Understanding Chinese Players' Perceptions of Gaming Monetisation and Regulation

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INTRODUCTION

Video game monetisation has changed significantly as the industry has embraced the "gambling turn" in the past decade (Johnson and Brock 2020). While most studies centred on understanding the impact of lootboxes on ethical monetisation design and attempted to demarcate gaming from gambling (Lui, Thompson, and Rich 2020; Xiao 2021; Zendle and Cairns 2019), China started shifting regulatory attention to managing designs that encourage players to overspend in online games. In December 2023, China's National Press and Publication Administration (NPPA) solicited opinions from the general public regarding the newly drafted "Measures for the Management of Online Games" (henceforth, the draft) (NPPA 2023). The draft banned a range of monetisation designs and deemed them spending-driving, including forced matchmaking between players, daily login rewards, first-time or consecutive top-ups, virtual item auctions or speculations, and unreasonable settings for the number of draws or odds for random rewards. This announcement battered the market value of leading Chinese game companies (Ye 2023) and sparked intense discussions among players. However, it remains unclear how players react to the draft and the meaning behind their reactions.

In this presentation, we present how Chinese players understand the draft and those monetisation strategies from the draft. We consider the draft a "convening" force (Barnett 2007; Baym, Swartz, and Alarcon 2019) that can prism the broader discussion of Chinese gaming culture. This is crucial for two reasons. Firstly, China has been considered an active power in creating monetisation regulation (Xiao 2022). Although most regulatory attention on a global scale remains focused on managing lootboxes (see Australian Classification 2024), China's approach offers valuable insights that can expand our understanding of problematic monetisation practices beyond just lootboxes. Also, while the main focus of this research is not to improve the draft directly, the findings could still contribute to its refinement. As players have been identified as crucial stakeholders in promoting protective regulations (Colder Carras, Carras, and Labrique 2020), presenting their perspectives on the draft offers valuable insight into how they interpret the message. This allows regulators to understand players' concerns and create more apt regulations.

By analysing 1017 comments that contain 65809 Chinese characters through thematic analysis, we found that Chinese players had split attitudes towards the draft and monetisation based on their preferred business models, premium and freemium. This division regarding the draft and monetisation was rooted in their understanding of modern play, the Chinese gaming industry, and the Chinese player community. More importantly, players formed two types of identities around these differences. For premium players, the freemium business model and related monetisation strategies were problematic. Retention designs like daily log-in rewards turned gameplay into compulsory activities that resemble work. They believed that the mobile sector rotted the core of the Chinese gaming industry as it emphasised capturing values and driving players' spending instead of creating quality content. Therefore, freemium players were not "true" players as the game they played was inferior and was gambling. Premium players supported the draft but distrusted its execution because of the previous failure to regulate lootboxes. However, freemium players argued that retention designs were key attractions as they offered free rewards. They also believed that the prosperity of the mobile sector would eventually radiate to the industry; therefore, although freemium monetisation could be problematic, it should not be regulated. From the perspective of freemium players, freemium games were not seen as inferior but as a fair exchange, where they sacrificed certain experiences in lieu of making payments. Therefore, they opposed the draft and panicked about its impact.

We adopt Gieryn's (1983) boundary work theory to explain why this dispute happens (Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2015). We argue that the controversy around the draft and monetisation designs occurred because players hold distinct ideologies and establish different boundaries, not because the draft or mentioned monetisation is inherently ethical or unethical. Their demarcation around play and work mirrors the broader debate of playbour (Zaucha and Agur 2023; Egliston and Carter 2023) and shows how playbour is embraced and rejected simultaneously. And their debate on the industry and monetisation reflects how players are torn by the metric-driven trend in game production (Egliston 2024). These differences not only create players' different identity boundaries but also lead to divergent political boundaries regarding the draft. Therefore, we argue that the complexities of players' identities predicate the mismatch between players' and regulators' understanding regarding regulation and monetisation. Future policies should avoid the "one-size-fits-all" (Trinter, Brighton, and Moon 2015) approach and consider how to bridge the gap between the divided values behind players' identities.

BIO

Tianyi ZhangShao is a PhD student from the University of Sydney. His doctoral work seeks to understand the monetisation of Chinese mobile games through the lens of players, developers, and regulations. He completed his masters in USYD, where he explored the appeal of the Nintendo Switch and articulated the notion of hybrid gaming. Part of the work has been published in the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.

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