Paid to Play: Gender, Intersectionality, and Labor in Online Game Companionship

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Using interview data from game companions across 19 countries on the gaming freelancer platform E-Pal, this study explores the nature of their work and how workers' intersectional identities relate to their work experiences. The findings suggest that gaming companionship work is a highly affective form of playbor, as producing or manipulating relationships and emotional responses is more important than gaming itself in the labor process. Game companions' labor is also gendered and racialized on this platform. Female workers, especially Asian and Latina females, are more successful, but they experience more gender-related stereotypes and objectification. Moreover, the findings suggest that Black workers are especially marginalized. On an international labor platform such as E-Pal, languages, time zones, and local political economies shape the labor process and demonstrate unequal power relations in the global gaming industry.

Keywords: platform capitalism, digital game labor, game companionship, gender, race

Video games are not only places of entertainment and play but also platforms for work and labor (Yee, 2006). Research on digital game labor has focused on four main areas: game development, below-the-line labor, player production, and game labor politics (de Peuter & Young, 2019). Inquiry on the labor of game development usually involves work organization (Hodgson & Briand, 2013), labor process (O'Donnell, 2014), working conditions (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2006), and professional identities (Weststar, 2015). Studies about below-the-line labor have examined game testers (Bulut, 2015), community managers (Kerr & Kelleher, 2015), and game promotion (Huntemann, 2013). Player production is about the participatory culture of players and how this culture transforms into profits for the gaming industry (de Peuter & Young, 2019). Game labor politics involve the autonomy and resistance of laborers (Kim & Lee, 2020). All of these four areas have focused on formal game work, except for player production. As new technologies evolve and the player population and economic actors expand, new forms of labor, including informal and gig work, are emerging in the gaming industry (de Peuter & Young, 2019; Zhao, 2023). The social and competitive nature of online games provides opportunities for gamers and companies

to innovate business models for profit (Zhao, 2023). Examples include paid boosting (Miller, 2015), gold farming (Tai & Hu, 2018), game companion/coaching (M. Li, 2023), and game streaming (Guarriello, 2019). These services were at first organized by gaming guilds and studios but have grown to rely on online platforms.

Platform-mediated game work, a novel segment within the platform economy, involves matching customer demands with workers who offer assistance or entertainment in gameplay (Zhao, 2023). To help gamers advance their skills and climb competitive ranks, paid services such as boosting and coaching have emerged (Miller, 2015). Video games also have social functions, as people can use games to build and maintain social relationships, especially in online multiplayer games (Depping, Johanson, & Mandryk, 2018). This has led to the emergence of game companionship, a service where customers can pay gig workers to play video games with them. The service first appeared in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) clubs as early as 2013 and gained popularity during the COVID-19 lockdown because of people's need for entertainment and social interaction (Ouyang, 2020). One influential Chinese paid game companionship platform, Bixin, had more than 40 million registered users in 2020 (M. Li, 2023). Outside China, numerous similar platforms are emerging and growing in other countries, such as E-Pal (United States), Lita (Singapore), Gamigo (Germany), GamerLink (Canada), and BattleBuddy (Greece).

M. Li (2023) and Zhao (2023, 2024) studied game companions in China. M. Li (2023) examined the precarity of game companionship work and found that the industry was male-dominated. Zhao (2024) further explored gender disparities in platform-mediated game work, including game companionship, and found that female laborers had become more informal and vulnerable because of cultural, social, and technological factors. These recent studies contribute to our understanding of this new type of platform labor, and their findings are generally consistent with existing research on gender differences in the platform economy (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016; Duffy, 2016; Vyas, 2021). However, it should be noted that they only examined game companionship work from a gendered perspective, and their studies are limited to a context (China) that is relatively monolithic, with less ethnic diversity and a more restricted Internet environment. Considering the unique gaming landscape in China, which has more active female gamers than in any other country (Harper, 2020), it is reasonable to conduct a gendered analysis. However, as mentioned previously, game companionship is growing in other parts of the world. Gamers from diverse backgrounds engage in the industry, and people's intersectional identities can relate to outcomes and well-being in workplaces (Behm-Morawitz, 2017). Incorporating the varied identities and different backgrounds of game companions would enrich the existing literature on platform labor studies, game studies, and critical identity research.

This study recruited 27 gig workers from E-Pal (https://www.epal.gg/), the largest gaming freelancer platform with 1.5 million registered users and more than 150,000 verified game companions (L. Li, 2023). In addition to its primary service, game companionship, E-Pal also provides chilling (interactive services in nongaming settings) and customized services. Although E-Pal is a U.S.-based platform, its workers come from all over the world and speak 44 languages. Thus, it serves as a representative site for examining intersectionality and labor issues in game companionship. This study aims to expand the current research by asking two questions: What is the nature of being a gig worker on E-Pal? How do gig workers' intersectional identities and diverse backgrounds relate to their work experiences? The findings suggest that

game companions' labor is a type of playbor where the boundaries between "work" and "play" have merged (Kücklich, 2005). Their labor is highly affective and involves the commodification of emotions, as producing or manipulating relationships and emotional responses is more important to the labor process than gaming itself. On this platform, the playbor of game companions is gendered and racialized. Female companions, especially Asian and Latina females, are more successful than other groups, yet they experience more gender-related stereotypes and objectification. The gendered and racialized playbor seems to be a designed affordance of the platform, aimed at maximizing profits, as the enjoyment of privileged customers depends on the practice of consuming the Other (Bulut, 2020). This study also situates E-Pal within the global political economy, where game companions are laboring under unequal power structures within the global gaming industry. Languages, time zones, and local political economy significantly impact the working experiences of game companions, presenting barriers and challenges for some workers when they serve customers primarily from the Global North. The main contribution of this research is that it uses a diverse group of informants to examine game companionship labor, further theorizing the concept of "playbor" (Kücklich, 2005) through an intersectional lens. In addition, the study incorporates Bulut's (2020) framework of ludopolitics to analyze inequalities in game companionship at various levels, both locally and globally. The limitations and future research directions are discussed in the final section.

Gender and Identity in Gig Work

Existing research on gender dimensions in the gig economy has focused on participation, motivation, the pay gap, segregation, and other challenges related to gender. The gig economy may appear to be a labor market devoid of the gender bias of human managers and employers, as it is governed by algorithms (Milkman, Elliott-Negri, Griesbach, & Reich, 2021). In this way, it has the potential to improve gender equality, as female gig workers can benefit from the anonymity, inclusiveness, and flexibility it provides (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016). Historically, precarious work was mostly undertaken by women who were disadvantaged in the formal labor market (Young, 2010). However, Hunt and Samman (2019) found that there are fewer women than men among gig workers in seven Western countries. In terms of motivation for engaging in gig work, flexibility and income are important for both genders (Churchill & Craig, 2019). However, gig work generates more income for men, whereas flexibility is more crucial for women because of their schedules being constrained by nonwork commitments (Churchill & Craig, 2019). Like the traditional labor market, there is still a gender wage gap in the gig economy, with men earning more than women on average (Cook, Diamond, Hall, List, & Oyer, 2021). Despite working longer hours, women's hourly rates are only two-thirds of men's rates (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016). Female gig workers are more vulnerable about income and economic security (Churchill & Craig, 2019).

Gender segregation and other challenges also exist in the gig economy. Women are rarely chosen for technical support tasks (Pesole, Brancati, Fernández-Macías, Biagi, & González Vázquez, 2018). Men dominate services such as software development and transport, whereas women tend to take on tasks that are traditionally viewed as feminine, such as caregiving (Churchill & Craig, 2019). Women are also influenced by gender stereotypes and algorithmic bias. Research shows that gender bias in customer reviews exists on platforms like TaskRabbit (Hannák et al., 2017) and Uber (Cook et al., 2021). These stereotypes can affect the algorithmic rankings of women, leading to fewer opportunities for them (James, 2022). A study also found that women are automatically assigned to lower-paying tasks on a low-skill gig platform (Cullen,

Humphries, & Pakzad-Hurson, 2018). In addition, as gig workers are independent contractors, platforms have no responsibility to ensure their health and safety (James, 2022). Women are more likely to experience health issues, such as fatigue, stress, and anxiety (Howard, 2017), as well as harassment at work (Ma, Rivera, Yao, & Yoon, 2022). These findings suggest that gig platforms tend to reproduce old patterns of gender inequality (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016; Duffy & Schwartz, 2018).

Researchers have employed an intersectional approach to examine inequality in the platform economy. Most platform workers are immigrants or individuals from racial minority groups (Gebrial, 2022; Van Doorn, 2017). Van Doorn (2017) argues that platform labor is rooted in a world shaped by capitalist values, which depend on the gendered and racialized subordination of marginalized workers. Gender, race, language, and immigration status all contribute to increased precarity in platform work (Popan & Anaya-Boig, 2022). Numerous studies have demonstrated platform workers' intersectional vulnerabilities to precarious work. Kwan's (2022) study in China shows that the working class, single mothers, and migrants are in the most unstable situations. Research has also found that race plays a significant role in the hiring process of gig workers (Curran, 2020; Vyas, 2021). Curran's (2020) study on a paid English learning platform reveals that White male American teachers have considerable advantages over other groups. Vyas (2021) claims that women of color are underrepresented in the online labor market and have low-paid jobs despite their competence. Race and gender disparities are usually used by digital platforms to extract unpaid or underpaid digital labor and legitimize wage theft (Casilli, 2017). Casilli (2017) further contends that inequality is amplified in non-U.S.-based workplaces, where digital work is influenced by time zones, languages, payment mechanisms, and Internet connectivity.

Gaming, Intersectionality, and Game Work

While statistical data consistently show an almost equal proportion of female and male players, gaming culture is still misogynistic (deWinter & Kocurek, 2017). deWinter and Kocurek (2017) suggest that the foundational definition of hard-core gamer remains masculine. Game narratives have also long been criticized for perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and objectifying female characters (M. Perreault, Perreault, Jenkins, & Morrison, 2018). Females in online games, especially in competitive or multiplayer games, frequently face online harassment, including verbal abuse, threats, and sexist comments (Ekiciler, Ahioğlu, Yıldırım, Ajas, & Kaya, 2022). Gaming is also a place of racism. A study finds that males and Whites are over-represented in gaming characters, whereas females, Hispanics, and Native Americans are underrepresented (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). The narratives of gaming contain racial stereotypes that tend to depict White characters as heroes, Asian characters as martial artists, and Black characters as criminals (Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011), which can lead to the formation and reinforcement of racial/ethnic stereotypes among players (Behm-Morawitz & Ta, 2014). Scholars increasingly recognize the importance of considering intersectionality when examining inequality in gameplay. Women of color, LGBTQ+, and other marginalized groups face more challenges and discrimination that must be acknowledged and addressed (Cameron, 2019).

Inequalities also exist in game work. The formal workforce in the gaming industry is dominated by middle-class men, with women being significantly underrepresented, especially in technical and leadership roles (Prescott & Bogg, 2013). Female game laborers have worked in masculinized and hostile

working environments (Harvey & Fisher, 2015). Gender and racial stereotypes can also impact informal labor within the gaming industry, typically composed of individuals from peripheral and semi-peripheral regions (Zhao, 2023). One study found that female game streamers faced more objectification, as they were more likely to attract comments on their physical appearance, while male streamers typically received comments about their game content (Nakandala, Ciampaglia, Su, & Ahn, 2017). Other research on game streaming also shows that female streamers tend to commodify their bodies and emotions to gain attention and profit (Guarriello, 2019; Zhao, 2023). Nakamura's (2009) study examines the racialization of game labor in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and finds that Asian players are depicted as threats and unwanted guest workers. Although there is limited research on race and informal game work, gamer companions' labor—similar to that of game streamers—combines creative labor with interactive service and requires high levels of performative and emotional work to engage and satisfy audiences (Woodcock & Johnson, 2019). Given the service-oriented aspects of game companionship, this study could also benefit from incorporating insights from race and ethnicity studies into service work. Glenn (1992) suggests that White women in service work are viewed only in terms of gender, whereas women of color are subjected to the combined impacts of both gender and race. Racial minority groups in service work often face more racist attitudes and behaviors from clients (Baines, 2008) and receive lower evaluations and wages (Alexander, 2021).

Methods and Data

To examine the experiences of gig workers on E-Pal, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 27 participants from diverse backgrounds. I used purposive sampling and selected participants based on their gender, race/ethnicity (self-reported), country, number of orders, and time spent on the platform. I looked through their profiles on E-Pal and messaged them for additional screening. The interviewees included 18 females and 9 males from 19 countries, with 9 from North America, 3 from Asia, 6 from Europe, 4 from Latin America, and 5 from other regions. I categorized the countries into five regions because North America, Asia, Europe, and Latin America have bigger gaming markets (Kerr, 2017), and there are more gig workers from these regions. Countries not in these four regions were categorized as "other regions." To protect the privacy of the interviewees, I coded them using numbers. Detailed information about the interviewees can be found in Table 1. The interviews lasted between 50 and 120 minutes and focused on the interviewees' motivation for work, the nature of their work, and their interactions with customers and the platform. A thematic analysis approach was used to identify the common themes in the transcripts. While the relatively small sample size of 27 participants may raise concerns about interviewer bias and validity (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 2008), such sample sizes offer considerable advantages in qualitative, inductive, and exploratory research. They enable close interactions between researchers and respondents, allowing researchers to examine individual experiences in detail, develop compelling conceptual insights, and therefore enhance both the reliability and the depth of findings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006).

Table 1. Interviewee Information.

Code	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Country	Status	Number of orders	Time working on E-Pal (days)
Interviewee 1	Female	Asian	USA	Part time	599	1,180
Interviewee 2	Female	Asian	Italy	Part time	35	57
Interviewee 3	Female	White	Germany	Full time	250	30
Interviewee 4	Female	Asian	Philippines	Full time	2.1k	1,162
Interviewee 5	Male	White	UK	Full time	171	245
Interviewee 6	Male	Turks	Turkey	Part time	248	275
Interviewee 7	Female	White	USA	Full time	2.1k	854
Interviewee 8	Female	White	USA	Part time	5.4k	607
Interviewee 9	Female	Latina	Mexico	Full time	786	225
Interviewee 10	Male	Asian	France	Full time	1.3k	788
Interviewee 11	Female	White	Australia	Part time	872	1,110
Interviewee 12	Male	White	USA	Part time	109	678
Interviewee 13	Male	Asian	USA	Part time	415	793
Interviewee 14	Female	Latina	Venezuela	Full time	10.6k	541
Interviewee 15	Male	Black British	UK	Part time	168	786
Interviewee 16	Female	African American	USA	Part time	462	530
Interviewee 17	Male	Latino	Costa Rica	Full time	161	840
Interviewee 18	Female	Asian	Canada	Part time	413	852
Interviewee 19	Female	Asian	Canada	Part time	107	96
Interviewee 20	Female	White	Spain	Part time	58.9k	715
Interviewee 21	Female	African American	USA	Part time	699	296
Interviewee 22	Female	Asian	Vietnam	Full time	2.2k	1,197
Interviewee 23	Male	Arab	Saudi Arabia	Part time	489	606
Interviewee 24	Male	Arab	Morocco	Part time	401	912
Interviewee 25	Female	African	Algeria	Part time	308	920
Interviewee 26	Female	Latina	Brazil	Full time	470	545
Interviewee 27	Female	Asian	Singapore	Full time	3.6k	1,240

Findings

Being a Game Companion on E-Pal: Flexibility, Precarity, and Affective Labor

On E-Pal, gamers operate as gig workers contracted by customers to play games together. When asked about interviewees' motivation for working, all viewed gaming on the platform as a profitable activity that allowed them to earn extra money. Eleven interviewees were full-time "ePals" (the designation for gig workers on E-Pal) who played games for a living, whereas 16 were part-time who worked here as a side hustle. The threshold for entry is low. As listed on E-Pal, the criteria for becoming an ePal are being (a) 18 years or older, (b) able to provide service in at least one game (gaming level was not required), and (c) humorous and talkative. After successfully applying, the platform also requires ePals to include pictures and

audio samples in their profiles for customers to assess. Interviewees expressed that clients would judge game companions based on their appearance and voice to decide whether to purchase the service.

Game companions usually work in a quiet room at home using a computer or mobile phone with Internet access and headphones. Sometimes, they need to have their microphones or cameras on at customers' requests. They have the flexibility to choose the games they can play with customers and set their service prices, typically on a per-game basis, ranging from $0 to $20. E-Pal employs a two-sided matching mechanism where customers and workers can choose each other. Game companions also have agency about their schedules; they can decide whether to accept an order or negotiate the completion time with customers. The average daily working hours vary significantly among interviewees: Some part-time ePals work fewer than 2 hours per day, whereas some full-time workers may work more than 10 hours daily.

Interviewees indicated that their income heavily relied on their popularity and exposure on the platform. While orders on E-Pal are not allocated by algorithms, workers' visibility to customers is determined by algorithms. According to interviewee 8, "If more people see you when they first come to this website, they are more likely to choose you." E-Pal uses a 5-level rating system to rate game companions from low to high: ePal1, ePal2, ePal3, eStar1, and eStar2. This system influences exposure by prioritizing higher-rated ePals in search results and recommendations to potential customers. Interviewees suggested that to achieve a higher rating, they needed to ensure their profiles stood out, remain active on the platform, consistently receive orders, and maintain good client ratings. Although the platform's rating calculation is transparent to gig workers, their work opportunities remain unstable. For example, interviewee 10, a full-time ePal, said:

> This job is inconsistent. One month, I made about $2,000 because I had a very generous customer who ordered more than 50 times. And then once I only had three orders in the entire week. If it's not in the ranked season, there is no reason for people to play much. So I only made like $50 that week. It varies a lot . . . Once, one of my regular customers suddenly disappeared on E-Pal.

Although game companionship incorporates more playful elements than other gig work, it also exhibits a precarious nature, as outlined in Kücklich's (2005) original playbor framework. Despite E-Pal advertising game companionship as a flexible and high-income job opportunity for gamers, interviewees suggested that only a few top ePals who had the most visibility and fan base could earn decent incomes. The majority of interviewees did not feel optimistic about their career prospects and viewed it primarily as a part-time or transitional job.

Although E-Pal did not disclose the demographics of its customers, all interviewees revealed that most customers were male. These customers were aged between 18 and 30, with the majority being in their late twenties. 19 interviewees described their clients as lonely people who lacked friends to play games with in real life. In addition to game-related communication, interviewees mentioned that they also needed to provide enjoyable experiences to customers during service. This involved actively responding to customers, offering emotional support, and cultivating a friendly atmosphere. E-Pal also encouraged game companions

to build long-term relationships with customers after completing service. In this sense, game companionship constitutes a type of affective labor, as it involves producing or manipulating relationships and emotional responses (Hardt & Negri, 2004). An example is from interviewee 26:

> Whenever I am in an order with one of my customers, I just try to ask them some simple questions like their names, so I can call them by their names. I would let them know that I am willing to really help them in whatever they need. If they want to share any information about their lives, like they are tired of their current jobs or don't know how to talk to girls, I will respond to them and don't make them feel ignored.

When performing their affective labor in game companionship, workers need to use various skills traditionally viewed as feminine, such as showing care, expressing emotions, and building relationships (deWinter, Kocurek & Vie, 2017). Twenty-five interviewees expressed that companionship was more important than gaming in their business, while the other two focused more on gaming because they mainly offered coaching services. Unlike other types of playbor, such as "gold farmers" and esports athletes, game companions' work involves more affective elements. Affective labor is essential on the platform, as it is not only a required skill for game companions but also a strategy to build customer relationships to ensure business stability.

A Platform Dominated by Females

In contrast to previous research on gender inequality in the gig economy, the findings from this study suggest that female gig workers on E-Pal are more successful than their male counterparts. Interviewees revealed that females were more likely to get orders from customers, the majority of whom were men. Although the platform did not disclose the gender composition of game companions, all interviewees observed that more females were on the order rankings and front page. Both female and male interviewees agreed that this market was more competitive and challenging for men. As interviewee 6 (a male ePal) mentioned:

> Girls just dominate this website because this website was initially created for only women. Sometimes I feel quite upset about that. I have to keep sending messages to my visitors to get customers. But girls are just automatically getting messages from men, so they don't have to make any effort but I have to exert effort.

Interviewees also noted that clients' expectations of female and male ePals differed. M. Li (2023) categorizes game companions into two types: leisure companions, who focus more on having enjoyable conversations and providing emotional comfort to clients, and technical companions, who usually help customers improve their gaming skills and level up in games. Because of the lack of survey data, it is unconvincing to conclude that there is "gender segregation" in game companions. However, interviewees suggested that because of different customer expectations, more female ePals provided "leisure" companionship, while males tended to provide "technical" services. For example, interviewee 7, a female ePal who had more than 2,000 orders, said:

> I feel like to be a successful female ePal, you need to be pleasing to the eye and have a
> nice voice. You must be welcoming and can't be too brash. But for male ePals, you have
> to be good at the game and have the ability to either coach or carry clients in games.

Similar views were expressed by the male interviewees. Seven of nine males said they almost reached a professional gaming level, with two certified as pro gamers. However, they observed that good gaming skills did not necessarily mean more customers. For instance, interviewee 17, a retired pro gamer with more than two years of full-time experience on the platform, had completed only 161 orders as of the interview day. In contrast, when asked about their gaming proficiency, only two of the 18 females reported being above average. These findings further demonstrate that gaming skills are not the most important factor in the success of game companions.

Another gender difference observed in this study is gender-related harassment and objectification. Interviewees mentioned that harassment was prevalent, especially in the messaging channel where any user could message them directly. Common harassing messages on this site include sexual harassment, hate speech, and scams. All interviewees expressed that they had experienced or observed hate speech and scams, but more females experienced sexual harassment, and one male interviewee also mentioned that he was sexually harassed by a male customer. Although explicit content was prohibited on this site, interviewees stated that they could not block "not safe for work" (NSFW) content. Interviewee 8 suggested that:

> Even though NSFW is not allowed, customers hint at those services. But I don't do any
> kind of thing that could be misconstrued as sexual or NSFW. My page is like completely
> safe for work. I only post pictures from the neck up and I don't do full-body pictures. But
> I still get many messages asking me to provide NSFW content.

When the platform initially launched in March 2020, it used the name "E-girl" and heavily marketed itself as a service providing intimacy and companionship in gaming through female gamers (Tran, 2022). Interviewees suggested that many female companions wanted to legitimize their labor and expressed grievances related to the stereotypes associated with "E-girl," a term long used as a slur to degrade female gamers. As a result, the platform rebranded and used the more gender-neutral name "E-Pal" in April 2020. However, when conducting interviews with ePals in July 2023, interviewees suggested that the platform still used women for marketing, not only on its website but also on other channels like YouTube and Instagram (Interviewee 7; Interviewee 11). This continued emphasis on marketing female ePals suggests that despite the name change, the platform still relies heavily on the appeal of female workers to attract clients.

How Race/Ethnicity Intersects With Gender

In line with existing research suggesting racial discrimination in the platform economy (Edelman, Luca, & Svirsky, 2017), interviewees expressed experiencing racism. However, they noted that racism did not always affect their work opportunities on this site. Nineteen interviewees observed that Asian and Latina females were more successful than other groups on E-Pal. However, interviewees also clarified that sexual objectification and stereotypes made these two groups more likely to succeed. According to interviewees,

the stereotypes usually associated with Asian female ePals included "being submissive," "having animated voices," and "looking cute." Meanwhile, Latina female ePals were thought to be "sexy," "hot," and "talkative." As interviewee 14 mentioned:

> I can feel race does matter. I guess that customers generalize Asian girls as cute and gentle. And they would think Latinos (Latina females) are talkative and hot. I think Asian and Latino are more welcoming . . . Customers might think White girls are less likely to respond.

The Asian group has reported experiencing certain advantages or positive outcomes that they attribute to their race/ethnicity. Asian interviewees also stated that they experienced racial discrimination on this platform, but two interviewees (Interviewee 10, Interviewee 22) expressed that reporting racism against Asians would be more likely to succeed as the CEO and other managers of E-Pal were Chinese (L. Li, 2023). In addition, Asian interviewees expressed that they encountered positive stereotypes because of their race/ethnicity (Interviewee 2, Interviewee 10, and Interviewee 18). Korean and Chinese teams dominate professional eSports competitions in *League of Legends*, the most popular game on E-Pal. Therefore, being Korean or Chinese could increase customer confidence in their gaming skills. This was expressed by interviewee 18:

> I mainly play jungle. It's the most demanding position in *League of Legends*. A lot of customers will tell me, you're Korean, no wonder you can play jungle well, not every girl can play jungle. I guess that makes me special on E-Pal.

Eight male interviewees noted that they did not observe racial differences. One White male thought he was more attractive than males in other groups, but that did not bring him more customers (Interviewee 12). Male interviewees tended to think customers cared more about their skills than about their race. However, consistent with previous research (Edelman et al., 2017), interviewees expressed that the Black group was the most marginalized for both females and males. Interviewee 15 explained that Black ePals were usually associated with negative stereotypes, which made them unpopular among customers: "There are a lot of stereotypes that Black people are more aggressive or they are just going to potentially be angrier. They are not the preference of customers who are looking for fun."

An African American interviewee (Interviewee 16) also mentioned that the platform did not prioritize Black ePals, resulting in less exposure for them. The lack of visibility led some to leave the platform, with few remaining. Gray (2012, 2020) contends that the exclusion of Black gamers exists not only in gaming narratives but also in gaming communities. This is because the gaming industry has long targeted and catered to White males, positioning them as the default gamers; minority gamers, especially Black gamers, are not regarded as legitimate participants, leading to their stigmatization as deviant bodies (Gray, 2012).

Languages

The previous two sections suggest that game companions' labor is gendered and racialized on E-Pal. Casilli (2017) proposes that gender and race inequalities in the global platform economy are related to coloniality, which refers to enduring unequal power structures that originated from colonialism and continue

to shape culture, labor, and social relations (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Similarly, within the gaming industry, Bulut (2020) argues that its gendered and racialized structure stems from unequal global production relations. Bulut (2020) introduces the ludopolitics framework, which suggests that the pleasure of the privileged White male group depends on the exploitation of the Other. Bulut's framework extends beyond local inequalities to analyze how privileged groups also determine who works and who plays at the global level. While the ludopolitics framework primarily focuses on game production, this study can incorporate insights from it, as E-Pal operates within the broader political economy of the global game industry. The following three sections situate E-Pal within the global political economy and explore how languages, time zones, and local political economy can influence workers' experiences on this platform.

English-language proficiency is related to job opportunities and can influence how laborers with an immigrant background communicate with their employers (Ono & Zavodny, 2008). As E-Pal is a U.S.-based platform catering primarily to English-speaking customers, English hegemony exists on this platform. The website indicates that ePals speak 44 languages, with English being the dominant language. Since game companionship involves intimacy and emotional connection, workers must effectively cater to and communicate with customers, which necessitates a good understanding of and proficiency in the customers' languages. However, because the majority of customers speak English, eight interviewees whose native language is not English mentioned facing linguistic challenges in their work, making them less competitive than native English speakers. For example, interviewee 14, a native Spanish speaker, said, "At first, my English was rusty. I couldn't have conversations with customers, so I practiced English for four months and my orders increased by 200%."

However, four interviewees expressed that being bilingual or multilingual could help them attract more customers. Interviewee 3, a native German speaker, suggested that customers preferred to speak their native languages during gameplay:

> I indicated on my page that I could speak German and English. I think that is my advantage. Fifty percent of my clients speak German and 50% speak English. Some Germans just want to speak German to people while playing games.

This indicates that being a non-native English speaker is not necessarily a disadvantage on this global platform. To better serve customers from diverse backgrounds, the platform offers a filter function that allows users to sort ePals by 44 languages. Game companions on E-Pal can also specify the languages they speak in their profiles to attract more customers. For instance, interviewee 9, originally from Mexico, found that speaking Spanish helped her build a loyal customer base among Latinos in the United States. Interviewee 6 even provided paid language exchange service, as he could speak Turkish, English, and Bulgarian.

Time Zones

The inequality of play on E-Pal is also evident in time zones. Casilli (2017) suggests that non-U.S.-based platform workers are influenced by differentials in time zones. An important aspect of international labor platforms like E-Pal is that buyers and sellers are located in different spaces and time zones. Time zone is crucial in the platform economy as it can reflect unequal power relations between the Global North

and the Global South (Kassem, 2023). If clients are primarily from the Global North, while workers are mainly in the Global South, then workers would need to organize their working schedules according to clients' locations (Kassem, 2023). Such false flexibility could result in uneven working opportunities, overwork, and exhaustion. Customers on E-Pal are mainly from North America (the largest source) and Europe, which has a significant impact on workers in Asia, Africa, and other regions. For example, interviewee 4, based in the Philippines, highlighted the difficulties of adjusting her schedule to accommodate customers from the United States:

> I work here full-time but it's very hard. Most of my customers are from the United States. They usually like to play games at night, and that's my morning! No one likes to play games in the morning. But I have to support myself, so I use American time in the Philippines.

Worsely, interviewee 24, based in Morocco, relied on medication because of frequent late-night coaching sessions. These accounts demonstrate that while North American customers enjoy leisure time through gaming, companions in other regions struggle to adjust their schedules to meet customers' preferences. This situation goes beyond affecting work-life balance, contributing to physical and mental health problems. The platform worsens these work-related health issues by categorizing ePals as gig workers, thereby avoiding responsibility for ensuring ePals' health.

Local Political Economy

Although work on E-Pal is not constrained by geographic space, local political economy still affects who plays and who works (Bulut, 2020). When asked why they worked on this platform, some interviewees cited a higher income compared with their local labor market. This reason was especially common for workers from Latin America (Interviewee 14 from Venezuela, Interviewee 17 from Costa Rica, and Interviewee 26 from Brazil) and Southeast Asia (Interviewee 4 from the Philippines and Interviewee 22 from Vietnam). For workers from these countries, a gig job on digital platforms was their panacea (Casilli, 2017), offering more freedom to compare and choose work locations and types and enabling them to escape from relatively limited local labor markets. These economic conditions motivate them to become game companions, providing entertainment for gamers from more developed countries while improving their own living conditions. As said by interviewee 14 who lived in Venezuela:

> After dropping out of high school, I worked in local supermarket and restaurant. There aren't a lot of jobs I can find. But this job is pretty chill for me. I make more money than my family members and other young people, so I can help my family and at the same time save some money . . . I earned more than 25,000 dollars in one year (on E-Pal). In my country, this salary is really good . . . I just need to stay in my bedroom to make money. I'm tired of the long commute to work. The public transit in Venezuela is terrible.

Connectivity issues also affect workers' experiences on gig platforms like E-Pal, influencing both participation and performance. While China has the largest market for gaming companionship, and the average price for a game on E-Pal is higher than on Chinese platforms, none of the interviewees are from China. Though this may be related to the sampling procedure in this study, interviewee 13 (a Chinese

immigrant in the United States) suggested that it was because people in China did not have access to Discord, the main channel for worker-client communication. This underscores how platform accessibility and connectivity infrastructure can directly impact participation in global digital economies, even for a country like China with a robust gaming market. Although some workers have connectivity, Internet access can also affect how they work. Interviewee 17, a retired professional gamer in Costa Rica, elaborated on how poor Internet connectivity created unpleasant working experiences on this platform:

> I know that there are a lot of racist people on Earth who think Latin Americans can't play games well. This is because we don't have good computers and good Internet connection. We have problems like Internet outages. It makes a difference in your reaction time and you can't focus 100% on your game . . . People in other places like Europe or USA don't understand this because it's normal for them to have a good Internet environment. They don't understand why Latin America is just so different.

Interviewee 17 suggested that Internet outages and unreliable connections in Latin America not only affected reaction time during gameplay but also contributed to the misperception that Latin American gamers were less skilled. This misconception, rooted in regional disparities in technology infrastructure, perpetuates stereotypes and affects opportunities for Latin American gamers. These accounts reveal that gig workers in regions with inadequate connectivity face challenges that extend beyond mere participation opportunities; they also confront systemic biases and perceptions that influence their ability to compete on online global platforms like E-Pal.

Conclusion

Starting as a gaming social site, E-Pal commercialized the "looking for group" (LFG) culture—where gamers connect to form cohesive teams in online multiplayer games (Jiang, 2023)—and evolved into a platform that profits from matching sellers (game companions) and buyers (gamers). Advertising its business as fun, flexible, and high income, the platform has attracted numerous passionate gamers who hope to make extra income through gaming. Unlike other types of playbor, game companionship involves more affective skills as it focuses more on providing enjoyable experiences to clients and producing emotional responses. Game companions' affective labor is not only commodified but also gendered and racialized on E-Pal. While previous studies have examined gender gaps in the platform economy, the findings of this study suggest that paid game companionship is dominated by females. This conclusion also contrasts with the findings of M. Li (2023) and Zhao (2023, 2024) in the Chinese context, yet it reflects gender inequality in this field in another way. In the Chinese context, more active female players (Harper, 2020), the stigmatization and devaluation of female companions (M. Li, 2023), platforms' strategies to avoid governmental scrutiny (Zhao, 2024), and social capital (Zhao, 2024), all contribute to the success of male game companions. In contrast, female companions on E-Pal have higher incomes and dominate the market. However, the high visibility of female companions seems to be a designed affordance of the platform to maximize its profits. Although the platform changed its name from "E-girl" to "E-Pal," it still relies heavily on the appeal of female workers to attract clients, the majority of whom are men. Although female ePals are more successful, they are subjected to more objectification, harassment, and bias. E-Pal's ambiguity about its policies allows harassment and objectification to persist, as such content can help the platform

attract and retain male customers. Moreover, gender intersects with race and ethnicity in ePals's labor. Asian and Latina females are the two most successful groups; yet their success is often influenced by sexual objectification and stereotypes. Conversely, negative stereotypes contribute to making Black workers the most marginalized group.

This study also situates E-Pal within the global political economy and examines inequalities on the platform at the global level. The findings suggest that companions from all around the world need to deal with challenges related to languages, time zones, and local political economies to better serve customers primarily from the Global North. These challenges encompass issues such as work-life balance, health concerns, participation opportunities, and systemic bias. These findings once again support Bulut's (2020) argument that the fun of privileged customers depends on the pain of the Other, both locally and globally. By studying game companions' labor on E-Pal, this research further theorizes "playbor" employing an intersectional approach and examines inequalities in this form of platform-mediated game gig work within the broader global political economy. This study can expand the existing literature on platform economy and game labor studies. Although this study selected a relatively diverse group of participants, the proportions of the different groups among the participants may be imprecise because of a lack of survey data. This study also acknowledges a limitation in not including perspectives from nonbinary gender workers because of their low representation on the platform and the reluctance of those contacted to participate or respond. Future studies can use survey data to increase the generalizability of the findings.

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