広島大学学術情報リポジトリ
Hiroshima University Institutional Repository

| Title | “Illicit but Legal” : The Ambivalent Morality and Resistance of the Japanese Digital Precariat. |
| --- | --- |
| Author(s) | ANGIULLI, Arnaldo Andrea |
| Citation | Journal of International Development and Cooperation , 29 : 1 - 26 |
| Issue Date | 2022-06-01 |
| DOI | |
| Self DOI | 10.15027/52440 |
| URL | https://ir.lib.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/00052440 |
| Right | Copyright © 2022 Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation, Hiroshima University. 本紀要の一部・全部を問わず、著作権者（広島大学大学院国際協力研究科）の文章による許諾なしに複写・翻訳することを禁じます。 |
| Relation | |

【Article】

# “Illicit but Legal”

# The Ambivalent Morality and Resistance of the Japanese Digital Precariat.

Arnaldo Andrea ANGIULLI

Graduate School for International Development and Cooperation

Hiroshima University

1 Chome-5-1 Kagamiyama, Higashihiroshima, Hiroshima 739-8529

**Abstract**

This article discusses the experiences of 13 Japanese lower-middle-class online gamers and their trade of weapons and rare objects collected in-game. The informants engaged in these exchanges through digital flea markets (DFM), even when the platforms banned the practice and threatened legal repercussions. These individuals' sense of insecurity strengthened their relationship during these events. Informants' offline performances did not mirror their indifference to the authority of the digital marketplace. This duality meant the users created an ambivalent morality that, in the online case, conveniently allowed them to contravene rules in the pursuit of profits. The informants argued they were resisting against an unfair rule that sought to outlaw their exchanges.

The aim of the article is two-folded. First, the article aims to observe informants' use of resistance narratives to continue their trades. The second is to discuss what legitimized the ambivalent morality of the group in its quest for profit and in what way it functioned. This article argues that this ambiguity sprung from the internalization of neoliberal arguments, such as self-entrepreneurship and the marketization of individual abilities.

## Introduction

The neoliberal precarization of the workforce widely affected Japanese lower-middle-class individuals. The protracted hiring slump, which started in the 1990s, has had a lasting effect on the generations that enter the job market in times of low growth or stagnation (Ohta et al., 2015). Ishida (2010) observed the halting of upward class mobility, and, analogously, Brinton (2010: 115) defined this phenomenon as particularly hindering "for the lower strata of the class structure." The spreading of the neoliberal doctrine historically overlaps with the insurgence of digital media. These technologies intermingled with the fabric of daily life and produced both new systems of exploitation and innovative ways of value creation. The digital flea markets (DFMs) in Japan serve as an example of both of these elements.

This article discusses the experiences of 13 members of the online gaming community (*netoge*). The group is part of a larger community of virtual data traders that, from 2017 to 2020, dueled with the DFMs. This conflict resulted from the ban of their commerce, consisting mainly of weapons and rare items collected in-game. In doing so, the players forged a new morality to—in their words—"resist" what they perceived as unfair rules hindering their trade of digital artifacts. This moral stance conveniently suited the group's desire to persist with their exchanges, although it violated the DFMs' veto and, possibly, Japanese laws that regulate the unfair competition.

Nonetheless, according to the narratives of the informants that acknowledge the existance a moral conundrum, this insubordination did not manifest offline where they believed social norms had to be adhered to and laws enforced. This puzzling separation of cyber and material life echoes informants' ambiguous existence in-between precarious employment and the internalization of

neoliberal ideas. Interlocutors did not consider that their quest for profits through digital means might have originated in their analogical, economic struggles. Therefore, they defended their moral ambivalence, mainly in terms of resistance against the platforms. This argument is repeatedly deployed by those who point to their intergroup relationships as a primary reason for engaging with trafficking and those who believe that profit-seeking is its key component.

The purpose of this study is to unpack this ambivalent morality which is deployed as a strategy to renegotiate precarity and to observe what allows this morality to exist and how it works. To do so, there will be a brief discussion of the informants' relationship with the platforms and their rules, which became substrate for such morality, and how this last is recodified according to the group's needs. Contingently, the work highlights how ideas of devotion to profit penetrated discourses of the lower-middle-class in Japan. For this reason, the article seeks to answer three main questions: how did this ambivalent morality emerge?; through what narrative is it justified?; and what keeps it functioning? Other sub-questions explored within the study include: how do interlocutors' moralities become intertwined with neoliberal ideology?; what divides interlocutors who affirm the trade sprung from social relations and those who believe it revolves around economic gain?; is this difference rooted in the diverse experience of precarity?; and, can their commerce be considered an act of resistance, or is it solely as a smokescreen to pursue their financial interests?

Through one of the informants, it was possible to observe the 13 traders closely. The collective, inspired by fantasy literature and gaming terminology, self-identifies as "the guild" (*girudo*). The group engages with a multitude of games, on mobile and desktop, sometimes simultaneously, to maximize their profits. The fieldwork was held from early 2019 until the summer of 2021 for about two years. This relatively short period was extraordinarily dense with happenings, such as the peak of the illicit trade, its disappearance from the DFMs, and the recent reemergence over new platforms. The methodology included semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and observations of the exchanges in DFMs and peripheral locales. These consisted of private forums, open text websites, blogs, message applications, and in-game events. The majority of these conversations took place in Japanese, particularly the cryptic local gaming expressions. Nonetheless, the research benefitted from the players' different degrees of proficiency in written English.

This article argues that adherence to neoliberal regimes produced this "resistance," implementing some of the neoliberal core values like competitiveness, insubordinate research for profits, and unregulated use of the skills to create it. The conflict between the guild and DFMs strengthened the community's morality and conveniently harmonized with its economic needs; yet, for the informants, online morality differs from its offline form. Due to their nebulosity, it is highly improbable that digital and analogical moral spheres could be truly apart. Nonetheless, the interlocutors insisted that their noncompliance to norms never manifested offline, where rule violations remained taboo. This ideal fragmentation of their ethos is a fascinating ploy. Here, morality is intended in the Foucauldian notion

developed in *The Use of Pleasure* (2013 [1984], Ch.1-3), including the comprehensively abstract values (moral code) and set of behaviors this principle can determine (moral conduct/behaviors).

The guild's case also resembles Bröckling's theories in *The Entrepreneurial Self* (2016). The text contains uncountable observations that became points of reflection about the current state of the regimes, the individuals, and the subjectification strategies surfaced by internalizing neoliberal values. In particular, the guild self-regulates through mutual access to their "log"—files containing a precise list of a member's in-game activities. This "non-hierarchical structure of reciprocal visibility" (160) is not dissimilar from what Bröckling defines as the *democratic panopticon*, a "system of all-around evaluation," a "360-degree feedback" (159). The German sociologist connects this technology of mutual control to Foucault's theory of moral conduct (163-166). For the informants, this control is exclusive to their online behaviors, where the group can set the agenda for each member.

The pendular stances between online and offline, and their interfacing, are in different measures discussed in several anthropological works (Ito, 2005; Nardi, 2010; Postill, 2011; Horst and Miller, 2012). In some cases, anthropologists and other scholars understandably questioned the validity of the separation of these two spheres (Taylor, 2009: 331-332; Farman, 2011: 107-108; Hjorth & Richardson, 2014, 43-55; 59-75). Nonetheless, this division is a helpful heuristic to point at the intertwining, bridging, and in-betweenness of analogical and digital behaviors. Other works extended this analytical tool to observe the "new ethic" of digital sociality and economy for at least two decades (Himanen, 2001; Castells, 2004; Marin, 2014; Fuchs, 2014; Kergel & Heidkamp, 2017a).

**Digital Precarity in Japan**

The sluggish pace of the Japanese economy and its impacts on the workforce represent an abrupt awakening. While the country overcame its financial depression, Japan's employment customs, previously well-known for their stability, never fully recovered from the burst of the 1990s' bubble (Ariga & Okazawa, 2009: 7-8). Osawa (et al., 2013) notes that throughout the 2000s, behind the curtain provided by the recurring concept of "self-responsibility" (*jikosekinin*), the state incrementally disengaged with the issue of insecure employment and workers "discovered that *jikosekinin* actually means that when you are in trouble, you are on your own" (310). This emphasis on self-responsibility became a topos for much of the neoliberal policymaking. Kergel and Hepp (2020) place it as an absolute condition for "freedom" in postmodern and neoliberal terms. Kergel and Heidkamp (2017b) had already identified the neoliberal interpretation of freedom as the root of the contemporary precarized mindset. Expanding on Bröckling's concept of the entrepreneurial self, Kergel and Heidkamp (2017: 103 cfr) discussed self-responsibility—along with self-initiative—at the base of the ideal future (i.e., the entrepreneurial society) ( Bröckling, 2016: xi). Bröckling expands upon the concept further, pointing at the shift of values instilled in the "new economy." For the German sociologist, like a "taunt," the whole

body of institutes that deal with precarity exist on the same principles that animate corporative management.

> The set of values and practices propagated in training courses for the long-term unemployed and aid measures for youth in teaching programmes at special schools, self-help groups, and politically engaged charities are at a basic level analogous to what executives are taught at exclusive coaching workshops, personality seminars, motivation weekends, and in self-help books on management and careers. The same values are invoked: self-responsibility; creativity; initiative; assertiveness; 'team' skills. (Bröckling, 2016: 36).

Gagné Okura (2020) eloquently discussed the "long processes" of restructuring the convention of long-life employment as a "discrete yet concrete mechanism" in Japan (381). Studying now-turned middle-age precariat, the anthropologist points at the "sense of social and emotional precarity among regular workers," a feeling that stems from the "culture of risk" festering the labor market (382). This phenomenon is not new to Japanese scholars (i.e., Genda et al., 2010) nor exclusive to Japan (i.e., Standing, 2011:38-40). Yet, Gagné Okura points at the node of the problem, observing that much of Japanese welfare robustly stands on long-term employment and, with the erosion of this "social norm" (Takahashi, 2019), the whole architecture of Japan's "corporate welfare" is at risk (383-385).

The pulverization of Japan's life-long employment is what Fumagalli (2007) deemed, a decade before, as the "decomposition of the workforce," one of the three pillars of cognitive capitalism,[1] along with financialization of capital and the shift to cognitive/immaterial exploitation (61-63). This last principle of cognitive capitalism can also explain the fusion between personal and productive spaces among the informants. At the center of this immaterial exploitation, there is "hybridization" between the "development of productive forces and social relations of production" (Lebert & Vercellone, 2006 cfr. Fumagalli & Lucarelli, 2007: 19-20). This passage indicates a *sine qua non* for cognitive capitalism and the core of a general theory accumulation that explains such forms of capitalism (ibidem). Briziarelli & Armano (2020), while discussing the resistance of physical labor to digital abstractions, seem to present an analogous description of digital capitalism (2), which leads one to believe that the two concepts are related. In other words, productive forces (i.e., the merging of means of labor and human labor) and relation of production (i.e., the social connection humans establish) turn into a cluster from which both labor—including its ideation—and sociality are made into one. The trade of digital artifacts, which some informants explicitly differentiate from ordinary employment, precisely for the chance to engage in it with "friends," is, therefore, nothing more than cognitive labor; a capitalization the players make of their immaterial talent. In regimes of cognitive capitalism, if human social processes unravel online, the same digital space will become the locus of production. On these premises, the virtualization of labor, even when unconscious, as it is for the interlocutors due to its remote

exploitability and its interweaving with social life, can be considered not an outcome of today's diffuse precarity, but a prerequisite for it.

It is not by chance that, elaborating on Berardi, another influential Italian Autonomist, Allison (2013) similarly connects Japanese "anxiety toward the present" to the "failure to securitize the lives" (85). For the American scholar, "the regime of hard work and competitive output […] suffusing into the social life of just about everything [at a point] that blurred the boundary between living and labor" (ibidem). Berardi's words in the original passage (2009) are more explicit: "In the sphere of digital production, exploitation is exerted essentially on the semiotic flux produced by human time at work" (21-22 cfr. Allison, 2013:85). By semiotic flux, the scholar clarifies, "we speak of immaterial production," a flow of new meanings, a stream of "new forms of alienation and precariousness […] occurring in the Net" (22). Berardi voices the idea that to study this new notion is to pick up the threads of the "genealogical work of Michele Foucault" (ibidem).

Keeping in mind this "blurring" among living and labor, which Fumagalli also addresses as an essential feature of "bio-cognitive capitalism" (2019), it is indispensable to discuss the division of personal and professional freedom. These imaginary dichotomies exalted during the industrial era, such as duty and leisure, rebellion and obedience, purity and obscenity, have been famously looked at with suspicion by the many thinkers. Paradoxically, in the case of the informants, the muddling of private and public activities did not erase the line between personal and shared morality. Since the early days of neoliberal policymaking, free will and free enterprise have acquired a pivotal role in political discussion. The study above by Kergel and Hepp (2020) pinpoints how freedom in its "emancipative notion"—once in part of the leftist parley—became the flagship of "the new spirit of capitalism" that emerged in the neoliberal era. The prerogative to uphold "moral norms," in their inconsistent and fleeting interpretations, seem to have been superseded by the individual desire for freedom. This aspiration too often coincides with the freedom to pursue profit, no matter the outcome. Several narratives in this study support the idea that the opposition with the platform developed on the belief of an "unfair" violation of informants' freedom. This was a freedom to capitalize their talent whether this conflicted with the rules of the platforms.

**Rise and fall of data trading on DFMs**

Between 2016 and 2020, subscriptions to digital flea markets (DFMs) multiplied in Japan (Mercari, 2020: 14-18; MMD Labo, 2021). The accessibility and usability granted by smartphones played a major role in this popularity (WebTan Forum, 2014; MMD Labo, 2021), as reflected by the fact that the common word in Japanese became *furima apuri* (a shortened katakanization of flea market applications). Different communities emerged, whether the platform supported these actions or not.

This included subscribers of multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). These members were profitably trading digital artifacts obtained in virtual worlds before the appearance of the *furima apuri*. In mid-2016, when Japan's largest DFM lifted the embargo over game-data trade, this

commerce exploded. This opening received mixed reactions (Netorabo, 2016; Cnet, 2016), but more importantly, frauds started being reported.

On DFMs' official blogs, customers lamented scams involving the sale of game accounts with content purchased via stolen credit cards. Once the legitimate owner of the card disputed the purchases for reimbursement, the account sold in the scam was closed and the contents were canceled. Fraud through digital media became so common in Japan (Nikkei Shimbun, 2018; 2020a; 2020b cfr. Digital Revenger, 2021) that many Japanese Police districts instituted cybercrime consultation services (National Police Agency Cybercrime Project, n.d.).

In response to these activities, since late-2017 (Mercari, n.d, art. 886.; Rakuma, 2018), the central offices of all major DFMs started to increase the rigidity of their rules about game's data trade (*riaru manē torēdo* or, in English, real money trade (RMT)). This control culminated with the ban being restored in mid-2018. This repression generated an underground digital market where players promoted and organized their exchanges through peripheric platforms, such as forums, social network services (SNS), or blogs (Time&Space, 2019). Once details were arranged regarding locale, the digital artifacts were traded on the DFMs through mock-pages as "reserved posts" (*senyō shuppin*). The largest *furima apuri* of Japan banned the reserved posts in 2019 (Mercari, n.d.: Art. 373), for the informants, as a reaction to RMT.

The conflict ultimately came to a turning point with the amendment of the Unfair Competition Prevention Act in November 2018 (*Fusei Kyōsō Bōshi-hō*, hereafter UCPA)— with enforcement beginning in July 2019. This change made instances of trading digital data that constituted as unfair "advantage[s]" (*yūi*) through the "falsification of saved data" (*sēbu dēta no kaizan*) illegal and punishable with fines up to 5.000.000 JPY (UCPA, Art. 2-1, para. 17-18; Art. 21-2 para. 4). More importantly, it provided DFMs with the legal framework to intimate the external locales where RMT was organized. Central offices of *furima apuri* motivated these requests with the compelling need of controlling the legality of goods traded through their platforms. By the end of 2019 and the start of 2020, waves of account bans and content suspensions hit popular blogging platforms, SNS, and open text websites.

The guild believes that the trade of digital artifacts did not alter the saved data, but it was only a way to conduct item exchanges, as allowed by the rules of many virtual worlds. This argument supposed that the trade might be "illicit" (*ihan*)—i.e., not permitted by marketplace rules—"but not illegal" (*ihō*). This defense did not work.

In a year, RMT as a practice almost disappeared from generic DFMs; however, this does not mean that it ceased to exist. Conversely, new platforms highly specialized in the different aspects of RMT are emerging and thriving.[2] This surfacing underlines the ambiguity of UCPA and what constitutes an unfair advantage and falsification of data, as it puzzles those traders who fell victim to 2019-2020's bans. Among these are several members of the guild. Other strategies to circumvent the

prohibition involved the retail, not of the data itself, but their "containers." Computers, consoles, or game cassettes are still sold for high prices for their applications or saved files containing rare items, collectibles, or achievements. The DFMs have yet to take a clear position over this matter, and this trade continues undisturbed.

**Ambivalent Morality, Expanded Gameplay, and Community**

At the time of the clash, The guild's members developed an ambivalent morality that allowed them to justify their trades online without altering their offline behaviors. On the one hand, they recognized the ambiguous nature of their exchanges, that they were violating the rules of both DFMs and the MMORPGs, profiting off newcomers, and providing, upon payment, access to weapons and rare objects (*buki to rea*) that risked unbalancing the game. On the other hand, informants felt they were simply using their cultivated talents (*koyashita nōryokyu wo tsukau*), that the community was the true owner of the virtual world, and that easier access to the artifacts was a disadvantage only for developers' companies, which profited from the sale of premium upgrades offered for their intellectual proprieties.

Moral ambivalence manifested in the DFMs as insubordination. This defiance never percolated into what the users called "real life" (*āru eru* in Japanese, from English RL). The informants unanimously conceived it as "impossible" to ignore offline rules or laws. What surpassed the digital limits is the thick thread of relations that guild members developed. In short, the informants claimed their interactions, but not their morality, spilled over the real world, although the two elements interweave. This passage highlights the confusion permeating members' ideal division between the cyber world and real world.

The community recognizes fellows and has a deep self-understanding of themselves as a collective entity. The two personae, one online and the other offline, are not the same; yet, they benefit from the same level of intimacy with another guild member. Being disobedient on the DFM is not the same as doing so in real life, even though both experiences hold the same value. Instead, the game's personality can conveniently match the actions taken against the *furima apuri* because they are both online. So, for example, to play a "chaotic" character on the MMORPG can justify an "insolent/challenging attitude" on the DFM. In this way, the marketplace has been highjacked to become an extension of the game platform. It would have been beneficial to keep a complete record of all the characters guild members played. Regretfully, the great number of games, along with the assortment of digital personae each informant used, made this task nearly impossible in this circumstance.

As mentioned, in-game communications were highly codified, especially when not using voice software to communicate. The informants maintain that the Japanese gaming community created its language, borrowing much from the English parallel phraseology. The Japanization of the Anglophonic words is often referred to as "made in Japan English" (*wasei eigo*). These expressions went through

further alterations to facilitate the comprehension of Japanese players, sometimes referring to traditional, national imaginary, creating a language for gaming (*gēmuyōgo*).

Departing from philosophy's arguments, anthropology has explored ethics and moral code as a substrate for community creation (Cohen, 1985; Amit & Rapport 2002); however, the guild also shares intents, imaginary narratives, expressions, and symbolic meanings. All these elements organically emerged, binding together the members. Simply put, the informants consider their relationship to be one with in-game activities that also include collecting and selling digital artifacts. The members who joined the collective later through RMT were not exceptions. For them, the cooperation was possible because of their union that, in turn, was thickened by their coordinated resistance.

Organic interactions started in the virtual world, and then strengthened through the necessity of coordinating their dueling with the DFMs brought the community together. To different extents, guild members rely on RMT to make ends meet (*fuku shūnyū*). Repeatedly, informants shared that while playing together to increase their profit became systematic/strategic/well-organized/organic (*soshikiteki/taikeiteki na soshiki*) and enjoyable (*tanoshii/yukai*), what cemented their friendship was the struggle they engaged in with the DFMs. In a nutshell, for the interlocutors, the marketplace through RMT became the locus where their community consolidated, an extension of the MMORPGs through other means, and a way to create necessary side revenue. All these justifications gave them the reason to split their moral considerations on what is appropriate or not in defense of their freedom, and, more importantly, create a profitable detachment between online and offline performances.

**The guild as a community and its members**

This section will briefly discuss informants' general information at the time of the fieldwork (Table 1). Excluding two individuals, the guild members were all engaged in irregular (*hiseiki*) employment or underemployment. Irregular employment, however, does not automatically imply that they were not working informally or collecting revenue from an unregistered side hustle. Two members, for example, self-described their work as irregular (*hiseiki/seishain dewa nai*); yet, they contributed to their family business. One had worked for a long time in a company and had quit his full-time employment and started as part-time work to have more time to acquire new skills. Another had been involved in local activism and dreamed of becoming a public servant. One was a part-time worker (*pāto*) in a housing company, but he holds a real-estate agent's certificate. Despite living in his family's house, this informant also bought a small apartment and was receiving rent from this investment that was essentially paying the mortgage on the property. In a nutshell, it seemed that most informants came from a relatively comfortable background and were not used to economic and/or social insecurity.

Interestingly, all irregularly employed informants are in the tertiary industry, excluding two in secondary and one in the primary. Two of these three are also concurrently employed in family businesses. The pattern that emerged from the data suggests that interlocutors, originally from the lower-middle-class, are less equipped to react to precarity efficiently. All but one of the informants

considered their family “ordinary” (*futsū/ippan katei*), nonetheless responsible for their mindset. None of them recused their relatives of lacking personal or financial support; however, several mentions about the “goodness of the family” or “quality of the family” (*iegara*) were brought up as an explanation for refusing “meaningless jobs” (*yarigai no nai shigoto*). Curiously, the only informant who described his childhood as scarred by poverty maintained stable employment and a relatively “secure” life.

Table 1.

| **Age** | ≤20 / ≥30 | ≤30 / ≥40 | ≤40 / ≥50 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Informants** | 7 | 5 | 1 |
| Greater Tokyo Area | 4 | 4 | |
| Chubu | 1 | | |
| Kinki/Kansai | 2 | | 1 |
| Kyushu | | 1 | |
| **Work Status** | | | |
| Fully employed | | 2 | |
| Underemployed / Unregular worker | 7 | 3 | 1 |
| **Multiple Works** | | | |
| have a side job / does multiple jobs | 4 | | |
| do not have a side job | 3 | 5 | 1 |
| **Work hours (Part-time workers)** | | | |
| less than 20 hours | 2 | | |
| more than 20 hours a week, but less than 30 | 1 | 1 | |
| more than 30 hours a week (one employment) | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| more than 30 hours a week (two employments) | 3 | 1 | |
| **Average Monthly income (RMT revenue not included)** | | | |
| between 100.000 and 140.000 JPY | 4 | 1 | |
| between 160.000 and 180.000 JPY | 3 | 2 | |
| between 200.000 and 300.000 JPY** | | 2 | 1 |
| **300.000 JPY revenue is to be considered inconsistent and regarding only one freelance informant. | | | |

Of the 13 members, three worked part-time, between 20-30 hours per week. One was employed part-time, working more than 30 hours a week. Four of them were juggling two part-time or irregular positions, working more than 30, but less than 40, hours a week. Two were in part-time positions and worked less than 20 hours. One was a freelancer working 25 to 40 hours a week. Finally, two were full-time specialized workers. Their ages varied from 21 to 40, with an average of 29.7 years old. All the one job part-timers’ monthly revenues fluctuated wildly and were dramatically affected by the 2020-21 pandemic, averaging between 100.000 and 140.000 JPY. The other workers, with double part-time, longer shifts, or employment in the family business, were doing slightly better, between 160.000 and 180.000 JPY. The freelance worker was paid, on average, 200.000 JPY, with no bonuses or benefits, but on good months, revenue could reach up to 300.000 JPY. The permanent workers received 220.000 and 245.000 JPY with bonuses and benefits. About these two last informants, it should be mentioned that one introduced the other to his workplace, and they ended up employed by the same company. The “senpai” is the same informer that described his youth as marked by economic instability.

While the last three informants experienced less pronounced economic insecurity, their centrality in the group was such that they could not be excluded. Moreover, at the time of the first interview, the younger, full-time employee had just started working at his present position but had a long track record of precarious, short-term, and poorly paid employment. It is also essential to clarify that if it is true that their revenues are higher than the average, the older two of the three are married and have young children. In these cases, only the freelance worker's spouse is employed part-time, averaging less than 70.000 JPY a month—a figure that will likely shrink due to her pregnancy with their second child since summer 2021. This informant also fits the description of "small-scale freelancers eking out a living as 'Me Incorporated' […]" (Bröckling, 2016: 22). His self-employed condition is evocative of the dissolution "between workplace and private life," which, as Bröckling already discussed, points as the bedrock form of precarious "new autonomy" (idem: 26). His monthly revenue might be relatively more secure than other members, but his condition of employment is the most insecure, as he does not know whether he will have work in the future. Besides health and professional insurance, this informant is also left in charge of any upgrade he might need to improve his skillset through costly and time demanding courses.

Half of the interlocutors were bachelors, the other half were in long-term, personal relationships. They were divided as follows: two married; one in a relationship longer than five years; one in a relationship longer than two years, but shorter than four; and the other two in relationships longer than one year, but shorter than two. Of the members not in a relationship, four considered gaming a factor in not having a partner, the other three stated that it had never been a problem. All the members in a relationship answered that being with a partner requires mediation, and excessive gaming can be a problem. Nonetheless, in one case, the girlfriend of the interlocutor took part in an interview and seemed very supportive. Indeed, this young woman suggested to her boyfriend to further the commodification of game practices through live streaming or video sharing.

Eight of the 13 members resided in the Greater Tokyo Area, which includes Saitama, Chiba, Kanagawa, Tochigi, Ibaraki, and Gunma prefectures, three in the Kansai, one in the Kyūshū, and one in the Chūbū. Data about residence were crucial for the informants. This argument often came up in group discussion for the significant differences in prices/average living cost and, thus, the different purchasing power of similar wages. Quite unexpectedly, considering its centrality in discourses about moral code and family, only one informant discussed his place of origin. In contrast, others rarely mentioned it, if not for casual remarks about dialects and regional expressions.

The guild's overall revenue, generated through the trade of digital artifacts, greatly varied monthly. While a few individual members disclosed their income produced in this way, the group never openly discussed it. Relying upon the information collected directly from the informants and analysis of their posting, it is conceivable that the total revenue from all the DFMs oscillated between 350.000 and 700.000 JPY a month. Additionally, the evasive transactions carried on through the virtual world's

forum and "face-to-face" during gameplay. These two types are, most of the time, carried on directly in-game, and the goods are paid by exchanging QR-code through one of the cashless electronic payment services. One informant also exalted the "immediate satisfaction" (*sugu ni manzoku*) of RMT's profit, saying that in the "company, the salary is once a month, with RMT many times a day." Similarly, another guild member compared the fulfillment in seeing his products appreciated. Discussing the *Likes* his posts received (*iine morau*), he affirmed that what made these signs of approval better than those of other SNS was that "these can turn into money." Remarkably, these members are both blue-collar workers who cultivate professional ambitions different from their current occupation, something they explained with the low wages and harsh working conditions.

Profit-sharing is another crucial element for the community. The guild divides all RMT's revenue into equal parts, redistributed according to individual play hours and contributions. The collective has in-game "boxes" where every player deposits the digital artifacts they wish to contribute. Every member is free to take from the box if he needs by informing the other members, but he cannot sell it independently. Ex-members have been removed from the guild for this. The larger the number and higher the price of the digital yields an affiliate deposited in the box, the bigger his share of the total revenue will be; however, this means there are possibilities for a substantial profit gap between "hard" and "light" players. Many members saw this competition positively. An informant theorized competition as the substrate of the guild and, due to its highly quantifiable nature, internal economic rivalry as the most unbiased criteria to evaluate any skills. Strikingly, Bröckling had already located in this idealization of competitiveness the "essence of neoliberal governmentality" precisely because it provides a system of "universal comparability" (2016: 60).

The guild developed its internal value system based on daily game hours and relative profits. These hours are registered through the "log"[3] on the virtual world, but "nobody ever lied about it, not that it was possible." This total openness echoes the panoptical subjectification discussed by Bröckling. Among themselves, informants do not simply compete about the length of the game sessions, but over the time besides "absolutely must do things" they can dedicate to gaming. A member that works 30 hours a week and plays for 15 can acquire more prestige than a member that works 15 hours but plays 30. Some of the informants bragged about sessions of 10-12 hours and sleep deprivation. This time included switching among diverse, popular MMORPG to participate in daily, weekly, or monthly events and possibly obtain commemorative items or weapons to sell through RMT. While no informant openly supported this practice, the fact that they admired those who shared the most extensive time play indicates they prize this type of behavior.

The guild also partakes in competitions against other guilds, in and outside of the game. Perceived as an extension of the virtual worlds, the interlocutors often dragged RMT's sales figures into discussions about their rivals. Other guilds' sales are unknown, but members have a presumptive understanding of them by looking at competitors' posts on the forums or blogs. This external value

system involved the whole community of players in a virtual world, but on which game administrators have very little power. Despite being unregulated, this beyond-platform and players-only space is not free from competition. Conversely, in this locus, competition becomes the key to personal improvement and the way to measure the ability to translate gaming skills into capital. Again, Bröckling observed that, defined in neoliberal terms, "governing means promoting competition, while self-governing means promoting one's own competitiveness" (ibidem). While coherent with the surrounding regime of accumulation, considered in light of their struggle with the DFMs, this competitive zeal appears dysfunctional. The outcomes the informants and their competitors achieved against the *furima apuri* were poor. The "resistance" was short-lived. The platforms did not converge on common ground with the users, and the members risked legal consequences. The guild "self-governing," while bolstering profits in the short term, did not assure the longevity of their commerce. Instead, the competition undermined bonds forged within the guild and threatened its very survival. Also, conjecturally, it would have been interesting to observe the DFMs reaction to a coordinated effort to a much larger pool of users which the guild, jointly with its rivals, might have become.

The relations between the guild and its customers are also peculiar, being that buyers are often players that guild members know in the virtual world. The preexisting contacts are strengthened through the exchanges. These trades, because they act as an extension of the game, can improve their relationships within the virtual world. The secretive nature of the RMT represented the first challenge to overcome for both parties. The two-sided trust that sellers and buyers need to pose in their counterparts facilitates new organic interactions. Both sides are challenging the *furima apuri* authorities, and through the communication carried on in external locales to organize their *senyō shuppin,* no confusion is possible. The ability to create and increase trust is best exemplified by the new members' entrance into the guild through RMT and the relative openness of the community to this research.

Trust is not only highly desirable in dealing with other players, but also when interfacing with more complex entities, such as the game central office or the trading platforms. Multiple users who highlighted the cooperative potential unlocked through the digital media harshly criticized the DFMs for their extraordinary severity toward the traders of digital artifacts. This rigidity appeared to one interlocutor as "unnatural" in light of the chances for profit that the marketplaces were disregarding. The informant suggested that the lack of "mutual understanding" was due to the inability to have "natural conversations" with the market applications. This member's notion of the natural conversation revolved around a fantasy of secluded digital spaces where person-to-person exchanges, and not person-to-company, could be the norm. Besides the inextricability of "natural order" and "profit," the rejection of rules-based intricate communities best exemplifies this individual *entrepreneurial self*. Freedom is better, even when it means freedom among few. As in this case, the success in creating a trust-based network with the other guild members made some informants prefer the idea of a limited intranet to the

internet, but most importantly, a profit-oriented one. The group's idea of trust and camaraderie has developed along profit-seeking, a leitmotif of informants' conversations.

While they maintained that the main reason to engage in the rebellious trade was to resist unfair treatment from DFMs, the informants can be sorted by two characteristic tendencies. The first group is made of those who participated in the trade because it was an activity in which their friends (*nakama*) took part. They thus saw it as their duty to share with their comrades (i.e., identity commitment). The second group is composed of those who engaged with RMT because of the economic benefits they derive from it. They thus saw it as a smart way of using their ability (i.e., economic commitment). Based on this consideration, the guild members are divided according to their self-assessed motivation to exchange digital artifacts. This typification is solely an analytical expedient based on the interlocutors' self-expressed orientation. Informants of both subdivisions have, on several occasions, contradicted their statements or presented disproving narratives. Nevertheless, the separation is a valuable tool to frame the individuals' self-positioning in their actions against the trade platforms. The present study includes four narratives from each group.

**"Only friends, not colleagues"**

The first subgroup of informants is constituted by individuals who engaged with the RMT on the basis of their relations with the other members. Saying that these guild members engaged in these activities because of their duty toward their comrades does not mean they were not interested in the profit. They were, but not as explicitly as the informants from the second group. It is also important to note that while it is true these members averaged more from their analogical revenue, it would be reductive to believe that because of that, they had the luxury to engage with their resistance on moral ground. Except for one of them, all described the profit coming from RMT as "essential." Yet, this necessity questions the suitability of long-term commitment to game practice to pursue a socio-economic improvement, considering the revenues are so volatile that it is hard to quantify, even for the informants.

The informants' explanation about the irreconcilable nature of online and offline is rather simplistic: the group imagines itself as an online entity created to operate virtually. To perform offline is to interface with a different set of rules. To be a member of the group implies having a role and absolving this function in a digital custom. This practice responds to a logic based on the virtual world, which is separate from the workplaces, the families, or analogical friends. Being in the guild presupposes adherence to this system of beliefs. Interlocutors univocally supported such exclusivity, even when questioned about their behaviors that blatantly contravened this supposition.

Despite this general stance, it would be dismissive to conceive *a priori* the guild members depart from all cultural influences. Instead, preexisting backgrounds played an extensive role in those peer-to-peer interactions that allowed the collective to emerge. Personal, professional, and economic support among the members was extensive. On many occasions, their relations exceeded the online sphere, contradicting their ideal separation of the cyber and material world. While conceivable, this

transboundary feature could not be documented in their narrative about their ambivalent morality, which they insisted belonged solely "online."

Shunya (39), Electric Engineer

Shunya is the most active member of the guild, and somewhat of an administrator—although he insists that the group "does not need a leader." He is one of the only two married members, and he has two daughters. He and his family reside in the Greater Tokyo Area. Shunya is also one of the only two members with regular employment. Despite not being the oldest, this informant is the most experienced online player of the community. He started playing Ultima Online in his late teens, before 2000, with a computer he bought with savings from his first job. Shunya remembers wanting to play the videogames and suffering because he "never dared to ask [his] parents for one, not even once." He believes the group can make a virtual world "lively" (*kakki*) because of their abilities in role-play and consistency.

Shunya is a full-time employee in a large company that provides the electric distribution services. His shifts include nights, particularly at the start of his career, which put his "biological clock out of order." This allowed him to get better at many games and play with international gamers skilled in PVP (player-versus-player).

According to him, the guild engaged with RMT not because of the money, but because of the members' camaraderie/solidarity (*nakamaishiki*). Shunya believes that *nakamashiki* is the concept behind any action of the guild. This feeling manifested as "resistance to an unjust rule" (*futō na ruru ni teikō*) when a member was "attacked" for the first time. For the informant, RMT practice is not a "job" but an extension of the virtual world itself. Shunya's circular argument revolves around his consideration of the other members. He "calls them only friends, not colleagues (lit. work friends), […] so this cannot be a job" (*shigotonakama janakute nakama dake to iu no de […] kore shigoto dewa nai*).

Shunya's belief that the RMT is only part of the game is also represented in his dismissive attitude toward possible consequences. He is "not worried" about legal repercussions. The DFMs are only "bullying [them] because of the otaku-ish image that playing MMORPG hobby carries… People are doing much worse on *furima apuri* with no consequences," and it would be a scandal to have them persecuted. "Until recently, whatever [bad] you did [to a gamer,] it was fine […] [the DFM] did not expect us to hit them back […] they must be in shock!" Shunya's justification for altering his moral conduct is the desire for social reparation. His *entrepreneurial self* is a redeeming manifestation. His revenge is obtained through capitalization, causing a positive "shock," a revolution of power dynamics between platforms and users. It does not matter that the guild members achieved very little with their actions. Posing as rebels, their failures take on a mythical, narrative feature. His friends are morally superior to his colleagues because RMT is not a job. For Shunya, their actions (i.e., resisting the oppressive platform "aiming to limit their freedom") are filled with social intents (i.e., responding to a request for help from a friend), and they only happen to conciliate with profit.

Michiya (27), Chef

Michichya is a graduate of a vocational school and a bachelor. Currently, he works in two different restaurants owned by the same company, but he hopes to open his own in the future. He is from the Greater Tokyo Area. He considers himself to be a "moderate/light player (*raito gēmā*) compared to other members," but when he is online, he gives all of himself. Michiya started working as a kitchen aid when he was still in high school and never stopped. This consistency is coherent with his passion for gaming, which also began when he was very young. He was timid and more reserved than the other members. He shared less about himself but was very prone to talk about the RMT and the "unfair treatment" the guild and other traders received from the DFMs, even before it was against its rules.

Michiya remembers the first time his post was canceled. In December 2017, he had been selling on DFMs weapons he collected in the most popular game at that time. After he reported it to the central office of the marketplace, his post was rehabilitated, only to be flagged again within 24 hours and all his content suspended. At first, he thought he was being attacked by "other jealous players" (*netamareta*), then he noticed other analogous complaints in the market section of that virtual world's forum. When he asked other friends from the *netoge*, they shared similar stories. Some of the players even gave up DFMs.

Initially, guild members sold their digital artifacts through the virtual world communities' forum, but they rapidly switched once they noticed the customer pool that DFMs offered and the trust from the buyers it procured. Michiya, first among the member of the guild, felt discrimination (*sabetsu*) that turned into a reason for anger. With this state of mind, he put forward these points to the others. Until that time, interests had been limited only to one virtual world. He did not consider himself entirely in the guild. Nonetheless, through the camaraderie (*nakamaishiki*) they all showed, he started to communicate with the others about matters unrelated to gaming and later engaged with different virtual worlds just for the pleasure of being together. RMT and his struggle indirectly made him a full member.

Michiya understood "from the start that the guild's resistance (*hankō*) was futile." This became evident to the others only during the wave of peripheral locales' ban of 2019-2020. He would never challenge, in that way, the authority of the workplace or society based on their materiality. "If you know you can touch it, then you know they can touch you." For him, virtuality protects from analogical outcomes. This last element highlighted his illusory differentiation between cyber and material worlds. Pressed about the degree of reality of their friendship, Michiya explained, "that is real because it is not *in the game* but happened *through the game*." According to him, the separation of the two spheres is dictated by degrees of materiality. Immaterial morality is not subjected to the rigidity of material interactions. The abstract world can appeal to the realm of emotion and psyche but cannot be transported in the concrete world based on embodied experience. These two domains find a touching point in the

gaming practices translating back and forth contents (e.g., having fun, making friends, creating profits, etc.) that materialize and immaterialize according to the player's needs.

Keishi (31), Farmer

Keishi (31) is a member of the community from Kyūshū and works as a farmer. Born and raised in that environment, he is "proud of his origin" (*kyōdoai/jimotoai ga tsuyoi*) and what his family represents in the community. His father has covered several roles in the local cooperative. He has been recently planning his wedding with his girlfriend after seven years together. His partner never complained about his passion for gaming because "he never neglected her."

Keishi is an idealist "ready to fight when is needed." He contests that the DFMs were trying to ban the whole data trade without seeing any difference, but he can also speak rationally from the platforms' point of view. He "understand[s] they were trying to prevent scam […] and [the 2019-2020's ban] was a good thing: they have to ensure nobody is selling illegal products, [he] just wish they would differentiate among users (*yūzākan no kubetsu wo sureba yokatta*)."

The platform's unwillingness to distinguish between users made him decide to follow his friends in what he considered "mainly a protest rather than a resistance or a rebellion." He knew after January 2020, when ID registration became necessary on all major DFMs and all the members complied, that if the platform wanted to attack them legally, they had all their data. These legal threats never actualized, which made him sure that "also the [marketplace] had not understood if RMT was certainly illegal." For this reason, he considers them "*hetare*." This does not translate to English well. Its etymology is based on falling/laying on one's back (*hetaru*). A loose translation might be sloppy/weak/unable to do a job properly, an unforgivable misdeed in neoliberal regimes. In fact, due to this sloppiness, Keishi felt legitimacy in violating the rules. For him, in a world of hard workers who constantly need to consider every circumstance for succeeding in their long production cycle, *hetare* individuals are not only undesirable, but punished by nature. "A *hetare* cannot farm not even weeds"[4] (*hetare dattara sasa mo sodaterarenai*). This inefficiency is irreconcilable with profit. This observation put Keishi in an interstitial position between the two subgroups of users. While he considers himself engaged in RMT because of an obligation to his friends, he has also developed an effectiveness-centered mindset. Keishi's moral code lost its rigidity in the digital realm, but kept it when it comes to conduct, although, conveniently, not his own. The idea of *hetare*, i.e., the reference for the productive efficiency of Keishi's entrepreneurial self, appears not only as a profitability indicator, but a criterion for recognition, a fundamental for reciprocity. To be is to be productive and effective; failing at that means not being worthy of acknowledgment.

Ultimately, Keishi lost interest in the trade altogether. He has so much to do that when he plays. He just "want[s] to *grind* and have fun, not talk hours about what to do next to companies that have a thousand times the money [the guild members] have." He will "always remember laughing at the

enraged emails [DFM] sent [to the members]," but for him, digital artifacts trading is something that "is nice if it happens but is not a job."

Ken (32), Electric Engineer

Ken is an electrical engineer and a bachelor. Now residing in the Greater Tokyo Area, he is originally from the Kansai region. There, he worked on and off for almost seven years in positions analogous to his present one. Ken's interest in video games exceeds gameplay and involves repairing old arcade machines and consoles, which he sold on DFMs, making a pretty penny. For him, engaging with RMT was not a simple struggle, but a life-changing event. In fact, in mid-2018, he lost his main account on a DFM where he had more than 350 reviews, all positive. After this event, he was worried since he had not secured his current job and considered the revenue coming from his repairs essential. On many occasions, Ken regretted following the guild in this fight "with no chances of victory from the start," but he never lost gratitude (*kansha*) for their friendship.

Ken started playing with the guild in April 2017 and became very close with all of them, particularly with Shunya, which he considers the "best senpai." In 2018, he had his account banned, broke up with his girlfriend, and did not have much work. He felt lost. Shunya introduced him in his workplace and recommended him for a job so he could start anew in a different city. Ken's life has changed for the better in the last two years through this relationship. He still uses DFMs, but with his father's account, through which he does not engage with RMT.

Ken stresses the importance the guild had in helping him to become independent. This statement includes the help he received in finding new employment and their attitude about trading digital artifacts. Many of the members expressed to him that selling what they had collected was taking responsibility and making "use of their cultivated abilities" to achieve "independence" (*jiritsu*). Ken respected how "serious they were about it." The other members allowed him to "imagine a different self and start working on it […] like making a new character in a new game!"

**"They are making money, and we want to make some too!"**

Seven out of the 13 members were not shy in saying that the RMT is an activity to engage with to make money. For them, DFMs' attempts to stop the scams that were taking place on the platforms was a good thing. As sellers, they saw customer insecurity (*fuan*) as a legit threat to their profit from "real weapon and rare" items (*hontō no buki to rea*); however, these good intentions spiraled out of control when admins started to ban everyone, "even those with more than 200 positive reviews." This bias triggered anger, but not disobedience, which was "based on [the fact] that [other sellers] are making a lot of money, and [they] want to make some too!"

These guild members saw their actions toward the DFMs as legitimized due to the considerable share of their profit paid to the platforms—independent from the illicit nature of their trade. These users

believed the opposition with the DFMs would have been only temporary and, different from the other guild members, that they and the marketplace could have "come around to understand each other" (*rikaishiaeru*). This hope is understandable, in addition to their profit-oriented mindset.

These informants were reluctant to argue about ideals or speak in the group's name. References to resistance were not as frequent, if not absent altogether. According to these members, the guild's disobedience revolved almost entirely around the profit, but this does not exclude the fact that they are genuinely participating in the collective because of a social commitment. It is also interesting to note that three of these members entered the guild in 2018, when the trade was at its peak. In the other group, it was only Michiya who questioned DFMs' authority before joining.

Despite the more straightforward explanations, these informants had very different personal reasons that drove them to profit. This category also presents a wider age gap between its members. Nevertheless, the profit-oriented members included a freelance IT worker and a real-estate agent homeowner that, imaginably, would experience less hardship than the university students or the blue-collar part-timers in the same category. This data alone seems to suggest that while some of the individuals in this category better exemplify the desire to overcome precarity, others were just more concerned with profit before the RMT.

Rei (40), IT specialist

Rei started engaging with the other members in late-2014 when the guild composition greatly varied and when its RMT activities were not managed as a group. As an IT graphic designer and a gamer, Rei worked for a game developer company and invited the friends he had made in a *netoge* to jump in as beta testers. These friends were Shunya, Keishi, and two other members that do not play anymore. The game was eventually canceled, but he and the others got along so well that Rei officially became a guild member.

Rei, originally from Kansai, relocated within the same region. He is married and has a daughter who spends a lot of time with him since he is working from home. He also often dates with his wife since her retired parents live nearby. Rei was also relatively unaffected by the 2020-2021 pandemic since he has been a remote worker for more than three years now.

He spends two to six hours a day playing, which is "much less than before." These long game sessions are not a problem for his wife, "she sleeps early, [he] can just play when she is sleeping." Also, Rei has almost no other expenses because "a computer is a tool used for work […] so the expenses to upgrade the computer are justified by the money he is making working."

For Rei, the "resistance" (*hankō*) was pointless for changing the DFMs. He knew this because of "that type of IT company's meetings." He convinced the group by advocating for a change "on [SNS]. But [they] obtained no effect at all." He followed the group because he "is a member but had no hope."

Rei understood that no revolution was coming. He opted to make as much money as possible before DFMs banned RMT.

Rei was trying to make as many transactions as possible because he has "insider knowledge" (*insaidā chishiki*) about the IT industry. He did not discourage the other members that did not share his viewpoint, and he always supported the group's actions. This support never ceased, even when he told the others the duel would "finish quickly." On that occasion, he suggested that everybody sell as much as possible because another "platform with all these buyers" was not coming soon. What Rei will miss the most is the "respect the guild had from other players of [a virtual world]." The group had become known for their discussion on the forums "about RMT, not only for the money [they] made but the things [they] said." He believes much of "the guild is based on the [RMT]."

<u>Yori (21) and Masao (22) Students</u>

Yori and Masao are two bachelor informants whose data often overlap. Despite their different residences (Greater Tokyo Area and Kansai), many answers were similar. Apart from being students with limited part-time jobs, they also share the idea that gaming is a hobby (*shūmi*) and that RMT is a funny side work (*fukugyō*) to make extra revenue (*fuku shūnyū/tsuika shūnyū*). Both informants valued the possible profit when they joined the guild (respectively, January and March 2018). In the case of Masao, the very first contact with a guild member happened through the DFM. Both Yori and Masao said that once they find a job after graduation, RMT would not be viable because they will not have the time to play games anymore.

Yori has also stated that he has been extra careful not to get his profile banned from the largest DFM in Japan. After the second suspension, he simply stopped posting digital artifacts—a third strike would automatically block his account. He is the only member who openly affirmed so, but he believes that others did the same secretly. "No reason to lose something convenient as the [DFM]. Everything one does with the phone needs to be treasured."

Masao was very concerned about the outcomes of the transactions because nowadays, "once you are blamed for something on the internet, it is not cancelable… After all, [I] only wanted to play games." He is "relieved now that [new platforms where RMT is allowed] have emerged." For him, other informants are like "models, but only when it comes to games." He followed all the other members, but he could not help being afraid. Masao's pragmatism allowed him to look further than the ideal separation of online and offline other members strenuously defended. He admitted his fear of the repercussions of the digital world over his analogical life. Nonetheless, to uphold his "models" he crosses another line between the two self-proclaimed typifications of users. This interstitial position places him close to Keishi.

In short, these young informants believed that the separation between online and offline should be preserved. They seem more concerned about possible outcomes than their older comrades in the

guild. The "*nakamashiki* is for when we play," said Yori. This data is interesting considering that these informants are the ones which digital literacy developed exclusively in the era of SNS. Digital fears haunt their narratives about comfort, secrecy, and public disgrace. Masao and Yori's understandings of technology are deeper, almost embodied. Almost exclusively, they see the erosion of the limit between the digital and analogical spheres so they are more inclined to value their division when it is possible.

Kentō (28), Restaurant and Night Bar worker

Kentō is a vocational school graduate employed as a part-time worker in a night bar and restaurant. He lives in the Greater Tokyo Area with his boyfriend of two years. He is "a gamer but not of MMORPGs." For him, RMT is an excellent way of making extra money. He started playing in his early teens and is particularly passionate about games that revolve around cute girl characters (*bishōjo gēmu*). Playing one of these, he joined the guild in 2016. He said that he is not shy about being a "girl character" (*jokyara* or *joseikyarakuta*).

Kentō is very critical of the Japanese school system. He felt discriminated against for his homosexuality and affirmed that gaming helped him get through high school. He also stated that he learned how to be an "adult from [his] parents and the [online] friends more than from schools." In that time, he "used to take his revenge on other players playing PK characters" (*player killers*). Inspired by internet friends, he changed and started volunteering in an NPO to help other young people who felt oppressed like him. He said that while real life needs activism (*katsudō*), the guild members never judged him about anything. "Foreign players were not judged either," he remarked.

Kentō explains that his desire to be himself encouraged his decision to challenge the DFMs. He could not "understand why to stop," so he "did not." He said that he made more money with RMT than any side job. His confusion about revenue and empowerment echoes the concerns other guild members have about resistance and profit.

For Kentō, humans base their decision-making on "feelings" (*kankakuteki*), while the internet and economics, widely based on mathematics, require logical thinking (*ronriteki*). "You do not want to hurt somebody in person because also that will hurt you (lit. make you feel bad)" (*RL de dareka wo kizu tuketara mōshiwake nai*), and this is why "you cannot do offline what you do online." This difference is what allows the ambivalent morality to exist. Kentō, in this way, dismisses any pain caused by online interactions. Fighting online is not logical "that is why taunting/teasing (*karakau*) the DFMs was fun." Kentō describes those who use anger online as *chūbō*, a wordplay with middle-schoolers, indicating internet users with childish behaviors.[5] Asked about the anger, other members felt about their profile suspension, he was prompt, saying that if they "really got angry, they also were *chūbō*."

The ambivalence of his analogical and digital personae makes Kentō an exceptionally interesting informant. His sensitive nature and the desire to help others offline hardly match his merciless attitude toward online interlocutors, even when they are his guild comrades. He continues to

infantilize those who are not "logical" but never clarifies what that means. His economic motivation for pursuing RMT, despite the DFMs', rules also clash with his social and civil commitments. This contradiction mimics the confusion between resistance and profit that animate the other half of the guild but is coherent to the rationality of *the entrepreneurial self*.

### A Convenient Morality

The guild's strategies against the DFMs platforms have been internally codified as *teikō* (resistance) and *hankō* (opposition) in relation to the passive or active nuance that the words carry. When questioned on those terms' definitions and examples, guild members compared "selling digital artifacts on a blog" or "ignore the rules of the DFM." Once pressed again, they could not answer for what constitutes passive resistance. Their cases both conveniently associate their rejection of the rules for the active pursuit of profits. This is in line with their *entrepreneurial selves*. Both groups have no shame or fear for their actions: they marketed what they could do, created their value system around it, and laughed about it. Yet, the guild does not acknowledge the relationship between time and revenue needed for these activities. For, if the members channeled this time and energy towards other activities, they could and would be making more money. In their prestige economy, they assign each other a value solely from the profit and the commitment to their cause. "[F]or the self-entrepreneur, there is no shame in selling oneself. On the contrary, it is the only way to build self-esteem" (Bröckling, 2016: 35). The alteration of informants' moral code is also explained with two main arguments, resistance through camaraderie and quest for profit, but their behaviors are not unlike. Despite the different motivations, the consistency of their moral conducts begs for questions about the actual dissimilarity in their moral codes.

In its economic and social terms, the trade signified a commitment to being better off for the users. Whether this improvement can be achieved is up for debate. While it is true that members benefitted from substantial profit in the early days of their commerce, this practice was deemed from the start of DFMs repression to an abrupt conclusion – data that raises doubts about the inherent insecurity of their RMT. Many interlocutors did not consider the time investment needed to acquire most digital goods and the low re-marketability of their skills.

The idealization of resistance created a perfect balance between the *hero* and *victim archetypes*, and the guild members could capitalize on this duality. They are victims when oppressed, and they are heroes when they rebel. Therefore, their profit is heroic in challenging "unfair" moral standards that oppress their freedom. This negotiation is coherent with other digital self-victimization phenomena that advocate for the erasure, or at least the suspension, of a shared moral code and conduct. It is uncertain if the DFMs related events were the sole reason for this renegotiation, but they surely became a trigger for the guild.

It is also undeniable that many of the guild's arguments are based on facts. The inflexibility of DFMs to universally ban RMT, rather than canalize it, is inexplainable from members' perspectives.

This belief is representative of their internalization of neoliberal values. Users guessed, "if something can produce wealth, why try to stop it?" Also, the criminalization of the digital artifacts traders is not a "mutually comprehensive" profit-oriented solution (*rikaishiau*) that some informants hoped for. The guild wanted DFMs in their organic user/platform/experience/community/profit structure. Members felt they own a virtual world and the trade that is part of it, but the marketplaces represents different companies and entities. They are fragments of other organics relations, between other users, of another community.

The trade platforms could have created an "RMT only" space rather than an "RMT free" one, and they decided not to. Marketing strategies were likely in place, especially retain the "secure" image (*anshin*) that the three largest *furima apuri* of Japan laboriously worked for—and that (in)famous problems of RMT could have been tainted. If this is the case, these approaches indeed gave their results, considering the high number of hard-to-reach over-60 customers, on which security should appeal, the platforms attracted through excellent usability and effective advertisement (MMD Labo, 2021).[6]

The guild now trades their digital artifacts on specific platforms, but Shunya maintains the "sellers are more, and buyers are less numerous" than generic DFMs. Also, purchases are limited to credit cards and not through "an easy-to-make account" that "the buyer can just top-up at the convenience store," like for all-purpose *furima apuri*. This constraint disincentives the users who do not have a bank account, so young players are left out of this commerce for the most part. The profits are also allegedly threatened by foreign players who pay for play and collect weapons to sell on Japanese or American markets. Many members discussed quitting RMT, threatening the guild's survival. If this is true, the community just faces players with a more developed *entrepreneurial self.*

The guild exemplifies how communities can internalize discourses from the public without elaborating upon the values they are importing. The capacity of the members to produce a subversive narrative, which in reality is not far from their own economic interests, is worth notice. It offers space to explore their multilayered internal process of translations—within their ontology and their epistemology. This transformative capacity is exemplified by their language (from English or Japanese to a new game language), their personal relations (from the game's associate to friends to business partners), and their trades (from the forums of the virtual world to DFMs to these new platforms). Each of these layers can be individually observed and then reassembled to comprehensively understand how the guild differentiated and negotiated meanings online and offline, interfacing its practices in-between these spaces.

## Conclusion

The informants' narratives suggest they have deeply internalized neoliberal parley and modus operandi in a similar fashion to the one mentioned in the literature. Among others, internal transparency, cooperation finalized to competition, self-reliance, and profit-oriented use of abilities, are the recurring arguments that bridge their morality with Bröckling's theory of subjectification. The guild members

seem to have a few short circuits between their moral code and behavior. In fact, while their idea of breaking the rules is argued as resistance to violence, they are the first to revisit aggressive stances, possibly only for profits. The information that interlocutors see RMT's income as "essential;" yet, overlook its time-per-hour revenue is also fascinating. The guild appears secluded in its logic and, in the pursuit of capital, experiencing a peculiar form of alienation and precarity, just like Berardi theorized. While the informants risked legal repercussions for short-term profits, DFMs and online games were true beneficiaries of the users' engagement with those platforms. Whether guild members consider it a job or not, their practices closely resemble cognitive labor. Following the literature discussed, the blurring informants experience between gaming (private time) and profit-seeking (productive time) for which they do not estimate RMT as work, would support this observation.

The article aimed to observe how the members' ambivalent moralities emerged, on what narratives it was structured, and what mechanics kept it in place. The data suggest that the ambivalent morality responds to the DFMs' restrictions on the trade of digital artifacts. The community saw this activity as part of their gameplay, felt power over it, and determined not to cease it. The game, the trade, and the community had become a briar patch. There was no way to possibly touch any of those elements without getting stung by its thorns.

Members' explanations for their insubordinate attitude are based upon two main discourses: resistance through camaraderie and quest for profit. The experiences of precarity do not seem dissimilar among the two subgroups; yet, exhaustive and specific research might reveal differently. The two tendencies have more than one crossing point, and it would be risky to simplify these visions as belonging to group-oriented and self-oriented informants. Each member appears flexible and rapid to adapt. Their divisions quickly disappear. These discourses generated internal debate only in the abstract. The materialization of their ambivalence hardly differed in most cases.

The intricate connections members developed before and after the insurgence of RMT were the substrate for their morality rooted in neoliberal beliefs. The trade became a substantial part of the *raison d'être* of the guild. The ambivalent morality allowed the guild to exist, and, until the guild existed, it needed this ambiguous moral code. It preserved the guild to the point that the game and the trade could be hardly disentangled from it; however, this ambiguity is now unnecessary because of a new free trade platform, and the guild is already losing full participation from some members. This last element suggests that, while surely profits, for the most part, excited the informants, resistance was not a mere cover for materialistic intents. The loss of engagement revolves around the loss of profits, but the idea of commune resistance provided the guild members with a compelling narrative to keep their bonds tight.

The thesis according to which this ambivalence is produced by internalizing neoliberal values seems confirmed by the data. There remains much space for further demonstration or confutation of this theory. It might also be interesting to explore the guild's future, now that their illicit but legal

practice can benefit from platforms where it is not prohibited. For the good and the bad, the struggle united the members. Now that this fight is over, the group must rely solely on camaraderie to stick together in their trade. Alternatively, they can decide just to play some games.

---

[1] Many exponents of the French Regulation School and Italian Workerism and Autonomism discuss of cognitive capitalism as a system of capitalist accumulation characteristic of post-Fordist countries with high scientific-technological density. The theory assumes that the extraction of surplus in these countries is now based on cognitive labor and knowledge. For a compact discussion, Fumagalli & Lucarelli (2007) made a relatively complete analysis. The manual edited by Vercellone (2006) is also rich in points on the topic. For a more recent and explorative collection of essays, again, Fumagalli (et. al 2019) produced invaluable contributions.

[2] This observation is referring to the time of this writing, as well during the last conclusive interviews held during the fieldwork in July 2021. During the 2020 alone three major service platforms Game Trade (gametrade.jp), Game Club (gameclub.jp) and RMT Jakkupotto (www.iimy.co.jp) emerged. It might not reflect future mutation of the Japanese virtual economy's condition.

[3] Files containing all players activities, visualized messages and information reported in text format.

[4] Literally: "A *hetare* cannot farm/grow not even sasa bamboo," a type of small bamboo plant that grows very easily, without any care and often spring from the soil naturally.

[5] At times, this can mutate in just the suffix -*chū* attached to the character name or in this case DFM, for example "naninani-san" become "nanani-chū" or if a DFM "DFM name-chū."

[6] Between 2018 and 2020, two out of three major DFMs of Japan all produced infomercial that mentioned safety (*anzen*) feeling relieved/secure (*anshin*) as keywords. The same words are also extensively deployed in all three companies' information website. (Mercari, n.d.; Rakuma, n.d.; PayPay Furima, n.d.).

**Bibliography**

Allison A. (2013), *Precarious Japan*, Duke University Press, Durham – London.
Amit, V., & Rapport, N. (2002), Anthropology and Community, *The Trouble with Community*, Pluto Press, 13-25.
Ariga K. & Okazawa R. (2009), Labor Immobility in Japan, *GCOE Discussion Paper*, No.44, 1-61.
Brinton M. (2010) Social class and economic life chances in post-industrial Japan, Ishida H. & Slater D. eds., *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, London – New York, Routledge, 114-134.
Briziarelli M. & Armano E. (2020) The social production of radical space, *Capital and Class*, 44 (2), 1-17.
Bröckling, U. (2016), *The Entrepreneurial Self*, London – Thousand Oaks, Sage.
Foucault, M. (2013 [1984]), *Historie de la Sexualité (Tome 2): L'usage des Plaisirs*, Paris, Gallimard.
Castells, M. (2004), Informationalism, Networks and Networks Societies, M. Castells ed. *The Network Society*, Cheltenham – Northampton, Edward Elgar 3-45.
Cohen A. P. (1985), *The Symbolic Construction of Community,* Chichester, Horwood.
Digital Revenger (2021), *Gēmuakaunto & dēta no hanbai baibai sagi higai no henkin hōhō tejun sōdan madoguchi* https://bit.ly/3ELEDen (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Farman, J. (2011), *Mobile Interface Theory*, London. Routledge.
Fuchs, C. (2014), *OccupyMedia!* Alresford, John Hunt Publishing Zero Books.
Fumagalli, A. (2007), The Global Economic Crisis and Socioeconomic Governance, A. Fumagalli et al. eds., *Crisis in the Global Economy*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 61-84.
Fumagalli, A. and Lucarelli, S. (2007), La finestra di fronte, *Quaderni di Dipartimento*, No. 201, Pavia, Università degli Studi di Pavia.
Fumagalli, A. (2019), Twenty theses on contemporary capitalism (bio-cognitve capitalism), A. Fumagalli et al. *Cognitive Capitalism, Welfare and Labour*, London – New York, Routledge, 61-76.
Gagné Okura N. (2020) From Employment Security to Managerial Precarity, *Pacific Affairs*, 93 (2), 379-400.
Himanen P. (2001), *The Hacker Ethics*, New York, Random House.
Hjorth L. & Richardson I. (2014), *Gaming in Social, Locative, and Mobile Media*, London, Palgrave.
Horst H. & Miller D. (2012), The Digital and the Human, Horst H. & Miller D. eds., *Digital Anthropology*, London – New York, Berg, 3-36.
Ito, M. (2005), Introduction: Personal, Portable, Pedestrian, M. Ito, et al eds., *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1-16.
Ishida H. (2010), Does Class matter in Japan? Ishida H. & Slater D. eds., *Social Class in Contemporary Japan*, London – New York, Routledge, 33-56.
Kato, H. (2005); Japanese Youth and the Imagining of Keitai M. Ito et al. eds., *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 103-122.
Kergel D. & Heidkamp B. (2017a), Media Change– Precarity Within and Precarity Through the Internet D. Kergel & B. Heidkamp eds. *Precarity Within the Digital Age*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 9-27.
Kergel D. & Heidkamp B. (2017b), Precarity and Social Media from the Entrepreneurial Self to the Precariatised Mind, D.Kergel & B.Heidkamp eds. *Precarity Within the Digital Age*, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, 99-114.
Kergel D. & Hepp R. (2020), Start Ups, Social Networking and Self-Tracking, T. Rachwał et al. (eds.), Precarious Places, Wiesbaden, Springer VS, eBook.
Lebert, D. & Vercellone, C. (2006), Il ruolo della conoscenza nella dinamica capitalistica di lungo period, C. Vercellone (ed.), *Il capitalismo cognitivo*, Roma, Manifestolibri, 19-37.
Melin, M. (2014), Flight as Fight, C. Fuchs & M. Sandoval eds. *Critique, Social Media and Information Society*, London – New York, Routledge, 231-247.
Mercari (2020), *Kabushiki Kaisha Merukari Gaiyō* https://bit.ly/3hXo5GI (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.

Mercari (n.d.), *Merukari anshin anzen sengen!* https://bit.ly/2XEq1fO (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Mercari (n.d.), *Merukari no senyō shuppin (torioki) ni tsuite* https://bit.ly/3kz3r1a (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Mercari, (n.d.) *Gēmuakaunto ya gēmu-nai no tsūka, aitemu nado no denshi dēta* https://bit.ly/2ZuoYQJ (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry (2020), *Fusei kyōsō bōshi-hō* (Unfair Competition Prevention Act), Chiteki zaisan seisaku-shitsu https://bit.ly/3AwdARP (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
MMD Labo, (2021), *2021-Nen furimasābisu apuri ni kansuru riyō jittai chōsa* https://bit.ly/3lQ5Vrw (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Nardi B. (2010), *My life as night elf priest*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.
National Police Agency Cybercrime Project https://bit.ly/3hVEfAj (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Neto rabo (2016/11/01), *Furimaapuri "merukari" totsuzen no kiyaku henkō de hinan gēmu no akaunto baibai o hissori kaikin* https://bit.ly/3o0xAIN (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Nikkei Shinbun (2018/3/18), *Netto baibai no chūko-hin, nisemono dattara?* https://s.nikkei.com/3kBgleW (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Nikkei Shinbun (a) (2020/1/15), *Atobarai peidī de sagi merukari riyōsha nado higai* https://s.nikkei.com/3AFm1Ku (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Nikkei Shinbun (b) (2020/7/26), *Sono shuppin, ihō kamo furimaapuri de tekihatsu aitsugu* https://s.nikkei.com/3EJtnPI (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Ohta S. et al. (2008) The Endless Ice Age, *Japanese Economy*, 35 (3), 55-86.
Osawa M. et al. (2013), Precarious Work in Japan, *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57 (3). 309-334.
Postill J. (2008) Localizing the internet beyond communities and networks *Journal New Media & Society*, 10 (3), 413-431.
Postill J. (2011), *Localizing the Internet*, New York & Oxford Berghan.
Rakuma (2018) *[Jūyō] kinshi shōhin no tsuika ni tsuite (gēmudēta kanren)* https://bit.ly/39B9DiI (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Rakuma (n.d.) *Rakuma anshin・anzen no tame no torikumi!* https://bit.ly/3zuIn04 (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Takahashi K. (2019), Long-term Employment as Social Norm, *Japan Labor Issues*, 3 (19), 12-17.
Taylor T.L. (2009), The Assemblage of Play, *Games & Culture*, 4 (4), 331-339.
Time&Space (2019/5/31), *Akaunto kyōyū suruto kiken? Baibai wa ihō?* https://bit.ly/3CNFUja (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Vercellone C. (2006), *Il capitalismo cognitivo*, Roma, Manifestolibri.
Vercellone C. & Giuliani A. (2019), An introduction to cognitive capitalism, A. Fumagalli et al. *Cognitive Capitalism, Welfare and Labour*, London – New York, Routledge, 10-32.
Web Tantōsha Forum (2014/11/16) *Furimaapuri no yūzā ni totte "kimochīi" no kongen o kangaeru* https://bit.ly/3i0TCqZ (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.
Yahoo*, Yafuoku!, PayPay furimade wa anshin anzen ni go riyō itadaku tame ni https://bit.ly/3kGroUx* (Internet Document), last retrieved September 22, 2021.