

THE SECRET LIFE OF CHINESE GAMERS

Teddy Guo, online gamer



Online gamer Teddy Guo is only in his early twenties, but his avatars are already worth tens of thousands of RMB. Like many other Chinese youth, he views digital gaming not as an escape from reality, but an alternate world filled with immense beauty, challenge and camaraderie. Jennifer Thomé met with Guo to delve deeper into the secret life of Chinese gamers, and to dispel some commonly held myths about what they are really up to online.

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

I'm lazy, but I'm resolved. If I want to do something, I'll do anything to finish it. I'm also smart, but then again, I could be biased. This question is awfully subjective. I'm only in my early twenties, so maybe when I reach 60 I'll have a better idea how to answer this question.

You recently sold one of your avatars for RMB 70,000. Tell us about the process of building up a desirable, and profitable, character.

I never really thought about it in terms of earning money. In many ways it's a process of supply and demand. You get involved early, when there are many items available, but as more users join, the items become scarcer and increase in value. The good armor in these games, for instance, is rare, and so people go and use actual money to buy it.

“There are also some other words you can't type out, like 'Japanese.' It's considered very sensitive”

When I first started this particular game I bought the account for RMB 20,000. It belonged to a previous gamer. I wanted to skip the basic levels, so it really saved a lot of time. This avatar wasn't worth RMB 20,000 *per se*, but it came with a lot of benefits. I was at the top of the game. It's a bit like being mentioned on of those lists of the richest people, and you can see whose account is worth the most, who has the most experience, and more. So with this system, you can use cash to become the most valued account within an hour. This character was the most powerful in our region.

So do most people play for fun, money or fame? There are

three types of players. First there are Renminbi players (人民币玩家 *renminbi wanjia*). These people are really professional. They spend money to play, and they spend a lot. I'm one of these players, and I'll invest more than RMB 3,000 a month in my game. That's the minimum. Then you have the all-or-nothing players (拼命玩家 *Pinming wanjia*). This kind of person might invest a little bit of money in their game, around RMB 200 or 300. But that doesn't mean they don't take the game seriously. They might be willing to invest a lot of time in the game. The difference is this: if I get an item, I am going to use it. They won't. They will sell it to the highest bidder, and then use that money to buy something

cheap and work to raise its value. A Renminbi player would think this is way too much trouble. Like me, right now I am trying to figure out how to pass a test in my game, and I can't be bothered wasting my time on other things. I place my focus on what's important.

Then there are the working players (工作式玩家 *gongzuoshi wanjia*). These are the players who use the game to earn money. They will help people to gain experience, or they might sell things online to earn game money, which they then sell to people for real money. These guys are really professional. You couldn't do it just working part time.

In terms of numbers, Renminbi players are pretty limited, maybe five to ten percent of all players. It depends on what area you are in. In Beijing, we have lots of Renminbi players, but in other places, like Hebei, you don't have many.

Are there any limitations on players in the game?

[Whispers] Of course. This is China. [laughs] Everyone has to register with their ID card, and if you are under 18, then you are limited to three hours a day, I think. After three hours, you might be able to keep playing, but you will earn less or no experience for your avatar. This looks effective on the outside, but if you're a kid under 18, then you use someone else's ID to register. They aren't stupid!

There are also things you can't type. If someone types swears, they just stow up as asterisks. There are also some other words you can't type out, like "Japanese." It's considered very sensitive.

What's the average gamer like?

They are between ages 14-35. They usually stop suddenly. They might stop playing because they lose interest, or they get busy with a job.

"They just put on some anti-radiation clothing, and get right down to playing the games"

I have a lot of lady friends who stop playing when they have kids, because they don't have any time. It's sad. When they are pregnant, they are stuck at home, so they play games. It's social, and so much more interesting than watching movies. Every character is a person, so there is a lot of interaction. And they don't have to deal with a lot of the awkward situations. They just put on some anti-radiation clothing, and get right down to playing the games. Then one day, they have a baby, and they disappear.

How do you find new games?

Every company has their own ways. Online advertising is really popular, but many gamers are afraid to click on these advertisements because a lot of viruses would spread through them. It was really, really bad.

I actually think that a much more effective way to reach gamers is through advertising in the movies. You can reach your target audience, and can make a huge impact with 30 seconds of amazing CGI. The audience will be thinking about that game throughout the movie and will rush home to sign up for an account.

So how do gamers make money online?

In many cases there will be one or two people, or a group of people, who will divide up tasks amongst themselves. They are like an online team. You can talk to them about what wants you have for your character, and what your schedule is like. If you need to gain a certain amount of experience but have to be at work, they can take care of that for you. I sometimes have them help me work on my game while I'm asleep.

Do a lot of gamers use this service?

It really varies by region. You know, the level of income is different between places like Beijing and Shanghai and smaller cities. In places where income, and work pressure, is high, people are willing to invest a lot of money into these services, up to ten thousand per month, if not more.

So what effect does this have on people?

You have to know its position. It's really easy to get lost in a game, so it needs to have its own time and place. It's a real world. You're really interacting with people, and you'll spend a lot of time doing so. You form some pretty powerful relationships online. You become a team, and then you can work in shifts to accomplish something. You can even get married and have children online. It's silly, but it's real.

You know, there are some things in life that you personally breathe life into. When you love something you give it life. But some things aren't like that. Some things already have a spirit, and you take part in it. You appreciate it.

That being said, it really eats into your time, into your work, and into your studies, so it's really hard to put it in a confined place. This is the reason that these online agents make money. They make it possible for you to plan your time, so that you're not wasting it doing useless things in the game. You only have to do the things that you want, not the things that frustrate you or waste your time.

So it's a bit like becoming a CEO?

That's right! You really only have to make important decisions and that's all.