

An Irrational Black Market? Boundary Work Perspective on the Stigma of in-game Asset Transactions

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the negative images on cash trades of in-game assets in Taiwan, through interview of participants in this activity, we believe the blurring of boundaries between work and play, adulthood and adolescence, real and virtual is what distinguishes this market from previous markets of virtual goods, resulting in its social stigma. We then discuss how the participants confront this stigma and the ambiguity in their social status, through performing various strategies of redefining marginality or constructing alternative boundaries, the participants raise their sense of selfhood and also reflect the inadequacy of the present social categories.

KEYWORDS

Massive multiplayer online games, MMOG, stigma management, in-game asset, social boundary, boundary work

INTRODUCTION

There is an estimated population of 1.9million online gamers in Taiwan[10], second only to South Korea in eastern Asia. Along with the large population of online gamer is a huge secondary market for in-game assets, in these markets gamers trade in-game currency or equipments with real cash. In the past these transactions take place between individual gamers, but with the fast growing demand for large amounts of in-game currency, many internet cafes and workshops transformed their business into specialized “production” and selling of in-game currency. By hiring low-waged workers from China known as “currency farmers” to play around the clock in “producing” in-game currencies, these “in-game asset companies” are able to keep an abundant supply of in-game currencies without violating most game companies’ policies to hunt down “macros” and “treasure cloning.”

Despite the prosperous growth of these secondary markets for in-game assets, the general public still sees these transactions with a negative perspective, often linking these activities with irrationality (trading “real” cash for “virtual” item) and fraud (trading “virtual” items for “real” cash).Past discussions suggest these negative images result from three perspectives: first, the virtual nature of the goods involved[3,11], yet it’s interesting how other markets like the digital music industry, which also involves trading real cash for downloaded music was never viewed in this way. Second, the dispute of property rights concerned in these transactions[2,8], these disputes are still on-going and provides an example of the society’s insecure feeling towards this market. Third, gaming community may consider these transactions as cheating, downplaying the sense of achievements for others[2]. Yet a mass survey conducted by Bahamut[1], Taiwan’s largest gaming forum, indicated that the majority of respondents are actually pro in-game asset transaction(42.75%), only 22.57% of the respondents are either against or strongly against these transaction, and only 22.57% of these respondents who are against the trading thinks that the trades breaks the fairness of the games. It seems that the gamers in Taiwan value interaction between players above maintaining “game rules,” compared with bots and macros which does not interact at all, the buying and selling of in-game assets does not interfere with the feeling of interaction between players.

Through our observations, we propose another reason for the stigma on in-game asset transaction, this explanation comes from the popular image of these activities, which is “teenagers selling virtual items gained from playing games for real money”. This image challenges the social recognized form of money-making, which is by adults and through working, thus in this market the boundaries between work and play, adulthood and adolescence, real and virtual are blurred, many of the interviewees in our research described this market as ambiguous. This ambiguity provokes anxiety and fear to the society for it poses a threat to the fundamental classificatory structure[4,12], resulting in the black market stigmatized image and the discredited view towards the participants.

We will therefore examine the actions within this market of in-game asset transaction with the concept of “boundary work”, which is “the strategies, principles, and practices we use to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories.”[7] In the first part of the discussion we will demonstrate strategies that the participants in these transactions use to make boundaries flexible or transform the meanings of these boundaries to their use. The second part of the discussion will

focus on how the participants manage their ambiguous identity through distinctive notions of time, space, and activities in daily life. Through these strategies the participants redefine their sense of self, and at the same time challenge the inadequacy of the existing social categories.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary data collection method for this research was through open-end interview with 11 participants in this market for in-game assets, the interviewees were either seller or buyer of Lineage, Lineage2, and Ragnarok Online in-game assets, three of the most popular MMORPGs in Taiwan. The interviewees were chosen with purposive sampling, the six sellers were chosen by their different selling and production methods. The five buyers interviewed were chosen according to different age and social status to examine possible differences in their ability to construct their alternative identity in these activities. We also gathered related posts on game-related online bulletin board systems and forums, these articles present how different online gaming communities view in-game asset trade outside of the game differently, offering us with a deeper understanding of the effects and response of these activities within gaming context.

FINDINGS&DISCUSSIONS

Confronting Stigma

Conforming and Identifying with Social Values

We define who we are by drawing inferences concerning our similarity to, and differences from, others[6]. In the case of in-game asset market, there is a clear hierarchical relation between the social desired and undesired characteristics: work above play, adult above adolescent, and real above virtual. Therefore when facing social pressures to label them with undesirable characteristics, the participants in this market would try to redress their position by presenting their similarities to the social desired characteristics. One interviewee Saku says he sells accounts and in-game assets in all five of the games he has played, but he despises those “kids” that spend real cash for “virtual” things. By showing his disapproval of the buyers’ action, the interviewee is actually presenting himself as within the social norm of adults earning real cash. This strategy works in this case only because the interviewee has an socially acceptable job identity other than selling virtual treasures. Therefore, the money he made in trading could be viewed as extra earnings in his extracurricular time and did not present to be a threat for identity degradation.

Redefining Marginality: Pioneers, We are!

But for those who sell in-game assets as a profession or the frequent buyer, they cannot present their activities in this market as a mere extracurricular earnings or spending, they must find a way to redefine their unavoidable discredited status. The interviewees within this category often compare their activities with those in more “advanced” countries, describing themselves as pioneers.

Taiwan’s government is too conservative, look at South Korea, Japan, America and Europe, they all hold a more positive attitude towards this market.(seller interviewee Lin, male,age42)

Most people are afraid to touch this part of the market, but they are wrong. For example in the past women were not allowed to wonder on the streets, but look at now! During

this change those women (who wandered on the streets) were viewed as strange, but in the end they prove to be doing the right thing.(seller interviewee Wang, male,age35)

By linking the marginalized activity with the “advanced” countries and the possible future, the marginal status of trading virtual goods was redefined as being progressive and with futuristic prospect. At the same time the stigmatized participants were turned into futuristic pioneers.

Crating Alternative Boundaries: Cooperation with Game Companies

One of the frequently heard accusations from gaming communities toward these cash trade on in-game assets is that it breaks the equal standpoint between players, and the trading activities crates incentives for “currency farmers” to enter a game, often camping at popular site and disrupting other players’ leveling activities. Most of Taiwan’s gamers believe that the major online game companies are secretly tolerating cash trade and currency farmers, one of our seller interviewees said:

The game companies’ attitude towards us? It’s more of a like-friend-like-foe relation, they dislike us because they will not gain one cent from our sells. Yet viewing it from another angle, they know if we keep a cash trade value of their game assets, an economic value, then their game will live.(seller interviewee Lin, male,age42)

Taiwan’s competitive online game market has forced all game companies to offer months of open-beta period, free trial time for players to get attached to their games. But because of the dozens of games that gets released every month, and many players became “game hoppers.” As soon as a game starts charging fee, they sell off their accounts and hop to the next free game. This phenomena led to game companies’ inability to recover expenses, under such condition, creating cash value of in-game assets provides a way of enhancing players’ game attachment. Playing the game is like investing in future earnings for the players. Besides, cash value of in-game assets attracts large numbers of currency farmers who plays for long hours, serving as the game companies’ fundamental revenue source.

In other words, game companies were caught between business concern and a sense of fair play from the payers’ community. Using this situation, the in-game asset companies then juxtapose themselves with the game company, so their image of balance-breaker is then reversed in to the supporting hand assisting the very survival of the game world. *“The game company provides the environments for the game, and we provide the contents for the players”(seller, Tzeng, male,age48)* .

The frequent buyers then legitimize their activities by drawing boundaries between themselves and occupational players or currency farmers. *“I come home from work late at night, then I have to wait for a group to play, say I work my heart out and play for five hours, but the truth is I can never be like those parasites who plays all the time.(buyer Chen ,male,age32)”*In this way, the frequent buyers join the mainstream gaming communities and shifting the blame of balance breaker to the currency farmers, transforming the meaning of their buying behavior into maintaining balance between “actual” players and occupational players.

Confronting Ambiguity

Separation of Time and Activities

When the work the sellers do is viewed as child’s game playing, and the goods they sell taken as

virtual non-existing things, they face a situation where they must separate the conflicting roles of a worker and a player, adult and “adolescent” activity, real goods or virtual. Much like past studies on home-based work, the purpose of the separation is so these different roles do not cross over to the others’ time and space [5,9]. When asked to compare her job as an in-game asset seller with her recent job at a stock exchange companies, one of our interviewee Scarlet said:

My old job was just doing completely brain-less work, everyday you come to work and leave on time, what you do after work is your own business. Now it seems as if I have no time of my own, I have to be beside the computer almost all the time so when buyers call I can instantly give them their currency online, the working hours is actually much longer then before, and instead I don’t get much fun from this game anymore, it’s just work.(age28)

The lack of clear distinctions between work and leisure caused the sellers to constantly feel consumed by their work, this wary feeling and downplaying of “fun” also points to her efforts of presenting her gaming as work and not play. Scarlet also deals with this problem by specifying “playing” the game Lineage as work, and plays Lineage2 for her pastimes. *“I must make these clear distinctions or else my life will get all messed up and I’ll never feel relaxed.”*

Wang said most professional players are at a transitional stage, either waiting to graduate from school or waiting for the military call-up. These people’s “gray zone” status gives them more freedom in doing this ambiguous activity, for here the ambiguity of playing for work, and adult playing children’s game is perceived as a pre-adulthood activity, drawing a clear boundary with the separation of time stages.

All of our seller interviewees referred to their business as providing a “service” instead of selling goods, the concept of a service provider fits into the society’s present job categories, avoiding the ambiguity in the notion of virtual goods. By carefully separating distinct roles, the sellers in their ambiguous social status are able to keep a sense of self that fits into existing social categories.

CONCLUSION

We observed the cash transaction of in-game assets and found that the ambiguous nature of this market is one of the main reasons for its negative image. This ambiguity is a result of its blurring of boundaries between work and play, adulthood and adolescence, real and virtual. It is especially the notion of adolescents playing games as work that challenges the society’s present concept of working adults, provoking stress and anxiety which led to social disparage of the activity. Through interviews with the actual participants in these trading activities, we found them clearly conscious of their social marginality. But instead of accepting their given image, we observed agency in which the participant used strategies to redefine their position and construct their sense of self.

The different strategies available are decided by the different participant’s social resources, if the participant has an alternative social position that is highly accepted, then the participant can confirm social values and use his/her behaviors in this market as a presentation of quality extracurricular time-use. But for those who do not have an alternative position to declare their social approved role, another strategy is to expand the frame of compared “society” and present

their marginality with a pioneer image as being closer to “advanced” countries or the future. Drawing alternative boundaries is also another strategy we observed by these participants, instead of accepting the social recognized boundary between in-game asset sellers and online game companies, by constructing a new boundary the sellers are able to juxtapose their position with the online game company claiming to cooperate in providing the game environment for gamers. The frequent buyers also use this strategy to legitimize their position, by drawing a line between themselves and the occupational players, the frequent buyers reposition themselves alongside the “regular” players, presenting their activity as actually maintaining equality with “the opposed” occupational players.

We also observed that some sellers also use spatial, time, and activity distinctions in their daily life to separate their ambiguous roles, all these strategies of boundary crossing and making helps the participants construct their sense of selfhood under the pressures of their social stigma, yet at the same time these alternative status that they create also reflects the inadequacy of the present social categories, and maybe in ways they are pioneers in challenging these inadequate social values.

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