Thrifty Players in a Twisted Game World? --A Study on Private Online Game Servers

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Online gamers' playing on private servers has become an important phenomenon in many parts of the world. For most of the popular online MMOGs (Massively multiplayer online games), unauthorized private servers operate in parallel to official servers. Although lack of reliable statistics on the scale of this 'informal sector' of game economy, game providers and authorized local distributors have been claiming substantial revenue loss due to private servers. Game industry also works closely with law enforcement authorities to crack down on illegal private servers and netcafés that provide services or access to them. These private servers of games are set up and operated by individuals who do not pay licensing fee to the game developer, but use the leaked, stolen, or hacked official source code to run the games in their own servers. The size of private servers varies, with the number of players on each server ranging from a few to several thousands, or even more. Private servers charge players with lower fees than official servers, sometimes employing a 'donation system' to collect voluntary payment and thus generate revenue. Such underground nature of private servers partly explained why attention on private game servers has been limited to legal and economic dimensions thus far.

In mainstream game culture, the private server players are often seen as either thrifty players who chose to save monthly fees of official server, or super-achievers who go after unspeakably fast speed of leveling at the cost of a balanced gaming experience. Also, private game servers are regarded as the illegal substitute for official servers. According to the dominant viewpoint that the game industry commonly adopts, the role of private servers to public servers is like that of pirate music to the music labels—they are to be blamed for millions of dollars in lost sales. The number of players who play in private servers can be directly translated into loss in profit for the game companies.

In this study, we try to explore what motivates players to join private game servers, why they choose to stay, and their distinctive gaming experiences in private servers. Our primary data collection method is in-depth interviews with private server players in Taiwan, supplemented by articles and messages related to private servers posted on local game bulletin boards and discussion forums.

Our primary findings suggest that players' motivations for using private servers went far beyond the monetary incentives or satisfaction of desperate leveling. Some players use private servers as a laboratory to conduct experiments or test parameters for their characters in order to optimize their performance in official game settings. Some use them to realize game-related hobbies such as taking photos across different maps in the game worlds. Such things cannot be done on

official servers without first investing vast amount of time and money in leveling up. Some players use private servers to share their memories of a game that has ceased to exist on the market. Some play both official servers and private servers concurrently with the same group of friends, under a distinct partition of activities that official servers are for leveling while private servers are for chatting. The diversified incentives related to playing on private servers also reflect the limits and inflexibilities of official servers. Under the restrictions of official game environments, players adopt private servers to maximize their pleasures and customize their gaming experiences.

Based on these player experiences, we also found that the economic relationship between private and official servers may not always be fungible. Sometimes players use private servers to supplement their game experiences in official game worlds. Sometimes, the non- or low-fees of private servers were used by existing players to bring in new players who otherwise would not have tried the game. Some of them may even join the official servers later. In conclusion, we argue that private game servers and their players cannot be taken as a marginal phenomenon or outliers, instead, they are a crucial part in understanding gaming experience.