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game rule system gameplay avatar WoW blessing noob kills demon race body fight people
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This Right Way to Play. Western Players' Appropriation and Reevaluation of Gold Farming in the Chinese Video Game *Genshin Impact*

Jieyu Liu

Abstract

The recent success of Chinese video games in the global market has drawn different businesses into the game industry, namely via game boosting. As a service to help new players in a game gain advantages against other players, game boosting, with its recent surge, contributes to the long-standing debate about game labor. Specifically, since Chinese workers and games are an inseparable part of the game boosting, in this paper I ask how this service adds to and complicates the racial discrimination demonstrated by the Chinese game labor in Chinese gold farming in the past. I offer a research design to first conduct a discourse analysis of the advertisements from three boosting platforms: Skycoach and LegionFarm Carry (LFCarry) from the West, and Taobao from China. These platforms offer services for the Chinese video game *Genshin Impact* (2020). Then, I analyze customer reviews of these boosting services. I compare how power is distributed among companies, game boosters, and customers in both Western and Chinese contexts to reevaluate game labor under a critical racial lens. I argue that Western companies, game boosters, and customers increasingly frame game boosting as a form of skill-based advancement rather than as repetitive, low-skill labor. This reframing produces a colorblind discourse that overlooks the racialized history of digital labor, promoting narratives of equal opportunity while avoiding confronting the violence and discrimination historically faced by Chinese gold farmers.

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Keywords: Chinese Video Games, Game Labor, Game Boosting, Gold Farming, Game Representation, Discourse Analysis, gameenvironments

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IASGAR PhD Day Report

The Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research at the University of Bremen, in partnership with the International Academy for Study of Gaming and Religion, held its 3rd Annual Summer Graduate Workshop on September 28, 2024. The workshop centered on Digital Gaming and Values, bringing together early-career researchers and doctoral students alongside invited experts. The program featured collaborative discussions examining research methodologies, study design approaches, and theoretical frameworks that illuminate the relationship between culture and video gaming. Several presentations distinguished themselves through exceptional quality and have been selected for publication in this issue under the Emerging Voices in the Field section.

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Introduction: Game Boosting as Revitalized Gold Farming

In September 2020, Chinese video game company miHoYo (later changed to HoYoverse operating in countries outside of China), published a “fantasy-themed open-world action role-playing game” (Adams 2022, 188) called *Genshin Impact* (*Genshin*) worldwide. Since its release, the game has managed to harvest a lot of love from Western players. In December 2021 and 2022, *Genshin* won two titles at The Game Awards (TGA), the industry’s most prestigious awarding platform. According to AppMagic, a data collection software for mobile apps, players in the Euro-American regions have contributed more than half a billion dollars to *Genshin*. As a popular and money-making Chinese game in the West, it draws businesses outside of the game industry to profit from it. Among those businesses, game-boosting services stand out and create interesting conflicts inside and outside of the game world of *Genshin*.

Game boosting, according to Conroy et al., is “the act of (players) lending an account to an expert to unnaturally and rapidly increase that player’s accounts competitive ranking” (Conroy et al. 2020, 2). Game boosters refer to those skilled players who are paid to help rookie players. Conroy et al. (2020, 2) explain that in the scenarios of competitive gaming (players vs. players), “an individual’s ranking carries with it an inherent social and skill status within the game.” Therefore, some low-ranking players have a compelling reason to buy the services to climb the rank ladder and become admirable in other players’ eyes. By doing a simple Google search, dozens of websites about *Genshin* boosting show up with thousands of customer reviews. One of the highest-reviewed websites, Skycoach, advertises itself as “with the highest degree of safety, fair prices, and a personal attitude for every client” (Skycoach n.d.).

Genshin, as described by scholars such as Matthew Adams (2022) and Orlando Woods (2022), functions on a gacha mechanism, which emphasizes a single-player gaming experience instead of competitiveness: “Gacha creates a money value for in-game items, characters, and mechanics” (Adams 2022, 193). It “enables players to either pay (to miHoYo) or grind (events, quests, and challenges on the game map)” (Woods 2022, 1077) to get the in-game currency, primogems. Players can use these primogems to obtain limited characters and weapons as collectibles, mainly for aesthetic reasons. Woods explains that gacha gives players agency to evaluate trade-offs between laboring time put in grinding and money paid to the game company.

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Through *Genshin* gameplay, players do not compete with other players, nor do they situate themselves in ranks. Following the definition of game boosting, this service does not make a lot of sense in *Genshin*. However, boosting services label themselves as helpers for players to escape the dreadful and repetitive grinding and farming in the *Genshin* game world. Therefore, *Genshin* boosting services essentially trade



players' playtime for money. Players pay game boosters with real money for game currency, saving their time grinding in the game world. Though there is no competition between the players in *Genshin*, these services help rookie players who are new to the game catch up sooner, and thus they can interact normally in the *Genshin* players' communities. According to thousands of customer reviews, this boosting service for farming is popular in the Western player community.

Game labor, in this case, game boosting, is not a new phenomenon. Specifically, around the topic of Chinese game labor, a term named Chinese gold farmers was developed to describe how Chinese played *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*, 2004) in the early 2000s. Lisa Nakamura (2012) and Tara Fickle (2019), two scholars studying Asian American game culture, argue that Chinese *WoW* players were racially discriminated against for their problematic game behaviors compared to Western players.

Essentially, Chinese players cheat in *WoW* by providing monetary farming services to rookie players to help them acquire in-game items, gaining unfair advantages against other players. Additionally, to Western players, a monetary transaction in the game world breaks the dynamic between work vs. play. Consequently, in the game, the Western players will hunt and kill the Chinese gold farmers until they lose their farming jobs in the real world. Historically speaking, the West does not support Chinese gaming behaviors and gold farming activities, and it corrects Chinese players' wrongdoings with violence and power. Interestingly, game-boosting service platforms such as Skycoach offer *WoW* farming services, just with the new label, game boosting. Moreover, many of the boosters are Western players, showing a change in the dynamic between Western players and Chinese players in viewing game labor today.

The scholarly criticism, as well as the recent phenomena about game boosting, lead to the following research questions: How do we understand Western players and companies' changes in attitude on farming services, especially in a Chinese video game where the mechanics are based on farming? How does this change in attitude impact the power dynamic between the Western and Chinese players and companies?

In my research, I propose a research design that utilizes discourse analysis to address the research question. First, I select three online platforms, Skycoach and LegionFarm Carry (LFCarry) from the West, and Taobao from China, that offer game boosting services in the Chinese video game, *Genshin Impact*, examining the advertisements shown on the platforms. Then, I examine the customers' reviews corresponding to the three platforms' services. Together, I compare the discourses used by the Western and Chinese platforms and Western and Chinese players to demonstrate the complication of the language toward labor in video games.

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Through the preliminary findings of such research design, I argue that Western companies, game boosters, and customers increasingly frame game boosting as a form of skill-based advancement rather than as repetitive, low-skill labor. This reframing produces a colorblind discourse that overlooks the racialized history of digital labor, promoting narratives of equal opportunity while avoiding confronting the violence and discrimination historically faced by Chinese gold farmers.

I aim to extend the existing research on Chinese gold farming by rethinking the racial discrimination as more than a discursive binary where the Western players are on the correct side and the Chinese are on the wrong side. The recent game boosting scenario demonstrates that the Western players and companies' discourse itself rules

over the actual game behaviors, which not only excuses their farming actions but also creates a standard of playing centered on their discourses instead of shared rules.

Western Boosters as Professionals and Chinese Boosters as *Manual Laborers*

To analyze why Western players suddenly accept what they hated in the past, it is useful to understand the reason why they hated Chinese gold farming so much in the beginning. Nakamura (2012), in her article, "DON'T HATE THE PLAYER, HATE THE GAME," demonstrated that the West analyzes the playing behavior expressed by Chinese gold farmers as cheating, which can negatively impact players' experience and game companies' revenue. Tara Fickle (2019) added that Chinese gold farmers and the Western players who purchase their services demonstrate an imbalanced dynamic between not only the two gaming behaviors but also the two races. In Nakamura and Fickle's words, the digital labor issue presented in Chinese gold farming is specifically about the *Chineseness* of playing. In other words, whenever Western players think about gold farmers, they think about Chinese players, as a race symbolizes a playstyle that is negatively looked at in the West. Additionally, Fickle points out that there is a link between farming vs. playing and work vs. play. She references Johan Huizinga when he defines play as a "free" activity (Huizinga 1950, 13); he also speaks in a Western liberal tone. Fickle criticizes that Huizinga's play is, in fact, a Western Enlightenment product that separates human activities into the binary of work and play. Therefore, playing under the topic of freedom creates a rationalization of freeing oneself from the labor-intensive world by playing, and this, according to Fickle, clearly is not the case for all the play cultures in the world.

Indeed, speaking from the Chinese perspective, playing is much more political and related to daily life. Wei He and Shule Cao, two Chinese media scholars, conduct a historical analysis of the discourse used by news reporting to portray the functions of games in society (何威, 曹书乐 2018). In their article, "From E-heroin to Created in China," they identify that video games in China are heavily affiliated with the government. They are called E-heroin because they negatively affect students' grades and their potential future, yet they are also called created in China because when they are spread internationally, they also spread Chinese culture to the world and bring profit back home. They specifically point out how Esports and jobs created by the video game industry in China function positively for national economics and political propaganda. Therefore, if one player can make money and be self-sufficient by playing video games, they are encouraged instead of being turned down in China.

Putting this reasoning back to the gold farming issues, Chinese gold farmers and Western players are never on the same channel. However, this makes the case of boosting services today in the West so interesting because all of the boosting services label themselves as farming services. From power leveling and grinding in-game currency to coaching low-level players about fighting other players, both Skycoach and LFCarry do not shy away from advertising their *WoW* farming service. Then, what is the Western boosting service that is different from Chinese gold farming to make the Western players think it is not cheating or Chinese?

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Through searching Skycoach and LFCarry's service descriptions, boosters' skill level and efficiency are the two major selling points. Pros (professional players) is the most frequent word showing up on both websites. LFCarry (n.d.) advertises that

"it's no secret to anyone that people are going to be racing each other to unlock all of the newly available content (in WoW) [...] Worst of all, if you take a break, you're risking falling behind. LFCarry's professional team is there to make sure that this doesn't happen."

The skill levels and efficiency act as two metrics in boosting services.

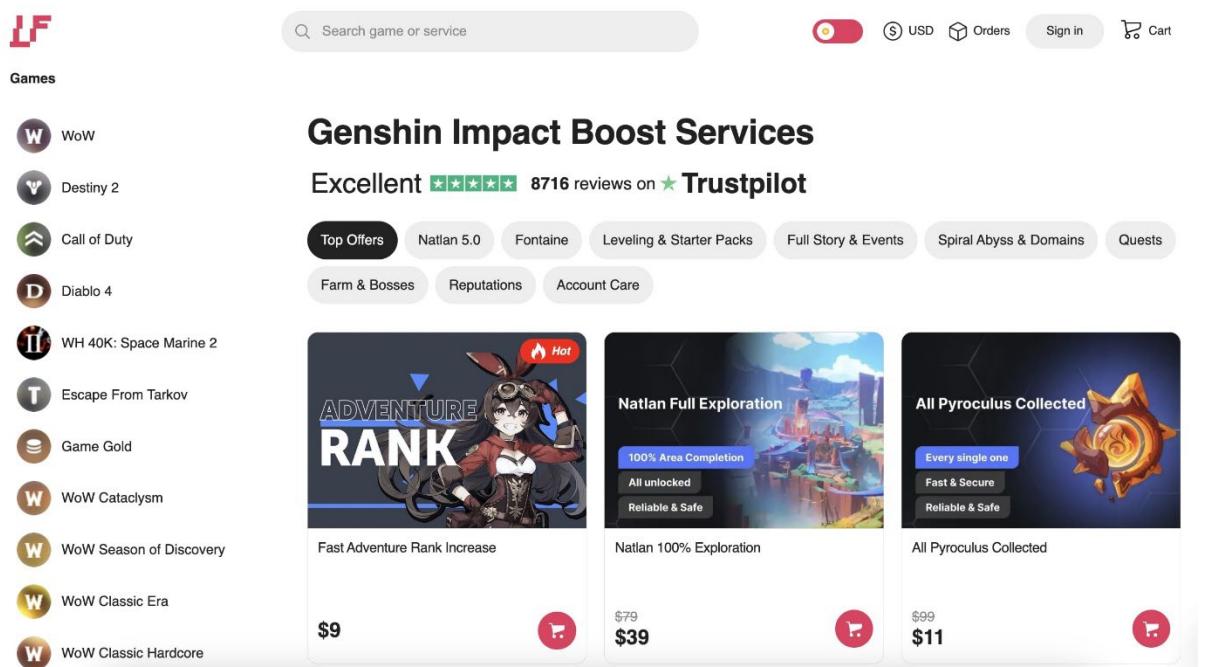


Figure 1: LFCarry *Genshin* Boosting Service Webpage © Jieyu (Warren) Liu

better at gaming is widely accepted by the casual players (buyers). Both Skycoach and LFCarry introduced a website where customers can write reviews called Trustpilot. Efficiency and skill level are still the two common words in their comments. One comment on Trustpilot about Skycoach *Genshin* boosting service describes the professional and efficient service:

"The Genshin Impact service I received was top-notch. SkyCoach's team is clearly skilled, delivering results quickly and professionally, significantly enhancing my in-game progress" (Cup of Tea 2023).

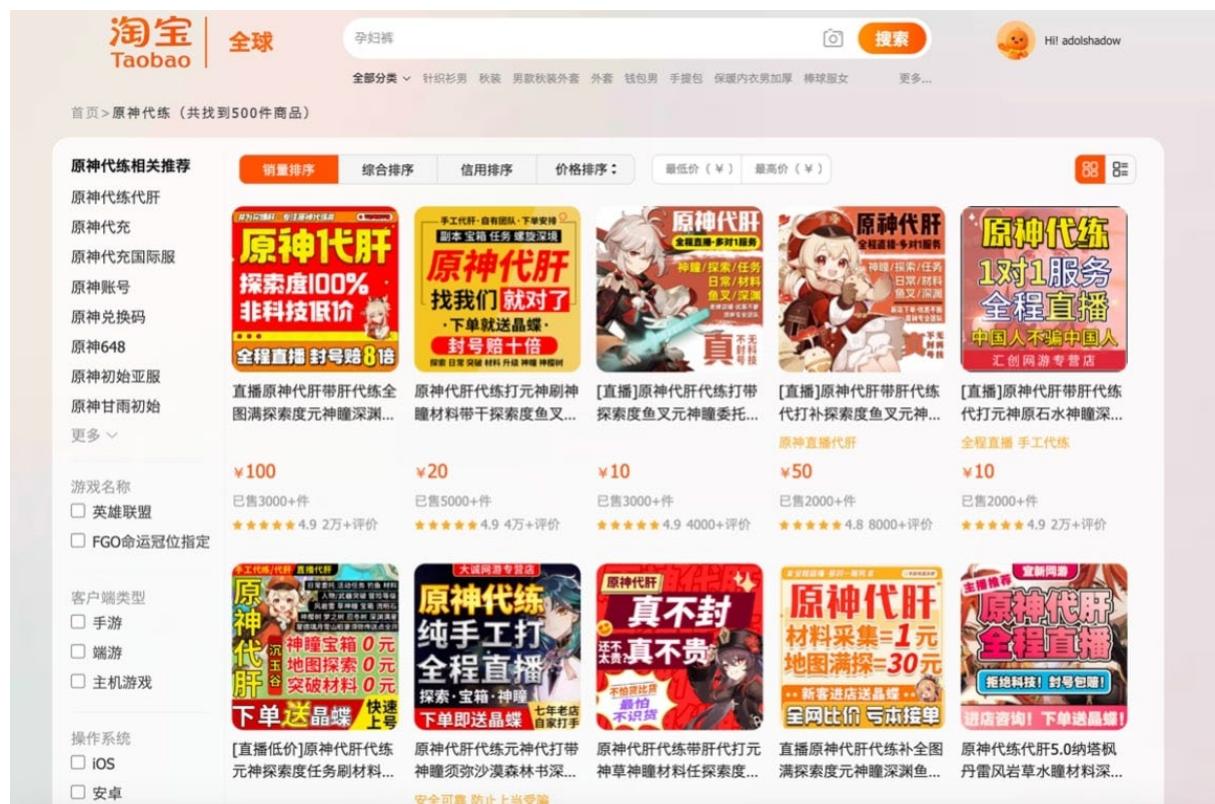
Another comment on Trustpilot about LFCarry *Genshin* boosting service identifies a pro named Tiger and compliments the company that the pro gives:

"He communicated well from beginning to end without question. During the stream that I watched, we still laughed about the funny moments in the game, which gave me a better experience throughout the time" (Emi 2023).

In both comments, the customers use the metrics of skills and efficiency to evaluate the service they bought. The customers genuinely believe there is a gap between them and the pros, feeling that there is someone better than them, helping them make the relationship between the buyers and the farmers in this scenario different from Chinese gold farming.

After all, *Genshin* is a Chinese game. Even though Western players and boosting services find ways to explain their farming activity alternately, it does not mean *Genshin*, as a Chinese game, also views boosting in this way. *Dailian* (代练) is the Chinese word that is equivalent to boosting, but it does not directly translate to boosting. A report on *The World of Chinese* describes the Chinese *dailians* (or boosters) as students and underage children who may work long hours during the night to sell their time and skills for money. Taobao, one of the biggest e-commerce companies, lists thousands of *Genshin dailian* services. Different from what Skycoach and LFCarry advertise, pros are *#T手* (basically a player replacing you to do the grind for you in the game), and the skills are *纯手工无科技* (all manual, no tricks or techs involved) in Taobao *dailian* service. The need for efficiency by the customer and the transaction between the buyer and the boosting platform is similar in both China and the West. However, Chinese *dailians* do not own a title, and their works are simple and direct – to help those buyers grind so they do not have to spend the time. *Dailian* in *Genshin* in China today is exactly the same as the Chinese gold farmers in

WoW decades ago. It is an acceptable job, and it converts video games in China from E-heroin to something useful.



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Figure 2. *Genshin Dailian* Service on Taobao © Jieyu (Warren) Liu

From the buyers of the Western boosting services, their description of boosters' professionalism and the platform's hospitality is almost like they receive an education from the boosting services. These educational works are not repetitive like gold farming, *per se*. Both parties evaluate this as actual work, so at least to them, boosting neither should enter into the work vs. play binary, nor should it qualify as cheating. Additionally, acceptance of this educational work based on quantifiable metrics helps the boosters and the buyers to focus on the actions of teaching and learning, thus making the types of games irrelevant. However, one should also note that converting boosting into actual work further complicates the digital labor of

gaming. Now, there is no binary of work vs. play, but there is neither a play element anymore, completely diverting from Huizinga's wish for "free" play (Huizinga 1950, 13).

On the other hand, *Genshin's dailians* and their platforms simply treat them as digital workers, just as gold farmers decades ago. There is no negative connotation on the topic of freedom in this scenario, as they work for their lives, and labor in farming in-game materials is a legitimate way of income. This contrast between the Western boosting services and Chinese dailian speaks to the difference in how to play.

Although both Western boosters and Chinese daillans are doing the same things, grinding in-game materials, due to the difference in how playing should function in a culture, the West and China give opposite results in the explanations of their actions.

In the actual Esports world, the top players of each game usually become professionals. By twisting the term, professional player, boosting services serve as an intermediate platform between the customers and boosters, and they gain power to make the rules of play. As quasi-authoritative platforms, they hire and advertise their services as professional and efficient; they record customers' reviews on another reviewing website as supporting material that shows their professional services. In other words, boosting services write their own rules on who can be professionals, and they choose the games these professionals are skilled in. Most importantly, there are no Chinese players in this boosting scenario. No ethnic groups have raised enough challenges to this new social norm about boosting created by the Western boosting services yet.

Who's Right to Play, and Whose Right to Play?

When *Genshin* gained popularity in the West, different services, such as boosting, appeared to fill the demands of some players. Even though a lot of people hated Chinese gold farmers decades ago in *WoW*, this time, nobody questioned the gold farming of the Western boosting service in a Chinese game because they never thought professional players in the boosting services could be related to cheaters in the gold farmers scenario. Nakamura emphasizes that the problem in Chinese gold farmers is about playing *like a Chinese* or the racialization of playing. In the boosting service of *Genshin*, the pros' grinding work, buyers' company with the pros, and transactions after the work, all happen within the Euro-American context. In other words, there are no other races to begin with, so those pros cannot be racialized and viewed as abject.

Shown by the examples of the platforms' advertisements and customers' reviews, as Western boosting companies' discourses switch the identity of game boosters from gold farmers (manual laborers) to professionals, now words rule over the actions in games. Western game boosters perform the same actions as the Chinese boosters and gold farmers, but due to the Western discourses supporting them, they are far from mistakenly playing and needing violent correction. Races are not clearly represented in the cases of game boosting, as they are concealed under the colorless discourses created by the Western game boosting companies. The game boosting phenomenon today must join in with Chinese gold farming, which reveals a past between the West and the racially discriminated China. Together, they demonstrate how the problem of game labor and racial representation today transforms from a colored discrimination against certain game behaviors performed in the game to a colorblind discourse centered on Western players and companies.

Genshin is a Chinese game, and gacha is a way of playing embedded in *Genshin* gameplay. Gacha is a unique playstyle, and it implicates real-world gold farming in the game. Players can either grind in the game as a gold farmer for the in-game currency, or they pay the game company as a buyer of the gold farming service. The *Genshin* dailian service on Taobao is exactly what *Genshin* gameplay implies. However, by completely redefining gold farming and cutting parts of transactions to HoYoverse, the Western boosting service diminishes all the *Chineseness* in a Chinese video game. Knowing that *Genshin* is a popular Chinese video game in the West, Western players still do not understand exactly what about this game's gameplay represents the Chinese game culture. Nakamura and Fickle demonstrate how a binary between the West and China on the issue of gold farming creates racial problems, yet the Western boosting service asserts that since the West has already redefined gold farming in *Genshin* as boosting, its hatred of Chinese gold farming in WoW will continue. The West cannot reconcile with China on the ways of playing due to its dominating interpretation of what the correct way to play a video game is.

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