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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.

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

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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.

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

"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.

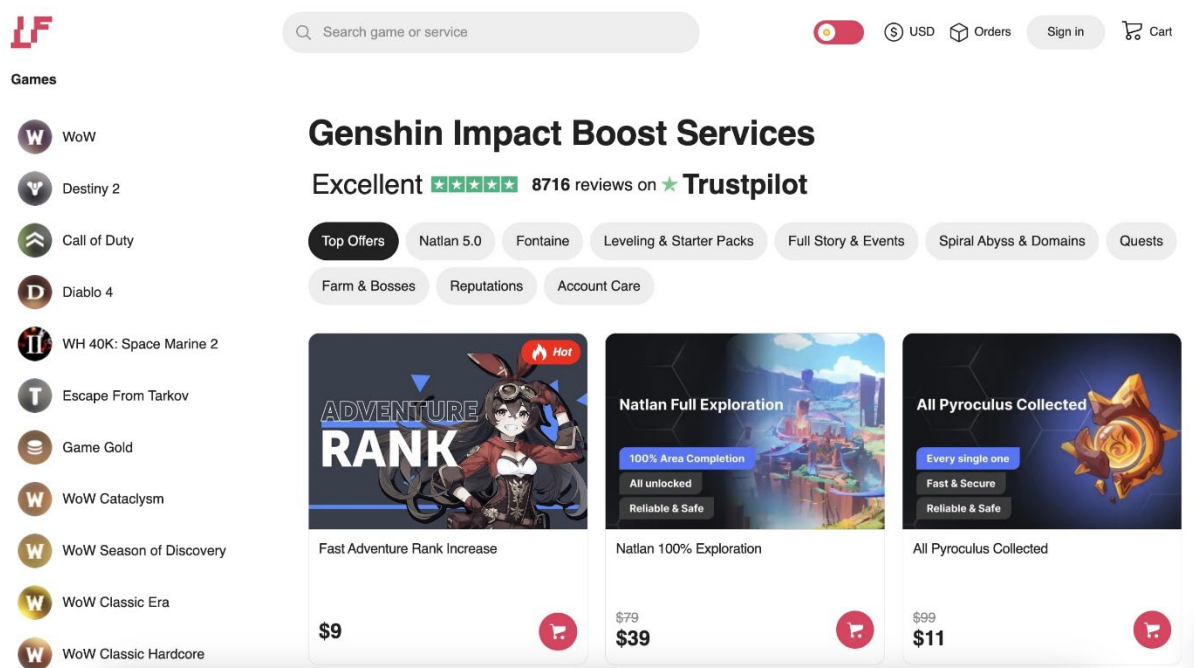


Figure 1: LFCarry *Genshin* Boosting Service Webpage © Jieyu (Warren) Liu

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 打手 (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.

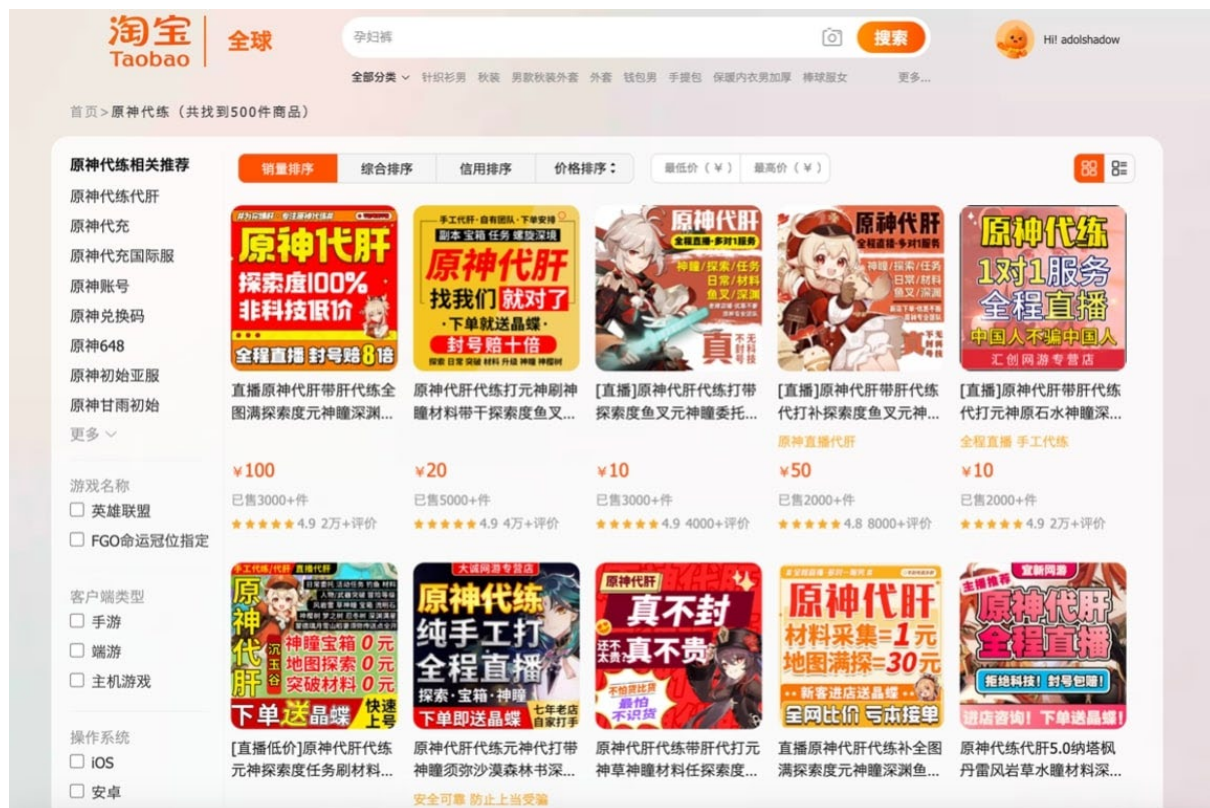


Figure 2. Genshin Dailian Service on Taobao © Jieyu (Warren) Liu

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 dailians 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.

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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