

## CONSUMER CULTURE OF INDONESIAN GAMERS: REVIEW ON GAME ITEMS MARKETPLACE “ITEMKU”

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### Abstract

Item is an object or commodity item in each game, especially in Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) genre. Every gamer competes to obtain good items, both in terms of functional and appearance. Various ways are done by the gamers to get items, starting from playing regularly, buying from game publishers, or buying from other players (making transactions). Since the MMOG (online game) era, such as Ragnarok Online (RO) which was firstly popular in Indonesia up to various types of games today, the gamers have already started to transact with other gamers. Hundreds of thousands to tens of millions rupiah flows in every in-game items transaction. Game item transaction tends to be enclosed and mostly done by gamers who know well enough to each other. Direct transactions between gamers are not without risks. Fraud is often happened from the type of item, nominal, and price and money paid. Gamers mostly complained about significant amount of transaction items fraudulent and were presented in various media including social media and game forums, both in official game account as well as community forums and fans.

Now, gamers don't need to be afraid to transact items by the presence of an item market called "Itemku". "Itemku" is a game item buy and sale service managed by Five Jack company from South Korea. During the 2017, Five Jack got an injection of an additional 1.2 million dollars investment for the "Itemku" service. While operating from 2016 up to today, "Itemku" already has customers, both sellers and buyers. "Itemku" only acts as a mediator in selling game items to maintain transaction security. But actually, "Itemku" services are not only in terms of buying and selling items, but also include charging game currency and playing jockey services. However, the most popular service is the items sale and purchase that are more or less the same as items sale and purchase from Steam. The difference is that the items that are bought and sold in Itemku are more diverse both from the game developers or publishers and the type of the games. Indonesian gamers who usually transact manually, were then enthusiastic about the presence of Itemku which has been operating in Indonesia for 3 years.

Indonesian gamers' enthusiasm in using Itemku services shows that game items have become important commodities. Shopping for game items is no longer just a hobby, but has

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become a necessity and culture of gamers in Indonesia. The game has become a market and its items become virtual commodity that are traded with the actual currency. Game items have become a daily necessity for gamers as well as the daily needs of people in general. Virtual commodities or objects such as items that are physically non-existent and can only be felt as virtual benefits sometimes have high value. Various items from various types of games with varied values from thousands to millions are traded on "Itemku". Buying and selling in-game items has become a new popular consumer culture among gamers. The transaction agents are not only limited to the upper class, but also the lower middle class.

Along with the diversity of MMOG that entered Indonesia and the growth of gamers, "Itemku" can continue to be the market leader in the game item market in Indonesia if it continues to innovate to meet the needs of its users. Itemku is not only a pioneer in the game item market, but also in the creative market among government programs that aim to grow creative industry in Indonesia. Industry without markets will be difficult to be developed, because in fact, the market can trigger a consumer culture that fosters industry, including games.

**Keywords:** consumer culture, gamer, item, marketplace

## Introduction

Since the shifting of the game economy concept from pay to play to free to play, the gamers, developers and game publishers perspective have also shifted. Online game producers and service providers that used to gain money from gamers who played their games, have changed their direction with the concept of free to play. Every gamer can play games free of charge daily or monthly. The concept of free to play has totally changed the overall game design which at the end the in-game items are introduced.

Game items are particular items and or currencies that are intended to purchase or gain more advantages in playing games. In general, games that have game items features in the play store or App store are labeled as "in-app purchase". The economic concept of games in the form of game items seems to get a sufficient positive response from gamers. More and more people are playing games after the free to play concept is applied by game developers and publishers.

Newzoo (2017) calculated that there are around 2.2 million active gamers around the world, of which around 47% or around 1 million gamers are spending money when playing games. Estimated gaming revenue for 2017 was 108.9 billion dollars. Newzoo claimed that 42% of them (46.1 billion) flew from mobile-based games. The growth of the game and game market in Indonesia has been quite promising. According to data, there were around 43.7 million gamers in Indonesia in 2017 who spent 880 million dollars to purchase games, both console, PC / laptop and mobile. Gamers in Indonesia are still male dominated by 56%, but Newzoo noticed a growth in female gamers, especially in the age range of 21-35 years and 36-50 years.

In addition to statistical research related to the growth of gamers quantity and the money they have spent, there were also a lot of research related to gamers and hobbies in playing the game. Researches related to gamers and the game were done by Khazaal et al (2016); Jap T, Tiatri S, Jaya ES & Suteja MS (2013); Wittek et al (2015) but seemed very tendentious and considered playing games was a form of an addiction and bad behavior. Meanwhile there were also several researchers such as Park & Lee (2011); Hamari (2017); Stefany (2014); Yulius (2017); Bastian (2015); Wohn (2014); and Cleahorn & Griffiths (2015) who focus more on the value of game items and gamers motivation in purchasing these items.

For years, game items buy and sell have not only occurred between gamers and publishers, but also gamers to gamers. Items buy and sell between gamers is also commonly referred to as RMT (real money trading). RMT has been performed for a long time, particularly among Indonesian gamers. Forums and social media are often utilized as a means of game items buy and sell and promotion before the existence of game items marketplace. RMT game items transactions are very vulnerable to fraud, both in terms of the type of item, amount, and money paid. The presence of a marketplace item service will certainly help gamers who perform item transactions both as sellers or buyers.

Itemku is the only and biggest game items marketplace in Indonesia. There are various items from various games that are sold on Itemku start from quite classic games in Indonesia such as Ragnarok Online and Rising Force, up to recently popular such as Mobile Legends, Arena of Valor and Playerunknown's Battleground (PUBG). Various game items ranging from in-game currencies (eg diamond), equipments, skins to accounts buy and sell and the services of jockeys player. Itemku offers various ways to pay and Safe Trading features that guarantee the transactions security for both sellers and buyers. The culture of consumption and game items buy and sell in Indonesia has aroused with the presence of Itemku marketplace.

### **Value and Motivation of Game Items Purchasing**

In-game items purchasing, whether in the form of durable equipment or disposable items, may be difficult to be understood by most ordinary people. What the benefits or use of game items are – or more precisely – what the value of a game item is, and what motivation drives a gamer to buy and use the items, are big questions for the community. Item in a game is a form of visual signs or symbols that has not had physical form. It will be certainly considered strange when traded with real world currencies. Moreover, if the price range from thousands to millions rupiah, general public consider that it is invaluable and difficult to understand.

Park & Lee (2011) showed that game items have had more value and satisfaction for gamers. Park & Lee further explained that there are 4 (four) values of game items: 1) character competency value; 2) pleasure value; 3) visual authority value; and 4) monetary value. The character competency value is the value of an item that is able to improve the ability of game characters. The value of pleasure makes gamers more enjoy in playing games. Visual authority value make gamers' characters looks more captivate and attract the other gamers' attention. While monetary value is the game item value is equal with the benefits provided.

Besides the values possessed by game items, there are also various aspects or factors that motivate gamers to buy items. Hamari (2017) stated that enjoyment in playing games will make gamers play longer which emerges a positive attitude towards game items and motivates gamers to buy items. Furthermore, Hamari underlined that a positive attitude towards game items and the attitude of fellow peer gamers will motivate gamers to buy items or virtual goods. Meanwhile, Stefany (2014) compiled five factors that induce gamers motivation to buy items: 1) perception value; 2) story pleasure; 3) pleasure duration; 4) pleasure control; and 5) customization. Value perception is related to the items utility, while story pleasure is related to the items value that make more enjoyable playtime. Pleasure duration and control are related to how long and easy the games can be enjoyed. Meanwhile, the value of customization emphasizes to the function of items in shaping the appearance of game characters to be more captivate and attract attention.

Yulius (2017) explained two important aspects that really motivate gamers to buy items. The first is playfulness that acquired and the second is trust to the publisher or game service provider. Bastian (2015) counted that 43.8% interest or motivation of gamers in buying items is strongly influenced by character competence, virtual item value and game play satisfaction. Wohn (2014) believed that social factors will motivate gamers to buy items. Wohn concluded that there are some gamers who intentionally buy items only to give to fellow gamers. Gamers who spend a lot of money tend to buy items for the consideration of visual customization, while gamers who spend less money prefer to buy consumption items in order to survive in the game.

Researchers – who study the gamers motivation in buying more in-game items – emphasized the aspects of the value and function of related item. Cleahorn & Griffiths (2015) proposed very different conclusions from other researchers regard to the gamers motivation in buying items; that is more on psychological happiness or health aspect. Purchasing items and or virtual assets in the game can produce a very positive impact on gamers' mental health, so they feel happier and less stressed in playing game (Cleahorn & Griffiths, 2015). We've seen some gamers who feel happy playing games after spending a lot of money to buy items or other advantages in the game.

### **Consumption Culture Shifting: From Physical to Virtual Item**

Rapid technological developments have shifted the economic landscape and commodity consumption. The virtual economy was born as a digital economic landscape with a global coverage area. Peterson (2003) defined virtual economics as an economy that displays a lot of symbols exchange and consumption. Virtual here is not interpreted as something “virtual” or intangible but more like that Boellstorff (2008) interpreted as approaching reality without being there. There are three virtual economic models according to Peterson (2003) namely financial market models, information models and political economy of signs models. The financial market model is dominated by the feature of money exchange; and the information model is dominated by knowledge and information exchange features; and political sign economy models that are filled with exchanges and consumption of signs or symbols as cultural codes (Peterson, 2003).

Game items inclines to be categorized as the third model of virtual economy - political economy of sign model.

Political economy of signs may be better known as the aspects of consumer culture, where the exchange and consumption of these signs are increasingly widespread and far apart from the conventional economic concepts (Peterson, 2003). The sign exchange is the transformation of valuables entity exchange, formerly referred to as "econoscape", the pattern of exchange of valued items, which is dominated by the consumption of signs, images and information (Waters in Peterson, 2003: 113). For Peterson (2003), political economy of signs is in the context of aesthetics, consumption, meaning and postmodern culture. Postmodern itself has been popularized for a long time since the end of the 80's. If we focus on the political economy of signs in an aesthetic aspect, which is consumed and interpreted in postmodern culture, it is very precise with the description and presentation of game items so far.

Game items are functioned as fashion items, so that they have social aspects (Wohn, 2014), visual authority values (Park & Lee, 2011), and customization (Stefany, 2014). Unlike everyday life items which are sold in physical forms, game items only have a visual (non-physical) form. Game items are consumed in the form of images that contain information which might only give certain satisfaction to gamers. Something that has no physical form - but might be psychologically satisfying and happy – can become more valuable in the transition era from modern to postmodern as it is today. Consumption is not only talking about items that enter the body or can be touched. Watching movies in theaters is an example of non-physical (virtual) goods consumption that have been done by human. We pay for tickets to enter the cinema and watch movies. What we get in a cinema is something that is satisfying psychologically. We feel satisfied after watching a movie, even though we can't touch the film physically and only imprint it on the memories in our head (it still remembers). Actually consuming items in the game is the same as consuming movies in theaters, which may only give satisfaction and leave memories. However, the game far exceeds the cinema or can be said to be the next generation of cinemas. The game has the potential to become an interactive drama that can be a storytelling medium that brings gamers into their fairytale world (Mayra, 2008).

## **Conclusion**

Game as a form of virtual economy has a considerable potential from economical aspect itself as well as educational aspect with its potential as an interactive media. Game items in a form of sign and symbol might be consumed to fulfill psychological needs both in negative or positive side. Game items consumption is a product of creative economy and may intensify the growth of creative economy and shift consumer culture that is physical oriented. Itemku as a game items marketplace can be a medium and catalyst of consumers culture shifting and creative industry especially game.

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