Chapter 17

An Empirical Investigation into the Sources of Customer Dissatisfaction with Online Games

Fan-Chen Tseng
Kainan University Taiwan

Ching-I Teng
Chang Gung University, Taiwan

ABSTRACT

Most extant research focused on the attractiveness of online games, but paid scant attention to the sources of customer dissatisfaction with online games. Thus, this study investigates the sources of customer dissatisfaction (dissatisfiers) with online games. From an online survey, this study identified five factors as the sources of customer dissatisfaction: (1) the deceptive behavior of other online gamers, (2) the discourteous behavior of other online gamers, (3) the unattractive design of online games, (4) the ineffective customer support of online game service providers, and (5) the undesirable restrictions or regulations imposed by online game service providers. Findings in this study highlighted the fact that the anonymous and intensive interactions among online customers themselves can result in customer-originated dissatisfiers such as deceptive behavior and discourteous behavior. This study also reminded online service providers of company-originated dissatisfiers such as ineffective customer support and improper constraints.

INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of computer technology and the prevalence of the Internet, online games have been emerging as a fast-growing online entertainment business, as evidenced by millions of customers (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008).

The worldwide popularity of online games attracted continued research on the characteristics and behavior of online gamers (e.g., Koo, 2009). It was also suggested that online games are the future of the interactive entertainment industry, and integrating business services into online games is a promising direction for e-business development (Sharp & Rowe, 2006).

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Besides, the research on information technology (IT) adoption, which previously focused on work-related IT (e.g., Davis, 1989), has also recognized the emerging importance of online games. For example, Van der Heijden (2004) examined user acceptance of hedonic information systems including online games, and found that perceived enjoyment and perceived ease of use are stronger determinants of intentions to use hedonic information systems than perceived usefulness. Hsu and Lu (2007) examined the problems users encountered in adopting online games, including unstable systems, malicious players and grief players. These IT-adoption studies were conducted in the online gaming contexts, indicating that online games are an important industry for IT research.

As a new form of recreation and entertainment, online games differ from traditional video games or PC games in two distinctive ways. First, online games are not only products but also services (NCsoft, 2001). Once gamers log into the game server, the game service provider must maintain their systems to prevent server crash or network latency so that gamers can play without interruption. Besides, the game service provider must protect gamers’ accounts and ensure gamers follow the rules of the game when playing online games. Since online games are services, previous research results on service quality are expected to be applicable to online games. Console games and PC games, in contrast, are products that are usually played alone without the need for instantaneous and continuing support from their manufacturers. The clarification of online games as a service will be elaborated in the Theoretical Background section.

Second, there are intensive, real-time and anonymous interactions among a large number of gamers in online games (thousands of gamers can log into the same game server). This is a mixed blessing for online games. One the one hand, the amusement and attractiveness of online games come from the intensive interactions among online gamers themselves, which are an essential part of the online game. On the other hand, the anonymity in computer-mediated communications, especially in online games, has led to certain problematic or irritating behaviours, misconducts, or even crimes among online gamers (Chen et al., 2005), which can also be sources of frustration or dissatisfaction for gamers.

While the business of online games is prospering, online gamers express their dissatisfaction with the services of online game firms and with the unpleasant behaviors of other online gamers (Lo, Wang, & Fang, 2005). Online game service providers should understand the sources of gamers’ dissatisfaction thoroughly, because the behavioral responses of dissatisfied customers may be unfavorable to the firms. For online gamers, they may voice their complaints to their friends who may be future online gamers, spread their complaints in gamer communities, switch to other game service providers, or simply quit online gaming (Lo et al., 2005). All these can undermine the loyalty of online gamers and consequently damage the financial performance of online game service providers.

However, because online games are an emerging industry, existing knowledge about the sources of dissatisfaction with online games is rather limited. Although previous studies have examined satisfaction and dissatisfaction with online games from either an engineering perspective (Claypool & Claypool, 2006) or from a functional perspective (Choi & Kim, 2004), a thorough understanding of customer dissatisfaction with online games is still in urgent demand. In addition, compared with traditional service industries, customers of online games have exceptionally massive communication among themselves. This can induce interpersonal conflict and unhappiness, which in turn may result in customer dissatisfaction with the services. However, little research has explored these issues.

To fill in the void of knowledge, this research aims to have a more comprehensive exploration