Online Gamers’ Preferences for Online Game Charging Mechanisms: The Effect of Exploration Motivation

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ABSTRACT

Online games construct a virtual world where gamers can explore and experience various exciting environments. However, studies on gamer behavior rarely investigated the relationships between motivations and spending for online games. Understanding these relationships helps online game service providers manage gamers’ motivations and develop better revenue models. This study investigated the relationships between one core motivation for playing online games—exploration motivation—and online gamers’ willingness to spend for online games. Analytical results indicated that exploration motivation is positively related to gamer willingness to pay monthly access fees for playing online games, and is negatively related to gamer intention to buy or to bid for virtual items. The implications are discussed and suggestions to game service providers are offered.

Keywords: Charging Mechanism, Exploration Motivation, Online Game, Virtual Item

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of interactive multimedia technology and the prevalence of broad Internet, online games are becoming one of the most prospering online businesses (Castronova, 2005; Nojima, 2007, Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Koo, 2009). To reap profits, online game firms have developed two major revenue sources: subscription fees and free games with the sale of virtual items (Lin & Sun, 2007; Nojima, 2007). Although online gamers sometimes feel dissatisfied with online games (Teng et al., 2012a; Tseng & Teng, 2011), worldwide market sizes of online games still keep rising (Transparency Market Research, 2012), leading to the question why online gamers are willing to spend for online games. Thus, research is required for understanding the relationships between online gamers’ motivations and their spending for online games.

The literature has proposed various reasons for playing online games (Lin & Tsai, 2002; Chou & Ting, 2003; Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005;
Wan & Chiou, 2006a, 2006b; Yee, 2006a, 2006b; Koo, 2009). One of the core motivations for playing online games suggested in the literature is to explore the virtual world for satisfying gamer curiosity (e.g., Koo, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Tseng, 2011). Psychologists proposed that cognitive and behavioral exploration of novel and challenging opportunities are results of curiosity, which is an emotional-motivational system (Kashdan, Rose, & Fincham, 2004). Online games construct a virtual world in rich interactive multimedia where gamers can explore and experience various virtual environments. In online games, gamers can explore new maps or zones, and try to solve novel missions to fulfill their exploration motivation (Chou & Ting, 2003; Yee, 2006a; Jeng & Teng, 2008). Therefore, gamers’ exploration motivations are likely to influence their willingness to spend for online games.

The importance of exploration motivation can be further understood by relating it to flow experience, which is an important source of gamer loyalty (Choi & Kim, 2004; Teng et al., 2012b). Flow experience occurs when individuals perform an activity with full immersion (Hoffman & Novak, 2009). In the state of flow, individuals can perceive happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure (Csikszentmihályi, 1997). To achieve flow over time, a gamer faces the tension between flow, anxiety, and boredom (Katuk, Kim, & Ryu, 2013). If a gamer moves toward more challenging areas without new skills, the result is difficulty and anxiety. Developing new skills to achieve the goal can give the gamer a sense of achievement, thus restores the user back to flow. On the other hand, if there is no evolution of the gaming experience while the gamer become more skilled, the result will be boredom reluctance to explore the game (Tseng & Teng, 2011). To recapture flow, the gamer has to explore new challenges in the game. That is, when online gamers become more experienced, they are motivated to explore new stimuli for maintaining the state of flow. Since flow predicts gamer loyalty and exploration motivation has to be met to achieve flow experience, this study focuses on the exploration motivation.

However, previous studies generally measured gamers’ usage behavior in terms of time rather than money (e.g. Chou & Ting, 2003; Griffiths, 2010). Although Koo et al. (2007) included weekly expenses for online game usage, the popular charging mechanisms for online games are monthly subscription fees and the sales of virtual items (Lin & Sun, 2007). Nojima (2007) examined the relations between pricing models and users’ stickiness to a certain game; however, the effect of exploration motivation was not explicitly elaborated. Thus, the exact relationships between exploration motivation and in-game expenditures are still unclear. To address this insufficiency, the current study examines the relationships between online gamers’ exploration motivation and their preferences for online game pricing models. In particular, this study aims to answer the following two research questions:

1. Are gamers with stronger exploration motivation more (or less) willing to accept the subscription fee charging mechanism?
2. Are gamers with stronger exploration motivation more (or less) willing to accept the virtual item sales charging mechanism?

Answers to these two questions help online game service providers design games and choose proper charging mechanisms in consideration of the exploration motivation of online gamers. Moreover, answers to these two questions also help online game service providers manage gamer exploration motivation in order to yield more revenue from a proper combination of charging models.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Online gamers play online games to satisfy various motivations. Based on a large-scale online survey and a factor analytic approach, Yee (2006a) constructed a comprehensive player motivation model comprising three groups of motivations. The first group, achievement, consists of three components: advancement,
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