Game Tips as Gifts: Social Interactions and Rational Calculations in Computer Gaming[1]

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ABSTRACT
The authors look at online tip exchanges as parts of gift economies created by the players and designers of console and online role-playing games in Taiwan. A group of experienced players and tip contributors agreed to be interviewed about the mechanisms and processes of providing free strategy guides on the Internet. Their comments reveal needs for social approval and networking in addition to their perceptions of rational exchange in the interest of completing games. The authors speculate on the social norms behind tip cultures, and their influences on game play and management.

Keywords: Game tips; tip culture; social approval; social exchange; game play.

INTRODUCTION
Computer game players often exchange °ßtips°® when they get stuck. We have recently observed some players devoting large amounts of time creating free °ßwalkthrough guides°® (a typical tip-sharing format) on the Internet, with many of these guides being published for profit off-line. It appears that the strategy guides that are now available on websites, BBSs, and in print are exerting profound influences on game play and game management. Players armed with complete obstacle-breaking guides can now achieve game mastery without understanding a game's underlying context. Furthermore, some game-

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producing companies are publishing their own °ßofficial°® game guides. We suspect that such references tend to reduce game playing satisfaction, but the implications of this unusual business strategy have yet to be fully explored.

Here we will report on our analysis of gaming °ßtip cultures°® as examples of online gift exchange. Observers who are unfamiliar with gamer networks may view such exchanges as residual gaming habits or actions taken in expectation of reciprocity—in either case, a game-based rationale. However, according to our observations of how computer games are played within well-defined social contexts, tipping cultures are better viewed as social norms that reflect complex relationships between players and their offline social structures. We will therefore look at tips from the perspectives of social approval and exchange influenced by local contexts. For example, in Taiwan, language barriers are promoting a need for °ßdrama-play translation guides°® that increase the importance and acceptance of tip exchanges within game communities.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

A game tip is a piece of documented information that helps recipients understand a specific game component or to overcome a game barrier. We choose console and online role-playing games (RPG) as our focus because their complex game situations and role-playing requirements are more likely to generate a need for assistance among players. RPGs are considered the most popular genre worldwide, including Taiwan. Two-thirds (67.6%) of the respondents to our questionnaire (described below) identified RPGs as their favorite game format, far above action games (9.5%). Results from a survey on the Bahamut game website (Taiwan's largest) showed that 83.9% of the respondents favor role-playing games.

The linguistic background of most Taiwanese console video game players has had a profound impact on indigenous tip cultures. Unlike their more recent online counterparts, console RPGs (e.g., DreamCast, PlayStation, and GameCube) have no Chinese versions, therefore local players have had to choose from Japanese or English versions. Japanese games dominated the early console market; when Japanese and English versions of the same game became available, the former was usually imported to Taiwan much faster. Consequently, most Taiwanese RPG players continue to play Japanese versions, even though they are much more likely to study English than Japanese in junior and senior high school. When English-version players encounter obstacles, they often find it more difficult than Japanese-version players to get help from websites or bulletin boards. Most questions refer to Japanese place or object names or nicknames; when the same questions refer to English objects, most players are unable to reply. Obviously, this linguistic aspect has had a direct effect on local tip cultures.

Four Categories of Tip Production and Exchange

Complete Strategy Guides

Complete strategy guides (also known as °ßwalkthroughs°®) provide comprehensive instructions for solving puzzles, manipulating fighting skills, and finding correct recipes so that players can overcome all challenges

encountered as part of a game storyline. Most players only use walkthroughs as general references, preferring to read them only when they get very confused or frustrated. Usually created by aggressive players of new games, these roadmaps can be organized and sold if a particular game becomes popular. And, the publication of walkthroughs of that game can make it even more successful. Later, even the game manufacturers publish their own walkthroughs containing game stories, screenshots, maps, and playing methods, as a fancy collectable for the players. The following excerpt from the strategy guide for The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 1998) reflects the goal-minded, procedural context of most walkthroughs:

> Enter Lost Woods at the north end of Kakiri Forest and follow these steps to get out of the maze: up-right-up-up-left-up. You will enter Sacred Forest Meadow, where you will meet Saria, who will teach you °ßSaria's Song.°® If you enter the room to the left of the entrance, you can play Saria's Song to the clown, who will reward you with a heart piece. Later, when you play this song for the King of Goron, he will give you a bracelet that allows you to pick up bomb flowers.

Based-on-need Tips

These tips, which are commonly found on game bulletin boards, usually appear as responses to players' specific inquiries. Eventually, the most useful and clearly written tips are collected and revised as frequently asked questions (FAQs). Topics tend to range from the very general (°ßI don't know how to proceed°®) to the very specific °ßHow can I get extra treasure from the main path?°®). The following excerpt, also from The Legend of Zelda: The Ocarina of Time (Nintendo, 1998), serves as a typical example:

> Inquiry: Help!! Where can I learn the sun's song that can help me to reverse day and night?
>
> Answer: You can go to the village in the direction of Death Mountain. Then try to find a secret path along the wall of the graveyard. The way to enter the graveyard is to play the Zelda's Lullaby that you have just learned from Princess Zelda.

Secret Treasure Maps

A secret treasure is a common tool that game designers use to divert the attention of players away from accomplishing the main goals of an adventure. Secret treasure maps pinpoint their locations, and frequently contain clues about how to retrieve them. This information is often considered a bonus for players who have already achieved the primary game goals. The following example is from Nintendo official website of the Legend of Zelda (Nintendo, 2003b).

> To find all 36 heart pieces that can increase your total life energy:
>
> ☒ at Lon Lon Luck, enter the storage shed in the Lon Lon Ranch. Move a large box that is blocking a small hole that holds the heart

piece.

- ☒ at Rooted Out: blow up a tree on the north side of Lon Lon Ranch to reveal a secret grotto that holds a heart piece.

Drama-play Translation Guides

These guides are useful for games with foreign language interfaces, since they provide translations of on-screen information and conversations. This helps players with the more subtle aspects of a game—for instance, clues embedded in dialogues about alternative ways to proceed, places to visit or inspect, and objects that may be useful for completing tasks later in the game. Note that drama-play translation guides are not simply screen-by-screen translations; publishers add contextual descriptions to make dialogues comprehensible in the contexts of re-created storylines. This excerpt is from The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker (Nintendo, 2003a).

> [upon the seashore]
>
> Red Lion King: You must find that Valoo and get a treasure—the gem of fire—from him. Go to see the Rito tribe, and they will tell you how to find the Valoo. Wait! There is one more thing! This is the wind waker. People use this baton to play music in order to pray. In the past, using it would let people borrow magic power from God, but I have no idea whether it works or not. However, I still think this will be helpful to you, you should learn how to use it . . .

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generalized reciprocity describes a system by which assistance given to one person is reciprocated by someone besides the original recipient (Titmuss, 1971). A prime example is the electronic posting of announcements, queries, and their responses—one of the most common activities of online groups (Kettinger & Grover, 1997; Finholt & Sproull, 1990). However, according to Desouza's (2002) literature review, most research on virtual communities is focused on their informational aspects, while altruistic knowledge exchange in professional communities has been generally ignored. We tried to capture the social aspects of altruistic knowledge exchange by analyzing gaming tips according to a gift economy framework.

Since the seminal work on gift exchange by Marcel Mauss (1990 [1954]), he and his followers have found that gifts differed from commodities because they are not contingent on future reciprocation. Using the example of inter-tribal presentations, he showed how gift linkages create human interrelationships. Cheal (1988) summarized gift economies as transaction systems that serve interpersonal representations and realizations beyond explanations based on political economy or exchange theory. However, although such anthropological insights serve as accurate descriptions of how gifts create social bonds in the physical world, it remains to be seen if the same theory can be applied to gifts exchanged in virtual worlds.

If we consider Internet-distributed game tips as gifts, recipient anonymity becomes an important issue. Based on his review of the ideal type of gift economy proposed by Carrier and Bell (1991), Kollok (1997) argued that the gifting concept does not explain why we help anonymous strangers on the Internet, and therefore suggested that such contributions should be considered public goods rather than commodities or gifts. Two questions remain: why do participants perform acts that seem unprofitable on the surface, and why do they devote themselves to offering information with no promise of reciprocity?

Davenport (1998) categorized the rewards of knowledge sharing as pure altruism, reciprocity, and reputation. The first emphasizes the intrinsic nature of altruism—helping strangers according to a belief system (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). When discussing open-source communities, some researchers argue that individual self-empowerment and cultural distinctiveness are adequate motivators for explaining altruistic behavior (Nicholas, 2000; Pekka, 2001; Steven, 1984).

Other researchers focused on the extrinsic incentive of altruistic behavior. In his book °ßSocial Exchange: the Two Traditions,°® Ekeh (1974) commented on the contrasts between economic models that describe exchange in strict terms of economic or utilitarian value and social models that describe exchange in terms of symbolic value. According to the economic model, the rational choice of reciprocity is of primary concern. Equity theorists emphasize the rational grounds that individuals use to evaluate the input/output ratios of certain behaviors in relation to others (Walster et al., 1978). Other theorists emphasize rational calculations about the perceived benefits of contributing (Bagozzi, 1975; Berkowitz & Daniel, 1964; Payne, 1982).

The tradition that Ekeh (1974) referred to as the °ßsocial model°® suggests that expertise can be exchanged for status, respect, compliance, and obligation (Blau, 1964; Mesch, et al., 1998), with social approval being the main reward for acts of compassion or generosity toward others (Blau, 1964:18). In a similar manner, Goldhaber (1997) has analyzed cyberspace economies and Raymond (1998) has analyzed open-source community development in terms of a °ßreputation game,°® assuming that prestige is more valuable in a virtual gift culture than in a °ßreal world°® gift culture.

RESEARCH METHODS

Our primary data collection method consisted of interviews with 15 gamers with various educational backgrounds and gaming seniority levels. Some interviewees reported contributing different types of tips while others described themselves as gaming experts who seldom gave tips; this allowed us to explore reasons why some players are more willing than others to share information. We also included some inexperienced players to determine their need for tips and their methods for finding helpful information. In order to analyze the impact of social relationships, we interviewed online gamers who had joined guilds that were originally composed of offline friends, but later expanded to include outsiders from the virtual world.

We also collected data by conducting an online survey via an electronic

questionnaire that we placed on our website. We posted an invitation to take the survey on Bahamut, the Taiwan gaming community's largest website. After one week we had collected 861 completed questionnaires, which provided demographic information and preferences from a broad range of gamers.

Our third data collection method was observing articles and other postings on game-related bulletin boards and forums. This allowed us to establish a thick description concerning everyday game playing activities.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Earning Social Approval: Console Games

We found that the need for recognition—a stage for demonstrating achievements and knowledge—was a primary motivating factor among game players, as it is among individuals in the physical world. Our interviewees claimed that gamers primarily want to play with personal friends and acquaintances, but sometimes hesitate if they think they cannot perform well in front of them. Responses to our questionnaire confirm this point: players who are not being watched by friends still enjoy being watched by outsiders.[2] In table 1, we can further observe the social network behind game playing. Both experienced and good players do have friends to play together and they take the role of consulters among the circle, while the so-so and novice players start to join in playing games because their friends are already playing. Serious gamers often keep detailed records of their games to share with friends, to answer questions about their gaming exploits, or to write game guides.

In table1 we can see that the diffusion of game playing based on social network. But with few exceptions, experienced console gamers have no stages, while online RPG players are able to earn fame and acknowledgement in the form of ranking systems and other means of gaining visibility. We can also see that experienced gamers have a tendency to play alone, the reason will be discussed in the following, and tend to choose games based on magazine reviews or TV advertisements rather than recommendations from friends.[3] Furthermore, console game players are more likely to prefer different kinds of games from those played by their friends. As pointed out by our interviewees, they always play different games with other friends. Consequently, when they have major breakthroughs, they are unlikely to have someone in their social circles to acknowledge their accomplishments, thus requiring a different type of achievement demonstration. One way to gain access to a stage is to contribute tips. Several interviewees expressed a preference for discussing

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[2] We found that the percentage of °ßI do not want to be watched when playing°® declines when the player's expertise becomes higher. In the table, 24.5% of beginners prefer not to be watched while only 10.6% of experienced players do not want audience.

[3] We were surprised to find that that 62.3% of experienced gamers rely on information from TV or magazines while just 17.8% of beginners choose games this way. Further, 57.8% of beginners choose games based on recommendations from friends.

gaming problems (and sharing accomplishments) with online co-hobbyists rather than off-line friends. Most importantly, they reported receiving a sense of social approval from their tip contributions.

Table 1

°ß How many friends are playing with you?°® by degree of gaming

Count	I am the only one	There are many, and I am better than most of them	There are many and I am a beginner compared to them	Only a few	Only a few, and I do not play at all.
Row pct					
expert	36 33.3%	54 50%	8 7.4%	8 7.4%	2 1.9%
good	14 5.1%	165 60.7%	44 16.2%	48 17.6%	1 0.4%
So so	34 9.3%	74 20.2%	140 38.3%	94 25.7%	24 6.6%
beginner	6 9.7%	1 1.6%	34 54.8%	5 8.1%	16 25.8%

(N=808)

Although tips are distributed freely to anonymous recipients, contributions are credited to specific individuals, and the most useful are recognized and honored. When game guides are published and distributed, originators are usually acknowledged in the form of publishing their names and contacting addresses. One interviewee, the owner of a game website, told us that he consciously avoids publishing excerpts from other writers' guides on his site because he does not want to attract too many visitors from the writers' own websites. Still, many contributors write and post tips in hope of being included in long-term °ßareas of excellent information°® by game bulletin board administrators. They consider such recognition more important than appreciation expressed by individual tip recipients. However, social regulation is still practiced on these virtual stages. We observed that tip contributors tended to use modest language to describe their efforts, including self-identities as service providers rather than game experts.

Social Relationships: Multiplayer Online Games

In Taiwan, online RPGs have a strong off-line social component, with game guilds including a leader and his or her classmates and close friends.(Holin et al. 2003) Friends of individual members are sometimes invited to join, but are rarely accepted into a group's inner circle. One interviewee told us that when his group planned a castle siege, all of his fellow members were organized to meet concurrently at four or five Internet cafes in order to act as a collective

body. In most cases, multiplayer online RPGs have become localized in Taiwan, with games produced and played in Chinese; the need for drama-play guides is very weak in this area.

The combination of linguistic access and the reduced need among online players to find a stage to show off their skills[4] means that Taiwanese online RPG tip cultures take on quite different forms from their console counterparts. We observed that online gaming tips are mostly used to reinforce existing organizations and interpersonal relationships, with mutual favors taking on the status of obligations. Players who belong to a guild have little need for walkthrough guides if they have friends who can provide answers to their questions. Furthermore, online RPGs are more likely to have fluid storylines that change according to the whims of player actions and interactions—a challenge to the standard structure and motivation behind walkthroughs. Junior players can find both information and access to new friends, which for many is preferable to the continued use of documented guides.

We observed that the most popular tip type on online gaming bulletin boards is the treasure map. As a gift to outsiders, this kind of sharing is mainly done for demonstrating achievement, similar to our finding for console players. In the world of online games, treasure usually exists for short time periods and subject to chances, so it is especially useful when one friend tells another about how to locate treasure sources. On the other hand, if the treasure is already gone, there is an element of boastfulness that is sometimes attached to announcing its location on a BBS.

We occasionally found based-on-need tips on bulletin boards aimed at online game players, but they were significantly different from those for console players. Console queries and answers tend to be very short and very specific. Since questions about online gaming are less likely to have a standard solution, discussions tends to evolve into prolonged reports on personal experiences that can turn into off-topic forums or disputes.

Regarding tips for strangers, several senior gamers told us that they consider small favors (e.g., sharing a bottle of water or giving directions to a village) a standard part of game culture, and therefore frequently provide these types of tips. One interviewee said, °ßI help because I was helped by others before°®—distinct evidence of a generalized exchange. Another gamer made the claim °ßIf I am free, I will help them,°® but we found that the meaning of °ßfree°® was very situational.

Impact on Game Play and Management

Many game companies currently publish their own °ßofficial°® walkthrough guides. For obvious reasons, they do not publish tips until a certain period has passed following the launching of a game. In many ways, official guides serve as collectable items and souvenirs rather than useful tools for serious

[4] For example, the ranks of characters are visible, and onlookers are immediate witnesses of game achievement.

players, who are more likely to rely on tips provided by other players. In addition, many players compete with each other to be the first to deliver a complete walkthrough; the mixture of competition and sharing increases gaming satisfaction.

To prevent players from losing interest after overcoming all potential obstacles with the help of walkthrough guides, many game companies now offer a range of awards for taking different paths to achieving game goals.[5] Since these bonus awards are not revealed in the main storyline, only those players who stay in the game after achieving the primary goal are eligible to collect them with the help from the tips.

As expected, players have complex feelings concerning walkthroughs, with some constantly hitting a button to move on to next screen of a guide. It appears that the majority of players recognize that they have access to clues and keys online, but learning them too quickly might erode their sense of satisfaction and challenge. This factor affects both the mindset of gamers as well as the efforts of tip contributors, who know that giving away too much information too soon might actually damage their reputations. We were a bit surprised to find that the most successful console game tip contributors had good writing skills and a sensitivity to sharing tips a few at a time.

CONCLUSION

We investigated various forms of gaming tips shared by console and online RPG gamers and the social norms embedded in tip cultures. We found that even the most complete and °ßprofessional°® tips (e.g., walkthrough guides), are not necessarily written by serious gamers who play dozens of games each year. Furthermore, while our data suggest that tipping is more than an example of altruism or behavior expressed with a goal of reciprocity in mind, tip cultures should not be viewed as the simple results of experienced gamers' efforts to earn social approval or to take part in social exchange networks. On the contrary, tip cultures overlap with fan cultures—another important dimension of digital entertainment. Tip contributors have preferences for certain games or game types, and are interested in luring more players to share their particular brand of fun. In addition to tips, they often maintain websites as a means of disseminating information about their favorite games, and have a strong interest in presenting as comprehensive a collection of data as possible.

Social approval is a driving force behind tip production. Speed is an important factor, since players need to finish a game (or several runs of the same game) in order to identify tips for sharing. Thus, Taiwanese players are known for buying the Japanese versions of games as soon as they arrive on the island, based on their perception that they cannot afford to wait for the English version, despite their superior English language skills. We recently observed a number of Taiwanese gamers playing a Korean game called

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[5] *In Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*, second-time players are given access to a °ßpicto box°® that allows them to take color photos of any character and turn them into collectable prints.

Ragnarok Online on overseas game servers before its launch in Taiwan, presumably to earn social approval by being the first to provide tips to fellow players. As one interviewee told us, °ßLanguage barrier is no longer a concern, we even play on Korean servers.°®

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Playing video games can make teenagers more involved in their communities, says a study of young Americans.Â Far from turning teenagers into anti-social loners, video games help them engage with friends and community, says a report. The Pew Internet study of US teenagers found that few play alone and most join up with friends when gaming. It found that many used educational games to learn about world issues and to begin to engage with politics.Â Those at Pew, Ms Lenhart said, "suspect that actually the interaction goes both ways." Although the study did not answer the question, she noted that previous research has suggested that similar exercises can directly influence social interaction and community engagement. Game theory and computer science has a huge intersection. Computational social choice (which is a part of both) is one of the fastest growing research fields nowadays. When you design a mechanism to solve a real life problem, it is important take into account the incentives of the participants. For instance when you devise a cake cutting protocol (a method to divide a homogeneous good) you might want an algorithm which produces envy-free divisions (to prevent an endless argument over the cake).Â In fact, any application area involving automatic interaction and coordination of rational/intelligent agents, such as in robotics, cloud/distributed computing, spot pricing, network security, machine learning, social networks, recommendation systems and resource management . COOPERATIVE GAME THEORY Coalitional Games: Introduction. Note: This is a only a draft version, so there could be aws.Â Denition: An NTU coalitional game on the set of players N is any mapping V (.) on the domain 2N such that, for any coalition C âŠ, N , â€¢ V (C) is a non-empty closed and convex sub set of R|C|, and. Learn about human computer interaction with free interactive flashcards. Choose from 500 different sets of flashcards about human computer interaction on Quizlet.Â concerned with the design evaluation and implementation of intâ€¦ develop usable products and involve users in the design process. easy to learn, effective to use and provide and enjoyable expeâ€¦ identify needs/establish requirements design build an interactâ€¦ human computer interaction. concerned with the design evaluation and implementation of intâ€¦ goals of HCI. develop usable products and involve users in the design process. 6 terms. LincolnISCTEACHER. Human Computer Interaction. Hci. GUI. W I M p. CLI. The method of communication between people and computer systemâ€¦