

**GOLD RUSH: COLLECTIVE NEGOTIATION OF
LEGITIMACY IN REAL MONEY TRADING OF
VIRTUAL ITEMS AS PART OF THE GLOBAL
INFORMAL SECTOR**

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Abstract

The discussion regarding the real money trading of virtual items contained in this paper makes use of theories regarding ludic theory and the informal sector, as well as empirical findings gathered in the field, by means of interviews to explore the uneasy relation that money and physical world economic disparities have with self-contained game worlds and the tensions that arise from this contact and showing how the two are actually intimately connected. The paper will show how, despite hot-headed and aggressive discourses against the real money trading, that the practice is much more internalized than one would assume at first and that it is not restricted at being the dominion of a select few, but is rather-wide spread, taking many forms and being constantly negotiated by players, both at individual and collective levels.

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I. THE PROPHECY FORETOLD - Introduction

A YouTube video posted in 2006, entitled “Chinese Gold Farmers Must Die” depicts several players of *World of Warcraft* systematically seeking and hunting down other game characters, and then bursting into laughter or dancing over their fallen bodies, enjoying victory over those who they consider as ruining the game.

In this paper I will talk about the Real money trading phenomenon, a highly unregulated, lax and diffused industry, surrounding online video games, which has as main focus transactions that convert virtual goods or currency into real-world currency and vice-versa. I will focus on the way the legitimacy and the fairness of the practice are perceived, as well as trying to frame the phenomenon as part of the global informal sector, through a shift towards the digital that urban informal labour is experiencing in the last decade or so. The main argument I will try to make is that real-money trading in general and the practice of gold-farming in particular should be seen and researched as part of the global informal sector and that the opposition it meets both inside and outside the game is intimately related to this, the practice being perceived not as an intrusion into the game-world per se, but as a warping of the very idea of play at the hands of profit.

I will begin with an obligatory introduction to the topic, by presenting a clear definition for the practice, a short segment that tracks the historical conditions that have made real-money trading the burgeoning industry that it is today, as well as the factors that drive its very existence. Subsequently, I will lay out a literature review, making use of classical theories regarding ludic theory and informal economy, as well as authors who deal more specifically with digital economies and the Real money trading phenomenon, in an attempt to anchor both my fieldwork and my analysis in firm theoretical ground, while touching both the questions of legitimacy construction and negotiation and those regarding the labour itself.

Furthermore, I will present the empirical data I have gathered, having done several interviews regarding the legitimacy of said industry with online gamers, in general, but also with actors involved on both sides of the transactions, as well as tracking online communities and forums for discussions regarding the subject. An analysis of the data is to follow, strongly linked to the theoretical chapter. The coda will be, obviously, made up of the conclusions that the work so far are hinting towards.

II. PLANNING THE EXPEDITION - Definition, History and Importance

Real money trading is the act of using physical-world currency to purchase or sell virtual goods, virtual currency or services that take place in a virtual environment. Although that definition sometimes covers multiple fields, it is usually used to refer to transactions taking place in and around online video games, mainly, but not exclusively, persistent-world Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG). The practice appeared more or less simultaneously with online gaming itself, but it has only become noteworthy during the late '90s, early '00s with the appearance of “gold farming” – used generally, regardless of the fact that “gold” is only the currency in a couple of games – the practice of playing the game for the sole purpose of gathering virtual currency, with the end-game of selling it for physical-world money.

Accounts conflict on the exact date when Real money trading first appeared in online video games, but the oldest reported instance from a trusted source dates as far back as the mid-80s (Hunter, 2006), where players would use real money to pay in exchange for other players' items or character while playing Multi User Dungeons (MUDs) – text-based online games, extremely archaic forms of today's MMORPGs. The phenomenon had no reason to

grow, since the game-worlds of the MUDs were not persistent, but would be wiped and restarted every few hours, with no possibility to carry over items or currency from one game session to the other.

It wasn't really operating on anything remotely resembling a large scale until the late '90s, when it was still functioning on a peer-to-peer level of direct trading between players within the first persistent-world MMORPGs like Meridian 59, Ultima Online or Lineage. It was around this time that the commercial possibilities started being explored, as MMOs in general and Lineage in particular started becoming more and more popular in South Asia.

The request for this service came from players who attempted to gain an advantage in the game, be it in terms of efficiency or status, without going through the redundant and boring parts of the game mechanics. Around 2001 the model started to adapt to the global capitalism and from a peer exchange turned into an outsourcing operation. The global nature of the community lead to certain, less fun, parts of the game being de-facto outsourced to different players. Western players had the means to pay X sum of money to avoid doing, say, 20 hours of repetitive tasks, because they would earn X sum of money in just 2 hours at their day job. Conversely, for the South-East Asian player, X sum of money was around the average pay for 20 hours of work, especially since the work, while repetitive, is relatively easy and devoid of major risk. A classic, perfect system of demand and offer formed, with more and more players in developing countries taking up gold farming as a full-time job. Gold farming has become, thus, the logical step to take towards the systematization of this system. Where once real money trading was restricted purely to an individual exchange, that took place between ordinary players, farmers use most of their time in the game for the sole purpose of producing virtual commodities with the intention of selling them for physical-world money.

During the quick escalation of the practice in first half of the 00s, the industry became more and more centralized, moving from the realm of player-to-player interaction and into that of hierarchical organizations. Entrepreneurs in China set up sweat-shop-style work places, called “gold farms”, (Yee, 2006b) where young men would work in twelve hour shifts, mining gold for a fraction of the sum it was worth and websites like IGE were being set up, operating a business where “they will buy 1000 gold for 25 USD. They sell that same 1000 gold for 66 USD. So for every dollar spent on buying virtual gold, only 37 cents of it goes to the actual gold farmers.” (Yee, 2006)

This streamlining of the process increased quickly and by the time World of Warcraft, by far the most popular MMORPG ever created appeared, a full-fledged industry was in place, with New York Times estimating in 2005 that around 100,000 gold farmers worked in China alone and a total market of 2.1 billion dollars in 2007.

III. READING THE MAP - Literature Review

Virtual Life and the Question of “Realness”

Because of the complex, at time inscrutable system of rules, be them official or not, that virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft’s “Azeroth” have, it is difficult to treat the relations that take place in it – or around it – as purely gaming-related, seeing how the community does not exist in a void, completely separate from off-line society. At the same time, it would be as dismissive and even presumptuous to treat it merely as a miniaturized projection of society at large. I have decided, therefore, to follow two main, rather broad, theoretical approaches in my process of explaining the social exclusion that gold-farmers are encountering, one following up on the playful, game-like nature of the virtual worlds and

deals with the inherent characteristics of play, while the other one is anchored more on the similarities with the offline world and it regards, quite contrarily, the harsh reality of economic disparities.

I dislike the term “real life” due to the shadow of normativity it throws, by presupposing that the virtual space is somehow “not real”, so throughout this paper I use the slightly milder term “physical world”, for the sake of clarity, when trying to discern between, for example, currency that exist only in the economic microcosm of a game or a similar virtual space and “hard” currency, that can be used outside of the virtual space. Although I will not make extensive use of the term “synthetic world”, as Edward Castronova calls the virtual worlds of online video games, as I find it somewhat pretentious, I will use his words to define the object of my research, as to not over-reach the “virtual world” definition to the point where it can encompass almost everything. Castronova defines, thus, a synthetic world as “an expansive, world-like, large-group environment made by humans, for humans, and which is maintained, recorded, and rendered by a computer”. (Castronova, 2005: 11)

The increasing digitization of the global monetary system, with physical money becoming more and more a thing of the past, makes, of course, the entire distinction somewhat laughable, in terms of physicality. I consider virtual currency as being no different than any other national currency, in that, while its function as currency is restricted to a limited space - be it the Forint in Hungary or the ISK in *Eve Online* – outside that space it can function as a commodity, being sold and purchased at different rates for the sake of profit. In a way, we can say that currencies hold, in a Marxian sense, use-value while inside the system where they function and only exchange value outside that system.

Game, Immersion & the Magic Circle

On the one hand, I will make use of theoretical works regarding the nature of game itself, what constitutes a breach of the game's very existence and in what way are the rules of a game negotiated differently from other social norms. In my attempt to do this, I will make use of Johan Huizinga's (1938) work on play theory, where he proposes that for a game to exist it must have an obligatory set of rules and it must be separated from the ordinary life by a "magic circle", thus allowing the creation of an alternative set of norms. The magic circle is usually an invisible limit, agreed on by the players, but at times it can be an actual physical limit, such as the edge of the stage or of the arena; (Huizinga, 1938: 10) or, in the specific case of online games, the log-in screen that one has to pass through in order to reach the play-world.

The set of rules and the magic circle are inexorably linked to each other, the existence and obedience of the rules being what keeps the game world independent and free from the ordinary life. In support of this, Huizinga makes a highly interesting distinction between a cheater and a "spoil-sport" (Huizinga, 1938: 11). While the former is simply bending the rules of the game so that he or she may gain an in-game advantage, still acknowledging the magic circle, the latter completely transgresses the rules, out of malice or towards one's own amusement, dispelling the illusion of separation and is, consequently, dealt with in a harsher manner.

Linking the concepts of play and freedom, Huizinga stipulates that "all play is a voluntary activity" (Huizinga, 1938: 7) and that when one plays because one is ordered to do so, or does it as a task or dictated by "physical necessity", (Huizinga, 1938: 8) it cannot be considered play, but, "it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it". (Huizinga, 1938: 7) Furthermore, he also describes the game as "an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it." (Huizinga, 1938: 19) For all intended purposes, then,

Huizinga would not consider online gold farmers as being players, and would see them as a clear transgression into the game world, by bringing in the seriousness of ordinary life necessities and duties into the play, fouling its sacral nature. On the other hand, empirical accounts prove that gold farmers still see themselves as gamers and declare that there is still fun to be had from the game, even when the game is source of bread. (Jin, 2006; Dibbell, 2007) For a full enjoyment of the game to be had, however, one has to separate the two planes, many gold farmers also having separate accounts that are not linked to the work, which they use as pure entertainment, as mentioned both by Dibbell (Dibbell, 2007) and by empirical accounts of one of my informants, seeing how one of the great selling points of video games in general and online RPGs in particular is the agency that it allows, offer that is shattered when one has a production quota and will generally spend their time repeating the same action hours on end.

There have been numerous attempts to discuss the practice of real money trading as being a breach of the magic circle through the fact that it uses resources that exist outside of the game to achieve an advantage within the gaming world, as well as by trying to make an off-line profit, using in-game resources. There have been modern scholars who used Huizinga's theory to discuss phenomena related to video games specifically, with some of them, such as Gordon Calleja criticising the core-concept of the magic circle, especially in regards to its use on video games, considering it a "binary myth" (Calleja, 2008) and announcing its redundancy in the era of video games by citing the inability to transgress the limit between the area where the rules of the game apply and the one where they do not. (Calleja, 2007: 27) It is unclear if Calleja is referring solely to single-player games when he is making such broad statements, but as my future arguments will show, the real money trading transactions are doing just that, traversing the limit of the game space in both ways, thus

disturbing the illusion of separation that the game world promises, while not necessarily being detrimental or destructive to the game.

Other authors, primarily Jesper Juul have tried to re-discuss Huizinga's theory in the light of digital entertainment in a more nuanced manner, seeing beyond the "binary myth" of the physical separation, and instead treating the magic circle as a metaphor. (Juul, 2008: 64) Furthermore, Juul argues that seeing past the magic circle as a physical, binary limit makes it useful in video game analysis, as one must consider it not as a God-given barrier, but as a "an imperfect separation that players negotiate and uphold" (Juul, 2008: 62) and this becomes very obvious in online games with established communities where End User License Agreement – the formal, official rules of the game one must agree to when creating an account – are not always the same with the rules of the community and, furthermore, a type of behaviour that might be frowned upon in one game might be allowed or even encouraged in another. In fact, the point should be made that, like in most physical world games as well, while a core set of rules are standard and, basically, make the game by differentiating it from others, the players are those who negotiate what is to be considered as "legitimate" and what is not.

In one of the most famous books on the matter, Edward Castronova describes the magic circle that surrounds what he calls "synthetic worlds" as being a "porous membrane [...] a boundary that defines and separates two organs but does not completely inhibit passage between them" (Castronova, 2006: 146), by definition a barrier that is more flexible, thus harder to shatter by intrusions, but he does warn of the potential disruptive and decaying effect the physical world can have on the game world, claiming that "when Earth's culture dominates, the play will be over; the fantasy will be punctured; the illusion will be ended for good. Taxes will be paid. The rich and poor will dance the same macabre dance of mutual mistrust that they do on Earth" (Castronova apud Harambam et al, 2011: 302) Furthermore,

the Real money trading is, claim some authors, just one of the many ways in which the commercialization of games is happening, from the selling of the game itself as a commodity, to corporate presence in virtual worlds, a continuous struggle for profit taking place at the edges, (Harambam et al, 2011: 309) as well as game companies trying to get directly into the practice, legitimizing and regulating the practice towards their own profit by building a virtual-good marketplace directly in the architecture of the game, (Lin & Sun, 2011: 335) rendering the entire discussion about the corrupting force of money irrelevant.

Informality & Real-World Economics

One should also be willing to also take a theoretical step back, to look at the phenomenon from outside of the virtual worlds, least one should credit the game with too much agency than it deserves. I will do that by treating the practice of real money trading as a virtual off-shoot of the informal sector. Using Keith Hart's 1973 seminal work that coined the term, real money trading fits even the most basic definition of informal economy, through its very nature of transacting currency throughout the globe with little to no taxation, poor estimations of scale and a large number of freelance workers with erratic returns. (Hart: 1973: 68) The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency's report into informal economy considers that the main characteristics of informal economy are "low entry requirements in terms of capital and professional qualifications, a small scale of operations, skills often acquired outside of formal education, labour-intensive methods of production and adapted technology" (Becker, 2004: 11) and that "young people are also disproportionately found to be working informally" (Becker, 2004: 21), where one can immediately see how well all these points can be used to describe the practice and gold farming and the gold farmers themselves.

It should also be said that the Real money trading practice in itself appeared and managed to survive and even flourish because of the global income inequalities. Without huge discrepancies in terms of labour standards and availability, as well as income, the practice would have remained in its infant stage of peer-to-peer exchange (Heeks, 2008: 5) and would have stayed a purely marginal phenomenon. While the phenomenon can obviously exist within the same economy, especially in one that has a huge income gap between the very rich and the very poor, as well as lack of formal employment opportunities, this is unlikely to exist on a large scale. This is due, in part, to the limitations of language when keeping an internal market (Heeks, 2008: 37), as well as the digital divide, particularly matters regarding digital illiteracy, (Jansen, 2010: 4) which would make the groups who would benefit the most from gold farming also be less likely to be familiar with the concept or have the computer and internet skills to tap the resources. However, as a counterexample, countries with a high population and a disproportionate wealth gap such as China or India do seem to have developed internal markets too large to be ignored. The most profitable and important markets, however, remain either the regional ones (from China to Japan, Korea or Taiwan; Mexico to the United States) or the global ones (Heeks, 2008: 37) which are intermediated by websites such as IGE or MMOKings.

This fact alone credits the necessity to look at Real money trading as a global phenomenon and to attempt to place it in the flow of modern capitalism. The global price for 20,000 World of Warcraft gold in June 2013 seems to be between 21 and 25 dollars for European servers, with variations conditioned by server, allegiance and website and 27 and 40 dollars for United States servers, as shown by price comparison website mmoshift.com. Keeping in mind that the intermediary websites receive quite a large chunk of the payment (Yee, 2006), it stands to reason that the wider the income and labour opportunity gap between the buyer and the seller, the more worthwhile the transaction will be for both parties.

While some authors, especially from outside academia, identify the broader flow of money from the Western players towards developing countries, predominantly South-East Asia as being a form of outsourcing (Weir, 2004; Barboza, 2005) without dwelling on the subject too much, Richard Heeks tries to expand his considerations on the matter, claiming that “from a theoretical perspective, outsourcing in the gold-farming sub-sector may be difficult because some of its preconditions – separable production tasks; market stability sufficient to justify risk; trust may be absent” and that “whether the relation between brokers and gold-farming firms can be called outsourcing is unclear: it looks more like market-based purchase” (Heeks, 2008: 38) Be that as it may, he uses the term for the lack of a better one on several occasions and if we are to consider the volatile and secretive nature of the market, most of the subcontracting is done between small-scale actors, “most of them micro-enterprises with just one or two staff” (Heeks, 2008: 14) where preconditions that Heeks claims as necessary are becoming less inherent to the process and we can, indeed, consider the practice as being driven by an informal outsourcing process. Furthermore, the case becomes even clearer in the case of power-levelling, the service through which a player lends a newly-formed game character to another, who is bringing that character up to top level for a certain amount of money. (Heeks, 2008: 5) This service is usually requested by people with several characters, who usually play at high levels, want to try a different character build, but don’t wish to go through the tiresome process of growing the character themselves. This cannot be considered “market-based purchase”, but rather a peer-to-peer form of outsourcing. While websites and larger companies obviously mediate the process, the contact remains limited to only two people in most cases, with the owner instructing the leveller on what kind of skill decisions to take through the course of the growth.

Due to the fact that most of the gold farmers are situated in South-East Asia, and that the scheme is only mutually beneficial when the buyer has a high income and the seller has a

very low income, the discussion must be framed in such a way that touches upon the labour that is put into acquiring the virtual items and the effect it has on both ends of the transaction. The practice can be seen under the auspices of Appadurai's view of "disorganized capitalism" (Appadurai, 1996: 46), with the Internet increasing the speed with which the unilateral power relation between contractor and contracted is blurred into a chaotic web of influences.

Furthermore, just how the case is made that the push into self-employment or underemployment is done by a lack of formal employment opportunities in one's community (Hart, 1973: 67) the same process is applicable in the case of gold farmers. However, due to the work conditions present, as well as the pseudo-ludic nature of the activity, one must escape the stereotype of the exploited sweatshop labourer, doing the Westerner's dirty work. While the general opinion is divided between ardent hatred and empathic pity towards the gold farmers (Yee, 2006), Ge Jin paints a different picture when he actually meets the farmers: "Most of the gold farmers I talked to love the job. In the gold farms, you can see they are enthusiastic about their job and they got a sense of achievement from it, which is rare in any other sweatshops. Most of the gold farmers I met do not have better alternatives." (Jin, 2006) Both Jin and Yee disavow the term "sweatshop", describing the conditions in the gold farms they have visited as decent and well above the average for the region and that "most other employment options for people who do gold farming involves hard labour." (Yee, 2006)

This also brings up the discussion of Digital Divide, with the unevenness of computer skills or access across the world (Friedman, 2001: 2081) in an increasingly digitized labour market meaning a kind of separation between those who can operate with ease on the Internet and those who cannot is starting to shape up as that is eerily similarly to the way in which illiteracy already blocks the social advancement and strengthens class perpetuation. This sort

of differences between those who are literate or illiterate in regards to Internet use may lead to a split within the informal sector in white-collar self-employed who are prone to making their livelihood through the outsourcing of web-based services from the comfort of their own homes and the blue-collar self-employed, which will proliferate the stereotype of the “underemployed shoeshine boys and sellers of matches” (Hart, 1973: 68) that forms automatically when thinking of the underemployed and the underqualified.

Even so, the problem with these accounts is that, despite the fact that there is some sort of consensus in the field that most farming is done by independent labourers (Heeks, 2008: 14) who use large websites as intermediary (Yee, 2006), they all refer to the, admittedly, much easier to find and access, large, industrial-grade gold farms, with dozens of wagedworkers and a clear hierarchical system. Little literature exists on the effects real money trading has on independent work-from-home farmers, for which reason the practice has barely been discussed in relation to the informal economy or, even more so, to a new balance of power in outsourcing services.

Despite the recent turn towards formalization, through taxation and official registration, most of the real-money trading and gold farming operations remain informal, unregistered and untaxed. The important distinction to be made is between the formalized version, where one works for a fixed number of hours in a gold farm, basically a wagedworker (Carr & Chen, 2002: 8) and the freelancing self-employed farmers who work from home. (Becker, 2004: 13) While the gold-farm wagedworker can be considered to engage in precarious labour, he can hardly be described as having an informal job position, regardless of legal status of the company or owner that employs him, the freelancer worker can be seen clearly as being underemployed in an informal, self-employed manner which should be treated as a virtual off-shoot of the informal sector, seeing how it fits into the definition of the informal economy perfectly, through its very nature of transacting currency throughout the

globe with little to no taxation, poor estimations of scale and a large number of freelance workers with erratic returns. (Hart: 1971: 68)

One of the key points that I have discussed in interviews I took regarding the issue was the difference in legitimacy and morality between the practice of purchasing in-game advantages with real money from informal, third-party – which most players refer to as “buying from the Chinese”, regardless of their actual nationality – and purchasing them directly from the game company, through “microtransactions”, in the Free to Play mode of MMOs. (Lin & Sun, 2007: 335) I have expected most players to have a clear distinction between the two ways in which these advantages can be acquired, and to consider the official channel more legitimate, much as one would consider buying vegetables directly from the farmer as being morally superior than buying them from the intermediary. In fact, it turns out most players I have interviewed saw little to no distinction between the two, focusing more on the legitimacy of the act itself, from a player’s point of view, while also considering more just to do business with the fellow players that is more similar to you. Some were even aware of the conditions in which many gold farmers worked and were sympathetic to their plight and denouncing the indiscriminate hatred that is sometimes directed towards them.

When I refer to the practice of real money trading as being part of the informal sector I am considering the virtual space as not being separate from the so called “real life”, but rather an extension of the latter. The practice itself shows us that if a boundary between the virtual and physical space does indeed still exist, it is an increasingly porous one (Castronova, 2005: 146), that allows self-separation for the purpose of a sort of escapism, but is never too far away. That is why I conclude that both the gold farming – which is bound to the game-world and the real money trading, which extends into the physical world, should be seen as part of the global informal sector, rather than an Internet phenomenon.

Inside the game, the practice of gold farming and gold vending are greeted by very similar reaction to the way society at large treats informal actors such as scrap-metal collectors or street vendors. The authorities and a large chunk of the population treat them like a pest or a nuisance, because their actions lead to in-game economic inflation and shattering of the trade system (Lehdonvirta, 2005: 3), as well as because their breaching of the magic circle, while other players make use of their services without necessarily championing their existence.

Reactions and Legitimacy Building

The real money trading practice and gold farming in particular are hated with a passion by most people who are not directly on one or the other end of the transaction. Real money trading is being attacked from both inside and outside the game. Most players, who do not engage in either buying or selling of virtual goods consider RMT as being tantamount to cheating or, at the very least, as breaking the “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1938), by letting a physical-world advantage, such as wealth, bring about in-game advantages, thus dispelling the illusion of escapism that games weave. The uneasy relations that gold farmers have with other actors in the sphere of the game has been documented and discussed by scholars who have tried to find explanations for the viciousness with which they are treated. Issues such as fairness and breaking of immersion obviously appear, Lin & Sun claiming that “the ideas of “independent worlds” and “fair rules” come under attack when players are able to buy virtual treasures and capabilities—and therefore status—with real money.” (Lin & Sun, 2011) In the same vein, when discussing the idea of status in the game-world it is understood, in Goffmanian terms, that everybody who possesses a certain level of equipment, a level or an achievement holds the same status, but if one is believed to have used physical-world money

in order to achieve that position, that players will retain the status, but not the esteem and regard of their fellow players. (Goffman, 1951: 295) It is generally expected that one should achieve a certain in-game hierarchical status by making use of the mechanics of the game, but the physical-world shortcuts through which money can be directly converted into status (Lehdonvirta, 2009b: 103) exist slip into the game-world, creating the crisis that is the central point of this moral panic.

A more pragmatic reason for which players despise farmers has to do with the way a virtual economy works. Thousands of players who do nothing else in the game other than mining gold coins – or other obtainable prime materials, such as leather or metal, easily transferable into currency – leads to an overproduction of those goods, in the sense that because of the large amount of a certain type of goods on the market, the price is dramatically lowered: “due to the Veblen effect, the rise in real wages actually destroyed value rather than created it. To the players it felt like the game was becoming easier: everything was suddenly easier to obtain. They owned more assets than ever before, but the real dollar value of the assets was plummeting.” (Lehdonvirta, 2005: 3) This devalues the currency and the items, creating hyper-inflation and ultimately shattering the trade system. Most affected by this phenomenon are players who take some time away from the game, only to return, a few months later, to see the small fortune they had stored in the bank devalued to the point of triviality. Some authors have compared extreme examples, such as some outposts in Diablo 3 with a “virtual Weimar Republic”, describing them as having more “in common with real world places like Harare, Zimbabwe in 2007 or Berlin in 1923”. (Earle, 2013) Other researchers, however, claim that what applies to one game doesn’t apply to another and for the most part, fears of economic woe caused by farmers are unfounded, (Yee, 2006) although glancing at the numbers I have already cited, seven years apart does give some credit to the

inflation that appears in the game, seeing how Yee describes IGE as selling 1000 gold for 66 dollars in 2006 and the current price stands around 20 – 30 dollars for 20,000 gold.

Furthermore, for the less economically-savvy players, there is always racism and pure old blind hatred to do the job. The farmers are often called terms like “rats”, “commies” (Jin, 2006) or “vermin” (Dibbell, 2007), terms that Jim Yee (Yee, 2006) finds disturbingly similar to the vernacular use to describe Chinese laundry workers in 19th century America. Groups of vigilantes that hunt, kill and spawn-kill (wait for the character to be revived and then kill it again, just for the sake of stopping the farmer behind it do his job) farmers and post the videos on YouTube are a fairly common occurrence and a general homogenization phenomenon (Heeks, 2007: 57) appears where even people who are not gold farmers, but fit the stereotype – broken English, of Asian origin etc. - are treated as such.

On the other hand, the game companies themselves abhor the practice and are constantly trying to curb it, banning thousands of accounts and implementing increasingly complex defence mechanisms against farming and trading. With this sort of shadow industry where money is spend inside and around the game, but none of it ending up in the pocket of the creators of the game; it was only a matter of time until they would get involved. Recently, the practice has been adopted by some of the game companies, through the “Free to Play” model, where playing the game is free in itself, but one can purchase advantages and perks directly from the company, through an integrated marketplace that tries to be less alienating than informal RMT and cut the middle-man, bringing the money to the company instead of an “illegitimate” third party. (Lehdonvirta, 2009: 105)

Furthermore, the volatile nature of the transactions are making national governments squeamish at the thought of the amount of revenue made and transferred without the payment of due taxes. Many governments proposed and even passed legislation to tax and attempt to regulate the practice, with South Korea treating virtual currency the same way as physical-

world when it comes to taxation, after a top court decision that gold farming should be treated as work, rather than gambling due to the effort and skill necessary, (Kim, 2010) while some gold farmers in China prefer to register as a formal business and pay taxes. (Jin, 2006)

Police forces around the world are getting interested as well, as there have been reports of virtual goods used by organized crime elements to facilitate money laundering operations (Heeks, 2008: 57) or even make payments for drug shipments or hired assassinations, by virtue of being a nigh-undetectable mean of transferring money anywhere in the world, although most of these stories seem to be apocryphal (Heeks, 2008: 58). The practice has also been dragged in front of the justice system, with the Honk-Kong based IGE website, the largest facilitator of purchasing gold, being the target of a 2007 consumer class-action lawsuit from the American World of Warcraft players, (Hunter, 2007), and while the lawsuit was thrown out on technical reasons in early 2008, it was followed by the opening of an official investigation by the Florida Attorney General's Office which mentioned "virtual goods" in parallel to goods in general. (Durankse, 2008)

There are those who empathise with the farmers, however. The NoGold organization, an organism that fights against the proliferation of Real money trading brings their fight directly to the higher-ups, having no quarrel with the farmers themselves and actually using their perceived exploitation as one of the reason why one should oppose the practice (Jin, 2006), while others, still, put the blame on the Western players who provide the demand for the service, showing sympathy towards those who just move in to cover the sector. (Yee, 2006) A significant number of authors, however, (Yee, 2006b; Jin, 2006 etc.) describe the general atmosphere in the gold farms as being a positive, cheerful one, with most farmers talking enthusiastically about their job, which they describe as "fun" and superior to other employment opportunities in the region. The term "sweatshop" also comes under fire from scholars with direct contact with the field, who describe the establishments as "normal or

well-furnished in local standards” (Yee, 2006) and see the term as oversimplifying the complex relation that employed gold farmers have with their labour. (Jin, 2006)

IV. Finding the Hidden Chest - Data Access and Methodology

Despite the online nature of my research, I have decided from the get-go that, while I will make use of plenty of online resources, I also want to take a series of face-to-face interviews in the classic manner. This decision was based on several factors, chiefly my disdain for Skype-assisted interviews where a sense of artificial urgency seems to constantly linger about. I have, therefore travelled to Romania for 20 or so days in order to take the interviews. The choice of location was based on the advantages one derives from having the interviews in both the interviewer’s and the interviewees’ native tongue, as well as from having an extensive network of friends and acquaintances in Bucharest and other towns that are deeply involved in video games. I have made a total of five interviews, three with people I have known before and two with strangers, whom I have reached by snowball sampling. The criteria for choosing respondents were that they were expected to have played World of Warcraft at some point and have a broad understanding and familiarity not only with the game itself, but also with the community surrounding it. Any other online games the respondent has played were welcome into the conversation, however, and it became apparent rather soon that most of them were long disenchanted with World of Warcraft and have passed on towards other titles.

The five interviews had an average length of 58 minutes, when counting strictly the recorded parts, and were structured in a way that kicked off with an average sized introductory part that dealt with demographic information, as well as with the task of easing

into the subject proper by discussing the respondent's history of online video games. Subsequently, the proper matter was structured around 4 or 5 pylon questions regarding the opinion on Real money trading, separation of the real and the virtual, opinion on gold-farming and the interviewer's possible participation in Real money trading which served as starting point to 20 to 30 splinter questions that branched off from them, regarding detailed information on the matter at hand. One of the interviews was, unexpectedly, with an actual gold farmer and, due to my interview guide being built expressly for discussing gold farming and real money trading from the point of view of an average player, much of the premade structure was scrapped and a certain amount of improvisation was required for it.

Furthermore, besides the interviews I also tapped into my 15 years-plus familiarity with the topic of video games, but also, more specifically, I made use of information I have found on various dedicated forums and websites, which proved to be invaluable help in regards to understanding the finer points of the real money trading process, as well as providing me with more recent data on numbers and prices than the literature offered. While originally I have planned to take up the game again myself and use it to create a deeper familiarity with the field by trying to buy or sell some items myself, I have decided against it in the end, seeing how starting to play a notoriously addictive game at the same time as writing my thesis would have been a potentially destructive decision and, even more importantly, this would have drained dozens of hours for a very limited return in regards to data.

Although all the interviews were conducted in the respondents', and mine, native Romanian, there are many expressions or words used directly in English, either because of the lack of Romanian versions for the term, or because of the often code-switching that is rife in gamer communities. When offering direct quotes I will mark the passages that were

spoken originally in English in *italics*, in order to maintain both the authentic aura of the dialogue and the original emphasis of the respondents.

Moreover, although each of the respondents is playing or has played several games which they will talk about, they have also all played or are still playing World of Warcraft. By far the most popular and important game in the genre, if somewhat antiquated, it will be central to most interviews, so, unless otherwise specified, the reader can safely assume that the discussed game is World of Warcraft.

V. IDENTIFYING THE ARTEFACT - Empirical Findings and Analysis

My first personal contact with real money trading came in the first MMO I have ever played, called Darkthrone¹, a rather minimalistic looking game, with no graphics, all the enjoyment coming from seeing numbers roll on the screen, but with a dedicated community. When one of the most powerful and best-known players in the game declared on the public forums that he is thinking of leaving the game due to personal reasons, a different player offered to pay real-world money for his account. The player made this offer public and outrage ensued, with a huge percentage of the players calling for the banning of the would-be-buyer, and describing the practice as “immoral” and a harbinger of “unfair advantages”, due to this leading to inability of a, say, poor student from Eastern Europe to compete with a Unites States white-collar employee. The fact that this kind of advantage was independent from the time, energy or skill that was put into the game sat very uncomfortable with many a player. But this was maybe 2005 and, despite the extensive controversy, the will to buy real-world money for a game account was perceived as an irregular and eccentric action, rather

¹ www.darkthrone.com

than an attack on the integrity of the game itself, the outrage being fuelled by the high-profile nature of the account and by the fact that the aspiring buyer was part of an alliance involved in a large-scale war.

The intrinsic idea of play, through its virtue of having separate rules and power relations is ideal to function as a bridge that disregards social statuses that exist in the common life and levels the field for king and pauper to take new roles, for the sake of fun. Nonetheless, in practice things are quite different, as most games tend to be played by people of similar social position. Well-off children will rarely be allowed to play with common street urchins and the teenage misfits throwing dice behind the school are rarely going to allow a middle aged woman to join their game. Even in games that gather players from outside immediate social circles there are limitations on who can join a specific game or not, as depicted, for example by the gambling tables in casinos that are delimited by a minimal and maximal bet, thus setting a rough guideline of acceptance. In the case of online games and especially in the case of massive multiplayer games, the players will not be representative of a single group, culture or social class, the interest in the game and the subscription fee serving as lone gatekeepers. Here we can see why the issue of transgression and of fairness is so central to all online games.

My informants' opinions on matters regarding the use of money in online games were quite contradictory at times, because of the different games they play, but also because of the different financial situations they enjoy. While there was no direct correlation between income and acceptance of Real money trading, there will obviously be differences between those who can afford to even consider paying real money for in-game advantages and those who see the mere price of the game subscription as a being barely accessible.

Victims and Perpetrators

The most common and immediate reaction to the practice is still one of befuddlement. Alexandru summarized it thusly: “Well, the game is made to be played. When you focus on the economic part, you go over any sort of pleasure that the game could bring you through gameplay and so on and are focusing strictly on the monetary facet.”

When talking, in 2013, with my informants from Romania about their views on the legitimacy or morality of the practice, all but one made a point out of rejecting the term “immoral” as being too harsh of a word and, instead, made the issue appear as much more complex and talked about it as being more of a grey area, rather than an outright violation of the game. Alexandru believes that

“These shortcuts, I told you, are annoying to some degree, ‘cause you couldn’t afford it and you have to spend more time than somebody else who has the necessary monetary resources would. But, well, you don’t have a job, you want to play instead of looking for a good job and others work somewhere and they don’t have the required time to dedicate to the game. I don’t see it as such a great advantage on their part. It’s simply circumstantial. You are playing and are doing it at your pace and are also enjoying the game meanwhile, they can buy the stuff and they have fun”.

Subsequently, he also claimed that those who pay for in-game advantages are not to blame and that everybody is free to decide what they want to spend their money on, arguing for the supremacy of the fun one derives from the action, regardless of the way one achieves it:

“In the circles I have played and in my opinion, I haven’t heard anyone to be disgruntled by the idea that somebody is buying stuff with real money. No matter the source. I mean, if they can afford it and they wanted something...that makes him happy. I wouldn’t give that money, but if he wants to do it, I’m not going to accuse him of this if he can afford it.”

Mircea also seems lenient in regards to the way other people are getting their game advantages, while making a point of the fact that he would not follow the same course of action:

“If somebody else would just join the game and he would have went and gave some money and he got to have from the beginning that [flying mount] for which I would have had to play some dozens of hours...to get the money for it, I would have not been resentful at all. It was his choice to give that money; I wouldn’t have given that money, you know.”

Several of my informants, particularly Radu and Mircea talked about how purchasing high-level items in games is actually detrimental to the buyer, both in regards to the actual game efficiency and in regards to status. Mircea makes the point that “You can usually see the people who bought their stuff, it’s like...they bought this amazing sword or whatever, but they have no idea how to use it, I mean, because they’re *newbs* they don’t know how to play that sort of character with that kind of *build*, you can see them right away.” Radu specifically brought up the matter of status, saying that

“No, I don’t think if...immoral. [...] I’m not content if I didn’t make it myself, trough gameplay, so to speak. If I would buy them with real money it would probably just be something I bought, you know? It’s not like some object from this world which you buy, ‘cause if I buy a computer here, *fucking awesome*, I can get it. If I’m buying a sword in the game...when I use that I’m just like *yeah, I bought this*. [...] And I’m thinking, look, it doesn’t seem to me to be immoral and, quite the contrary, not unfair either. But when I have that *item* won through the normal way and some other guy, next to me has bought it, you realize that my situation will be, from the point of view of, I don’t know...*ranking*, reputation, of who’s the best...I won it for real. I worked for it, I made it. He just spent 20 dollars and is holding it in his hand, you know? It’s something completely different.”

In a way both this discourses are very reminiscent of everyday rhetoric in capitalist societies where, while the acquisition of wealth is not condemned, the way in which the

wealth was amassed and especially the way in which it is used is under close scrutiny and there is a particular strain of revilement directed towards the nouveau riche-types who try to buy status with money.

On the other side of the transaction, everyone seems to see the typical gold farmer differently, ranging from abusers to victims and everything in between. Alexandru thinks that there are moral differences when one chooses the source where one would buy their virtual goods, and depicts the majority of gold-farmers as non-players and, some of them, even as non-humans.

“It’s not really ethical to buy [gold] from farmers, because they aren’t actually playing the game. They didn’t contribute; they just exploit certain mechanics of the game. They have scripts that do this; they don’t sit at the computer to do it. There’s a very small percentage that actually play and gather and it would be like...buying from...small producers. Just like in the marketplace. You don’t buy from a corporation. If you happen to run into something like this and you can actually help him for the spent effort, than yes, I agree. [...] But if the person just has to put on the script and pay the electricity bill and reaps the money at the end, no, I don’t like this.”

Radu also thinks that “For me, the most correct way of doing this is if you were to buy gold or whatever from another player. From somebody who is playing the game...in a normal manner and just happens to want to sell this. It’s better than both the Chinese and buying from the [game] company.” The problem doesn’t seem to be the transaction itself, but rather the role the initiator of the transaction has in the game. The marketplace comparison that Alexandru bring in is perfect to illustrate the same kind of physical-world morality that seeps into the game as well, when players refuse to have contact with outsiders, with those who don’t play the game as it should be played. In a way, this does seem to agree with Huizinga’s idea of a spoil-sport, of someone who plays against the game, but as Radu

continues, this comes more from confusion and bewilderment rather than hatred or pure opposition:

“I think it’s kind of sad that somebody would get into a field like this, which is made for *fun* and to reduce it to work. I just think it’s very odd the concept of going to work, turning on a game and start working. And the fact that something like this ended up being considered as a low skilled labour. Fuck, for me this is I don’t know, being a trash-man or something. [...] I understand why this is happening, but I still think it’s weird. Before reading some articles about it, I thought it was just scripts doing it, but then I saw pictures of these huge halls with only tables and computers and I was like...*what the fuck*, seriously? It’s a game, it’s made for *fun*, yet some people are working so you can make some things easier.”

Although they have different discourses, both Alexandru and Radu seem to not have a problem with the farmers themselves, as much as they have with the industry and with the grander phenomenon of capitalizing on a game that is “made for fun” by exploiting its mechanics. The farmer is seen, hence, when not under suspicion of using automated scripts to do the job, as a sort for victim of the system, but part of the system nonetheless, an intrusion into the game-world.

“Time is Money”

The practice functions largely, as iterated previously, as a sort of outsourcing (Dibbell, 2007) and, while its systematization through the appearance of big player gold farms is all too familiar to anyone looking at the way the manufacture and service industry has been outsourced to South East Asia, with labourers receiving an infinitesimal share of the price for which their final product is sold for to Western client, for many freelancers it offered a way of emancipation. Suddenly, anyone with a computer, a vague understanding of video games and a lot of time on their hands could start making money, without leaving their

own homes. It can be a source of income for the unemployed, who fail to secure employment in “modern sector” (Hart, 1973: 68), for the house-ridden, for teenagers, for the underemployed and can generally can be a productive way of self-employment. In extreme cases, such as the real-money auction house in *Diablo III* - a formalized, streamlined and legitimate way of selling game items for real money, with the game company taking a fixed share – earnings can reach levels where playing the game is more productive than a good-paying job. Case in point, two informants from Bucharest, whom I had informal talks with, not wanting to be interviewed, told me about making between 400 and 700 Euros per month, in the first few months after the game’s launch. They both worked for a multinational corporation and had salaries well above the average for the city and they both mentioned a third person, fellow co-worker, who they claimed has earned thousands of dollars by playing different online games, ultimately quitting his day job.

In this sense, the outsourcing of virtual services escapes the rhetoric of the Centre – Periphery discourse, in which labourers in developing countries are subjugated by the contractors in the West. One might see it in a way that is similar with Appadurai’s “disorganized capitalism” (Appadurai, 1996: 46), in which the outsourcing services are functioning as a way of emancipation, rather than slave-waging. Developing world youth, while let down by the state of their own region’s economy, do not need to emigrate to the West anymore in an attempt to find employment, when they can offer their services over the Internet, negotiating on equal footing the way in which they transform their labour hours into capital, but this comes with the disadvantages that lacking a formal job brings about.

Virgiliu also stated in a more direct manner what Alexandru hinted at earlier, namely the fact that putting money into the game to gain advantages is no different than spending time going for the same advantages.

“You can’t always know. You see that this guy has good gear and you don’t know if he paid money for that or he stayed and farmed the game for days. Never, when I saw somebody better than me, did I say, yeah, this guy has more money and stuff. I just thought that he was more dedicated to the game. [...] He invested more in this game. I didn’t stop to think if he invested money or time in it. *Time IS money, so...whichever.*”

This equivalence of time and money as both being resources one can use to increase one’s position in the game is something that appeared more in the case of respondents who had a job, especially a well-paying one, rather than in the case of those who were still students or in lower-paid positions. Virgiliu even said that

“I did buy for myself in-game currency, but legal, in the sense that, in *Hawken*... [...] It’s this online *shooter* with little robots. [...] And you can get money either through winning matches either through buying them [from the game company]. And I really didn’t feel like sitting, I don’t know, three days in order to farm and gather [currency] so I can buy this or that robot, which can build walls or shoot bombs. I said, fuck it! I pay 10 dollars and I buy the [in-game] money and that money I spend to buy the robot. And I did the same in *World of Tanks*, I bought a tank with real money. I paid so I wouldn’t waste much time. I mean, I said *fuck it*, I’m going to work to make money. I have money. Why would I sit and farm [in-game] money when I can spend, I don’t know, the equivalent of three hours of what I spend at work...I spend them and I get the thing, the robot, the tank...[...] In the game that would take me 10 or 15 hours. I don’t have a *low-end job*, to say that if I spend that money I’ll starve. I can afford it. If I had *minimum wage*, I couldn’t do this.”

This was a point that came up often in my interviews, with many informants arguing for the morality of the practice on the claim that Virgiliu summarized best through the “time is money” quip and if time can be transformed into money through labour, it should be, then, irrelevant if a player chooses to put a certain number of hours into the game or if he or she would rather invest a certain amount of money. As far back as 2002, Edward Castronova referred to “a distinct emigration of work time from Earth to Norrath” when discussing the economic implications of the world of EverQuest. (Castronova, 2002: 20)

Here we also find another reason for which the practice of Real money trading is so anchored in modern capitalism and functions almost as symptom of it, also working further to reproduce the kinds of conditions that lead to the appearance of Real money trading as a widespread industry. Rather than creating formal employment positions, the practice creates many informal “flexible labour” opportunities, putting labourers in possibly better paid and less physically demanding jobs, but creating an entire industry that is largely not officially registered and doing away with any benefits a formal position might offer, such as health insurance or pension. Furthermore, because of the relatively small set of skills one has to have to operate a gold farm, it also broadens the definition of the work force, leading to categories of people who would traditionally not be employed, but who enjoy a certain amount of free time, such as teenagers, students or the retired to take up the keyboards and directly translate their time into money.

The Small Gold-Farm Model

The practice opens up not only the possibility of alternative employment, but also the chance for new ways in which labour is organized. Due to its very nature and because of the Internet’s global reach, the job can be done from anywhere a stable Internet connection exists and at any hour of the day or of the night. Furthermore, cooperation can improve the overall experiences, so free associations of gold farmers have started to crop up all over the world. Although I did not expect to find, during my fieldwork, any actual gold farmers in Romania, planning on only doing interviews with random players, to find their opinion on the phenomenon, seeing how, as mentioned before, there is precious little empirical work done on gold farmers that are outside hugely-industrialized enterprises, due to their shyness in imparting their activities to others. Through snow balling and sheer dumb luck, however, I

managed to get an interview with Raven, a 22 years old girl who was, along with 3 other friends, part of a group of gold farmers, without them even living in the same town.

She started, alongside her then-boyfriend to work for a game hall that employed people to do gold farming in World of Warcraft, in a small, decrepit town in South Romania, but after moving to Bucharest she started doing it on her own, before meeting these people. Now they work under the guidance of an ad-hoc leader, who is the one that manages the transactions, selling the products of their labour to a Chinese intermediary, to be placed, to her knowledge, on the Korean market. The money they receive are placed in a pool where everyone can take as much as they need, continuing to work in the account of the debt for sums that are larger than their contribution. Raven told me that she wanted to buy a new laptop, so she did so with the money from the pool, and she estimates that she will work for the next 8 months towards the covering of the debt. Interestingly enough, they streamlined the labour even more, by using automatic software to do the work, instead of doing it by hand. Despite being grounds for immediate banning of the account, as well as being quite expensive to purchase, these automatic scripts – called “bots” – are very popular among farmers, reducing their work from actual tiresome labour to starting and stopping the script a few times per day on a computer. This goes on to contradict the Marxian argument that technological advances and increased mechanization only benefit the contractor and never the worker, who has to put in the same amount of labour, while producing a greater amount of a certain product (Marx, 1887: 135), and instead have the labourer “game” the system towards their own advantage.

The opportunity to talk with an actual farmer opened up the possibility to have a first-hand account on several matters, but one of specific interest, especially in the case of a small, freelancing farms was the balance of work and play in the daily life of a gold farmer. While describing her first contact with gold farming, a small gold farm where 5 young men per shift

were working in 12 hour stints, including some of her friends, mining gold in the MMORPG Dark Age of Camelot, in her home-town, Raven mentions that

“The guys who were working there and were doing this for the money, for the salary, they really ended up obsessed with this game and they would end up staying over time just for the pleasure of playing it. Many of them, after the entire thing went down bought the accounts that they built during the job and continued to pay [the subscription] and played for fun. [...] Even now, recently, like a year ago, I talked to a guy who used to work there and he still had the account”.

As stated before, according to Huizinga, these people could not be considered players and their activities cannot be considered play, due to the activity being done as a necessity, towards a material goal. (Huizinga, 1938: 7) But things are much more nuanced here. Does work become, suddenly play when their shift is over and they are doing that for the sheer enjoyment, even if they are doing exactly the same actions? This pure separation of work and play comes off as arbitrary and, again, the real distinction is made by the player. The player knows very well when he or she is doing that activity purely for work and when it is voluntary fun. On the other hand, operating a far, even in a self-employed manner, as Raven does, can disrupt your usual gaming behaviour, as she says that “I don’t play the game anymore. Only the ‘bot does.”

She also made a point out of describing the precarious condition and constant risk that a gold farmer lives with. She is in perpetual danger of being banned and seeing her gathered gold seized by the game authorities and even having access to her account blocked permanently. She then has to start over from zero, by building a different account, without making much money in the meantime.

“You make your plans and the next day you wake up without any of your accounts. [...] I now have three accounts. They banned one of them which I just got to [maximum] level 90

and was only using it to farm for two days. They crippled me.” These kinds of erratic returns, with the possibility of having weeks at the time without any profit is the reason why the money exist in a common pool and are accessible to anyone of her small group.

She claims that she doesn’t know how much she is going to continue doing this activity and she’s not thinking ahead, but says that “I would, though. The idea appeals to me. I’ve done some calculations and I would make some pretty good money out of this. I can’t see myself doing this my whole life and I’m also thinking of the bad parts. Like, you can get banned any time.”

When asked about how other players refer to her, through her nature of being a dreaded gold farmer, she replied that most people never find out, “the ‘bot is just doing its job. Maybe somebody comes and tries to talk to it and it doesn’t reply. They just leave.” She did mention, however, that one of her friends from the physical world became very cross with her when she revealed that she is farming gold in World of Warcraft, as he was one of the people that disliked the practice and actually became more distant after that conversation. About those who hunt down gold farmers and try make their work more difficult she says “They’re idiots. Imbeciles. And they’re this people who don’t kill just farmers, they can’t know most of the time. They sometimes gang up and start killing everybody. Maybe it’s their fun. But the kind of fun that is like...the kind of guy you see on the street that have nothing better to do and start kicking trash cans and do stupid stuff like that.” It is very likely indeed, in this regard, that the action depicted in the YouTube video I mentioned at the start of this paper is not dictated by hatred, but, instead, by fun and attempt to shake of boredom.

Constant Negotiations

As stated before, some players feel appalled by the fact that an individual that enjoys a material advantage in the physical world can subvert the entire natural order of the game and buy their way into the higher echelons – both wealth and status-wise – of the game. But an interesting and somewhat paradoxical phenomenon appears. Although it would stand to reason that if people are annoyed by a small number of players engaging in a certain practice, than they would be even more annoyed when that practice becomes a common occurrence and almost ubiquitous in the game. But the growth in scope actually has the opposite effect, with players growing more content and lenient of Real money trading, considering it even less than a fatality, but a random aspect of the game which they learn to ignore. The reactions in 2005, when I first encountered the phenomenon were hot-headed forum-wide fights that ended with entire alliances deleting their accounts and leaving the game in protest. Today, most people I've talked to seem to be much more lenient, making the case for a more "live and let live" approach to the matter. The number of forum and blog posts calling for measures against the practice also appears to have long peaked a few years ago, most people still discussing it, but only marginally, as something that "just happens".

To back up the claim according to which the most important rules of the game are not necessarily the official ones which are imposed top-down by the company, but the ones negotiated by the players, the example of the Diablo 3 practice of "flipping" can be offered. Flipping is the activity of speculating the Real Money Auction House, by buying cheap and selling high, creating monopolies on certain types of items and constantly raising the prices for the entire category. The practice exists in complete accordance with the rules of the game – and really, with the rules of any market in the world – but is generally seen by other players as ruining the game, by making the auction house the central object of play, rather than the actual gameplay and for messing up the economy.

There is a constant negotiation of the legitimacy of the practice that takes place from the global level, where time possesses the propriety to mellow out the initial enmity, as well as at game-world level, with different game shaving different player-negotiated rules, but also at individual level, where each player decides for themselves what is acceptable and what is not in the game. The best example is a surprising number of respondents who, while technically engaging in Real money trading, would never call it that, arguing that the devil is in the details and in the purpose that you are doing it for, not in the actual process.

After telling me about the time when he spent real money to purchase virtual goods, Virgiliu also recalled one of the times he spent in-game currency to buy digital goods that are usually paid for with physical world money. In this case, it was monthly access codes for the same game he had the currency in, which enabled him to play the game for a few more months:

“I bought *subscriptions* from the Chinese with gold in Eve [Online]. When I had [in-game] money, I bought them. I said, there’s no point to spend, I don’t remember what the price was, 10 – 15 euros, and I saw no reason to pay this much, because back then I wasn’t employed and 15 euros was horribly high for me back then. I said, as long as I have in-game money, I said, *fuck it*. I borrowed some money from Stokky [common acquaintance], as well, and I paid for three months of game [subscription] and I was like *awesooome!* From the Chinese. The delivery was in 5 minutes.”

Alexandru also told me that that he had a very similar experience, using the famously special sales-rich Christmas period to offer in-game currency in exchange for games bought by his trading partners at special prices, making the deal extra-profitable for everyone involved.

“I only traded in-game. The only real-money conversion I made was gathering a large amount of metal in *Team Fortress 2* and when [online video game shop] *Steam Winter Sales* arrived, people were willing to trade me that for games. And from what I had there put together, I ended up getting over a hundred games. [...] Around 100 – 150 euros, I guess”, while Radu

also recalled that he had bought the newly-out expansion for the game with in-game money and although “it would have been with 5 – 10 dollars cheaper to buy it with real money, but, hey, this is stuff I produced in game, can’t really complain.”

The extra months of subscription or other games undoubtedly qualify, despite their digital nature, as physical-world commodities, or better yet, to avoid confusion, as “information goods”, through their nature of existing outside of the synthetic world and having both exchange and use value in the “real world”. (Lehdonvirta, 2009b: 100 – 101) However, my respondents did not consider them as being the same as placing yourself at the supplying end of the Real money trading process, not even mentioning it the first time I asked them about their participation in the practice, but working it into the conversation later on. They argued that they have “only” bought other games with that in-game currency, which they saw as being worlds apart from getting money out of the game for personal profit or for buying physical goods.

VI. A HERO’S RETURN – Conclusions

The porous membrane that Castronova (Castronova, 2005: 146) believed to have replaced the strict magical circle of old, is not only more flexible, but apparently also possesses regenerative abilities, being able to close the gaps left by intrusions and become whole again. Or, to put it less metaphorically, the constant negotiation of the limits of legitimacy that players engage in have learned to accept the practice of Real money trading, with players preferring to be more concerned to make their own fun in their game, and let others have theirs, rather than fight the intrusion of real life. Some of them even engage in the practice without necessarily calling it like that, with individual negotiations of the term, such

as categorising differently the selling of virtual currency for real money, as long as those funds serve a circular purpose and contribute to a ludic end.

According to Heeks, both Raven, who is not physically dependent on the gold farming, but uses it as a source of extra income, as well as the other respondents who have spent in game resources to at least cover the cost of the game can be considered amateur gold farmers, in that the farming is not central to their daily life, some not even acknowledging its presence, and do not use the technique as a main source of income. (Heeks, 2008: 15) Furthermore, perhaps not surprisingly, players with a higher physical-world income will be more likely to both be more tolerant of real money trading and to actually engage in the practice, while those with lower incomes exhibit as main reaction not opposition, but bafflement.

The Real money trading is thus, a much more internalized practice, performed, at both ends of the transactions, by a higher percentage of players one might assume from reading the hateful diatribes one can find on any MMORPG forum and, rather than being seen as an intrusion of the physical-world into the illusion of separation offered by the game world, it is usually deconstructed to its most basic and described as nothing more than a conversion of time and money, through labour, and, while there is no perfect equivalence of the two, the process seems to be more accepted, the closer it resembles actual play. While farmers who use scripts are immediately dismissed as exploiters and those who do this for a living for a big gold farm are treated with confusion and suspicion, if some empathy, those who play the game in a more or less expected manner and still engage in real money trading are seen as doing a sensible thing that few will object to. The main opposition, thus, regards the industrialization of the process and not the practice in itself.

Its existence is intimately tied to the flow of cash and the gaps in income and labour that global capitalism thrives in. Taking form, in its current incarnation in regards to scale, at

least, because of the global and regional differences in income and employment, the practice of real money trading also works towards furthering the tenets of modern capitalism in the long term by moving jobs from the formal sector to the informal sector and by pushing into the workforce demographic categories that have usually been employed.

So, rather than assuming that gold farming is an intrusion of capitalism and of the physical world into the assumed illusion of the game, one can much easier see that the bridging of the two is done in the opposite direction, with play, games and synthetic worlds becoming a part of the capitalist contemporaneity.

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