Chapter 20

Paid to Play: The Gamers, Game Streaming, and Advertising in Chinese Mobile Game Fan Communities

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ABSTRACT

With the rise of game broadcasting appearing in video sharing or streaming platforms, there is a new social phenomenon in which fans or consumers could co-operate with the game companies in their mutual interest. This social phenomenon has further diverged into two types of tamed labour fans, the expert fans in gaming and live-streaming and tamed fans in marketing and socializing in fandom as company agency. This article will investigate the nature of this new role of tamed fan labour and explore how it functions in the fan community, especially in terms of relieving fans’ resistance against the game companies and consolidating the fan community by revealing their affinity for their fan. Using the example of a successful Chinese mobile game app, “Tower of Saviour,” this article will shed light on this rethinking of the fan structure, as well as on Chinese fan studies that show how tamed fan labour can benefit game companies in the Chinese cultural context.

INTRODUCTION

“Gaming could be a career pursuit”. This is the most common answer cited by gaming aficionados when they are interviewed about their perception of “gaming as working”. This answer is almost certainly true in Digital Age society. The game industry is one of the largest entertainment industries and is the paramount online cultural consumption market globally (Newzoo, 2018). Various ambitious professions can be found within this thriving industry, in both its production and consumption aspects. “Professional gamer” and “online game live streamer” are probably the major job titles on the consumption end of gaming, similar to other online occupations like bloggers, online Youtubers and online celebrities (Rich, 2009). Just imagine the more than 10 million gamers from various age groups who play famous online

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competitive games like Dota2, Zerg Invasion, Minecraft or League of Legends (LOL). The excitement and passion of those 10 million gamers makes gaming profitable in the commercial market. Consequently, e-sport and game live streaming have become popular in online gaming activities.

In the example of LOL, thousands of live streams from different countries can be found on Twitch every day, and the live streaming videos have been viewed by nearly a million people. The huge popularity of the video game LOL stems from its multi-playing nature; it allows multiple players to compete in online battles in a mythical setting. LOL involves a high level of competition among players and requires, for instance, an excellent command of strategy, teamwork, familiarity with gaming skills and fast gaming reaction time. This makes watching the battle online highly exciting; hence the demand of game live streaming rises. Attributed to the growing viewership and proliferation of competition between amateurs, different regional or international electronic competitions (or e-sport) are facilitated by game developers. Large numbers of e-sport teams are established, and hundreds of top professional gamers are recruited. In these ways, gaming has become a career path for gaming professionals and live streaming lovers.

Besides the game live streaming, another form of online media context has gradually acquired popularity in cyberworld of game fandom. This media context is the online celebrity-made videos about walkthrough or gameplay sharing. Online celebrity has well drawn the academic attention after its emergence in the internet. Follow the traditional trend of celebrity culture studies, the possible social and cultural influence like enhancing the visibility of social movement, public donation or audience attraction (e.g: Meyer, 1995; Schultz, 2001) are also addressed in online celebrity studies. Online celebrities are believed to have a more transparent and close connection to the audience, and at the same time they would have at least one specific distinction in any field that can catch the eyeballs of the video audience in the internet (Davies, 2010). This distinction is divergent in taste and audience fit with the taste would have a relatively stronger bonding with the online celebrities. Therefore, it could be expected that numbers of online celebrities with different characteristics would be invited and recruited as the labor of producing companies for making benefit generated from the close social network bonding between fans and their beloved online celebrity. Studies of weighed celebrities in their role, specifically on what diverse network they have, and how they interact with others like entrepreneur, public intellectual and fans are very common in nowadays academia.

Game live streaming for professional and online celebrity gameplays is the primary focus of this paper. In the academia, the term “game live streaming” and “online celebrity gameplay” are still poorly defined. It is generally understood as an online activity in which people broadcast their live video, with the aid of a computer or camera, on the internet. People participating into game live streaming are generally called “game streamers” or “game broadcasters” (henceforth “game streamer”). These game streamers start out as fans with active participation in online platforms. The reason for their game video sharing could be based upon showcasing game critique, commenting, satire, information exchange or simply sharing the joy of their gaming expertise. This is a major type of fan-labour activity and a peripheral gaming business, as described in the introduction. There are three major income sources for popular game live streamers. They may obtain considerable subscription fees from the online sharing platform while, at the same time, they raise crowdfunding on their fan page and seek donations from fans. For example, Felix Kjellberg, nicknamed PewDiePie in the gaming community, is recognized as the most successful game streamer in the world; he earns $7.5 million USD annually and his channel has had 10 billion views. Kjellberg’s story shows how live streaming of gaming can turn into a lucrative career. When PewDiePie become famous in internet, he turns to be online celebrity and lots of advertising companies and commercial sectors would ask for his endorsement in their products. At this time being, PewDiePie utilizes