Playing Games, Doing Class: The Sociography of the Biggest Consumer Community

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The revenues of mobile games have rapidly risen these years, which have played an essential role in the game market. More and more statistics reveal that mobile games have generated the highest revenues among digital games. As shown from the Newzoo statistics, the amount of global revenues of digital games in 2018 was US$137.9 billion, with mobile games contributing revenues of US$70.3 billion. While mobile games account for 51 percent of the global revenues, including 41 percent of smartphone games and 10 percent of tablet games, the percentages of console games (25%), PC games (21%) and browser PC games (3%) were obviously much lower (Newzoo, 2018). In this context, what is the sociography like when there is a huge inflow of physical money into the game world? And how much do we know about the community of paying users in mobile games?

The business models of games range from P2P (pay-to-play) or B2P (buy-to-play) to free access but with in-game store, the mainstream model today, which makes the amount of money that players invest in games become unlimited and thus forms a phenomenon of P2W(pay-to-win). Based on this background, the aim of this study is to analyze the social practice of paying users in mobile games. With Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of habitus and field borrowed, gamers are considered as agents so as to demonstrate the interacting process of paying users' value preferences and daily actions, and to show the distinctive relationships of regime, culture and dominance in the game community. Meanwhile, this study also tries to re-conceptualize the virtual world constructed in games and to analyze it as a new tribe in modern society.

I used field observation as methodology, and the subject was a game guild, "Tiger Knight." Tiger Knight ranks first in one of the servers of a F2P mobile game called "Sangokushi." There were 63 members in the guild, comprised of 62 males and 1 female. I applied to join this game community as a researcher on October 11, 2018. After approved by the decision-makers of the guild, I was given an account which had been invested more than US$850 and added into group chats for contacting members. In return, I was expected to attend all the game activities to enhance the guild's capability. Within these six months, I have to complete daily tasks, to join PvE battles every Tuesday and Friday, to participate in battles between guilds every Saturday, and to take part in some special events held spontaneously by guild leaders, such as guerilla warfare twice a week and 1v1 battles between guild members. In addition, I observe the interactions of the members outside the game, including

offline gatherings and communications via instant messengers, about 200 to 300 messages on average per day.

Members of this game community mainly come from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Most of the male players are aged 35 to 45, married, and with higher socio-economic status. Their occupations include bankers, executive directors of listed companies, senior executives from electronics and IT industry, and owners of an engineering company and a human resourcing company. The only female player is the assistant of the guild president, and she is in charge of managing alternate accounts, dealing with guild-related business and participating in the game activities on behalf of the president when he goes abroad for business or travel. For the expense part, the president, who spent the most amount of money, has put in more than US$100,000 in the game, followed by the engineering company owner spending US$35,000. Other than those mentioned above, there are five members that have dropped about US$20,000 to US$30,000, and most of the rest spend from US$150 to US$350 per month.

Different from former researches that compare guilds to Mafia (Taylor, 2006: 42), this study finds that the characteristics of this game community are quite similar to contemporary enterprise culture--less brotherhood, less loyalty, and more rational calculation. The characteristics found in this study are as follows: (a) A large quantity of paperwork: the guild leaders usually sort out the information of game activities, collate the combat capability, the extent of contribution and attendance rate of every player, and make them into forms by word processing software; (b) Bureaucracy: the players who hold higher economic capital and better governing skills take control of the establishment of the bureaucracy and become one of its upper class. The remaining players will be distributed to different teams depending on their combat capability and the team leaders take care of team players to see whether everyone follows the orders; (c) Bonuses: the guild leaders buy and give away virtual currency out of their own pocket to reward those who perform well every week, and they sometimes distribute bonuses to all the players in the guild in order to attract them to actively take part in game activities; (d) Incentive trips: three offline gatherings of this community were held in recent six months. The gatherings took place in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the president paid all the bills except for the flight tickets. In one of the gatherings, the president even provided a private yacht, a jet ski and beverages for the participants; (e) Expulsion, liquidation and trade: any player who holds perspectives different from the guild will be expelled by the management. They will buy his account and suggest he play other games, or arrange for him to join other leisurely guilds that don't pursue high-end games; (f) Division of labour: since not every member has an abundant capital, those players who lack available money have to compensate for his resource gaps by offering labour force, such as analyzing the data, providing strategies and managing more than 20 alternate accounts, in exchange for a position in the guild.

To sum up, the managers of this game community also belong to the management in real lives. They acquire the management approach from their enterprises and companies, and apply it to govern a guild in mobile games. That is to say, the cultivation of habitus is related to individual context, gender and class. Habitus allows the agents to sustainably do appropriate practice, to keep similar logic of actions (Krais, 2013), and to integrate the capitals they own to play a part in the game field. As a result, we still strongly experience social and economic inequality in games, because the game world is actually penetrated from everything existing in real society. The operation mechanism that originally belongs to real society is able to be redefined by game rules, to be reorganized, and to become more explicit and stratified (Chang, 2009). In particular, the in-game purchases in the mainstream F2P games

nowadays allow players to give money and get more functional items in return, and then enhance the status in games and enrich their game lives; on the contrary, those players who have insufficient resources will have weaker gaming experiences. When the spirit of capitalism violently invades the game field, players will never have a foothold of equal opportunity, which might make the dominance more evident and involve players in doing class while playing games.

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