Korean F2P games as a whole and furthered the media and legislative discourse on the mixing of monetary gambling and games (Kim, 2021). At the same time, the *Maple Story* player communities began rapidly polarizing with personal attacks and vandalism towards players that were active in campaigns.

Eventually, the players left. *Maple Story* players sparked consecutive waves of massive migration to another F2P MMORPG, *Lost Ark* (Smilegate, 2017) (Ryu, 2021; Yoon, 2021) — a game that already had probabilities disclosed at the time of the incident, thus, perceived as an alternative model of Korean F2P games among the players. Some *Maple Story* players also claimed that the *Lost Ark* live service team is more active in player (consumer) communication and transparently discusses the games' monetization tactics. It was at this moment when *Maple Story* players began to call themselves “Maple Refugee(s)” portraying themselves as such in fan-made images and memes online.



Figure 2: *Maple Story* players' truck protest in March 2021 (Park, 2021) (left). Trucks sent by *Fate/Grand Order* players in January 2021 (Anonymous user, 2021) (Right).

NEXT STEP

The case of *Maple Story* demonstrates the power of players as a force that could either disrupt or leverage games' business model, as well as the necessity of both societal and industrial consensus on transparent probability disclosure for sustainable games business (Petrovskaya and Zende 2022; Xiao et al. 2021). We also think the Maple Refugee incident is not an isolated case in the Far East. Similar conflicts may arise, and have arisen (see e.g., GameSpot Staff, 2017), in other major gaming markets, which echoes the growing player resistance against the global capitalism of

games (Dyer-Witthford and De Peuter 2009; 2021). Thus, our aim is to draw global lessons from this incident with regard to industry stakeholders and the regulation of games.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Nexon further disclosed the probabilities for most of their other games in the following weeks in March 2021.