Shades of Grey in the Gaming Industry: A Case Study of Commercial Boosting in China

Samson S. S. Tang
Department of Cultural and Religious Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
samsontang@link.cuhk.edu.hk

Ningxi Guo
Centre for China Studies
The Chinese University of Hong Kong
ningxiguo@link.cuhk.edu.hk

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INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the challenges and opportunities confronting Chinese boosters by examining the roles played by repetitive gameplay mechanics and industry-related factors in developing commercial boosting into a fast-growing (underground) market in China. "Boosting" is broadly construed as the process of understanding the rules of the game and finding means to reach the desired goals through cooperation and collusion (Meades 2015, 75). The form of boosting identified here refers to the act of lending a player's (the boostee) account to a seasoned player (the booster, who gets paid), in order to accomplish time-consuming tasks or "boost" the account's competitive ranking far more quickly than the original owner could achieve alone. Boosting—or surrogate gaming in this context—is rarely permitted by a game company's terms of service as it constitutes cheating (see Riot Games 2024, "7.1"; Tencent 2022, "2.6").

As with many emergent businesses that are concomitants of the commercialisation and professionalisation of digital gaming, boosting is one of those businesses despite being a twisted reflection of the formal economy. Copious boosting services abound on freelance marketplaces like Fiverr, and on gaming service websites such as KBoosting.com, Boosting Factory, and MmonsteR. Scholarly works on boosting have largely remained pertinent to Western game franchises or English-speaking player communities (Conroy et al. 2021; Horrigan 2023; Meades 2015), but few have addressed the phenomenon in China.[1] In the Chinese context, boosters are called *dailian* 代练, *daida* 代打, or humorously, *daiganren* 代肝人—literally the person (worker) who sacrifices his/her liver (because of staying up late) so that the original owner does not have to. China's boosting industry is estimated to comprise 6 to 7 million self-employed boosters, ill-paid workers, students, retired esports players, and streamers who seek to diversify their income streams (Zhao 2022). The monthly

income of freelance boosters typically ranges from under 10000 to 20000 yuan (approximately under $1374 USD to $2748 USD) (Kierst and Yang 2024). Those working in informal settings referred to as "gaming workshops" (*youxi gongzuoshi* 游戏工作室) often receive meagre pay and are prone to sexual harassment (Zhao 2022). The phenomenon of boosters committing themselves to repetitive tasks or having to reconcile themselves to a precarious status has, thus, invited us to address the blurring of such modernist binaries as play/labour and play/work (de Peuter and Young 2019; Goggin 2009; Lund 2014).

The findings undergirding this paper's arguments are derived from an analysis of three popular Chinese mobile games: *Honor of Kings* (Tencent Games 2015), *Onmyoji* (NetEase Games 2016), and *Game for Peace* (Tencent Games 2019). Further, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with five boosters and four players who paid for boosting services. Additional sources for this paper entail observations of boosters on the video sharing platform Bilibili, comments gathered from Bilibili and Xiaohongshu, and boosting service ads collected from Taobao and Xianyu. The analysis is, too, supplemented by one author's experience as a booster and live stream moderator.

The gameplay analysis indicates that player-versus-player (PvP) mechanics and the battle pass model in the chosen games often feature time-consuming and repetitive tasks. This can detract from the joy of gaming, transforming it into a tedious chore and becoming an incubator of boosting services. Another identifiable outcome is that China's boosting services have burgeoned mightily with the rise of e-commerce platforms like Taobao and Xianyu; live streaming platforms like DouYu and Huya Live (formerly YY.com); and social media platforms like Xiaohongshu. Most Chinese boosters promote their services directly or indirectly through these channels, positioning themselves as freelancers whose earnings hinge on unstable project-based employment. Boosters face fierce competition, may need to undersell their services, and grapple with exploitation of unpaid labour time (see Cohen 2012). And those working in gaming workshops would endure even grimmer conditions. If game studies research should address those aspects of the game industry that are "rotten to the core" (Cullen et al. 2022, 202), then commercial boosting is a topic whose stakes remain high. Boosting exemplifies that the gaming industry is hierarchically organised and not all professions receive equal recognition (Kerr 2017, 101). One might be inclined to view commercial boosting as inherently exploitative, but the authors argue that some of their interviewees justified the profession as a conscious choice to enjoy decent income, flexible working hours, and a sense of accomplishment, particularly among streamers.

Commercial boosting occupies a "grey" area in China's gaming landscape, due largely to its prohibition by most game companies and the legal challenges that have ensued.[2] The gaming skills boosters possess, as well as their ability to transfer skills to other games of the same genre, grant boosters an edge over ordinary players in today's meritocratic gaming cultures, where the valorisation of skills remains a salient feature (Paul 2018). Regardless of whether boosters experience joy or hardship in their endeavours, the impacts of commercial boosting on competitive game cultures are profound.

Endnotes

1 There have been discussions about "gold farming" practices in China (e.g., Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter's *Games of Empire* [2009]). Since this paper focuses more on the player-versus-player (PVP) elements of games, not ludic economies, it does not cover "gold farming" for brevity's sake.

2 In China's legal context, boosting is presented with challenges on several fronts. Boosting transactions lack effective contractual protections and may lead to disputes over labour and consumer rights. Account sharing violates personal information protection regulations stipulated in both the Data Security Law 国家数据安全法 issued by National People's Congress and the Critical Information Infrastructure Security Protection Regulations 关键信息基础设施安全保护条例 issued by State Council. Some boosting activities may lead to circumventing anti-addiction requirements outlined in the Notice on Further Strictly Managing and Effectively Preventing Minors from Becoming Addicted to Online Games 关于进一步严格管理切实防止未成年人沉迷网络游戏的通知.

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