

The impacts of farming and crafting on MMO economies

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Abstract

This paper examines the phenomena of “gold farming”, player responses to “gold farming” and crafting, and the economic impact of “gold farming” and crafting in Massively Multi-Player Online Role Playing Games (MMOs). With one MMO, Blizzard’s World of Warcraft, having recently broken 8 million accounts these games are becoming very popular and very profitable. On top of that, outside companies are trading in game currency and items for real world currency. Often these transactions are discouraged by the MMO creators. The author conducted in-depth interviews and questionnaires with players to determine the perceived economic impact of these “illegal” transactions as well as the impact of a legitimate in game economic factor, known as crafting. The players also expressed their opinion of farming and crafting as it influences their everyday game play. While there is some disagreement among players on the economic impacts of these activities, overall players disagree strongly about the effects of farming and crafting.

Overview

People spend countless hours every week playing various massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs). Often these games offer platinum and gold (or other in-game currency) for selling items, completing quests, or killing monsters. Players often find themselves with excessive items and see other players selling items that they do need; mutually beneficial exchanges take place and markets are formed. The market of a MMO works in basically the same way as a real world market; players exchange goods, services, and currency amongst each other to their mutual benefit. The game economy is affected in a number of ways. Players obtain goods and currency by killing monsters and selling the items the monster drops, they can create the items with crafting skills, or they can purchase these items from other players. For the most part, in game economies remain separate from the real-world. However recently there has been a cross-over. Players known as farmers spend considerable amounts of time in the game doing nothing but killing monsters collecting gold and items for the purpose of selling these items and in game currency for real world currency. These exchanges are often frowned upon by game developers and players and have thus become a sort of virtual black market. Many players and game developers feel that economies of games are influenced by crafting skills and these farmers; however several players also feel this is a legitimate way to get in game currency or items. Crafting skills act as a

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legitimate market in virtual worlds and the real world currency exchange for online goods acts as a black market. This paper examines how the two are related and how they both impact the economy of a virtual world. It will also examine the opinions of MMO players regarding farming and the overall impact farming has on these games.

Literature Review

Online Exchanges for real life currency

There is no denying that real life exchanges for virtual goods and currencies takes place. Sadly however, most game companies have missed the boat. IGE.com currently estimates the overall market for online items and gold to be worth about \$900 million, and they project it to exceed \$7 billion by 2009 (<http://www.ige.com/about>). Sony Online has found a way to profit with a website dedicated to selling accounts and items in-game for real world money, but overall this market is relatively untapped. Sony Online saw the potential to both get in on the profits and to remove incentive for players to visit gold farmers. Trading real life money for items, accounts, and money in game is a huge cash generator, and is only likely to grow. Sony Online Entertainment has even gone as far as creating the SOE Station Exchange. The SOE Station Exchange is "a secure method of buying and selling the right to use in game coin, items and characters in accordance with SOE's license agreement, rules and guidelines" ("Introducing Station Exchange," 2006).

Journalists writing about online transactions for real money like to point out how big the business is. For example, in *Second Life*, a player by the name of Kasi Nafus runs an in-game clothing store. She makes shirts and sells them in game for one dollar (US) per shirt. She is one of many from a variety of MMOs. Everything from in game shirts to real life cell phone rings are for sale. The *Second Life* avatar Anshe Chung is another example of the great success a person can make trading in game items for in game currency. In *Second Life* Chung has amassed an empire worth an estimated \$250,000 US (Hof, 2006). It is estimated that about two million dollars (US) per month is generated off of in game transactions in *Second Life* (Farming 2005). People originally purchased in game clothing or items from *Second Life*, but it now extends to ring tones and wall paper for real life cell phones (Graham 2006). The profit potential for game users is immense, and it is estimated that selling "things" in game yields over one hundred million dollars annually (Farming 2005, Economist 2006). Right now the biggest success story in online transactions is about a man who purchased an island for about twenty-six thousand dollars, and then he began selling rights to mine the island to other players. The island was purchased by a group called "Project Entropia." He has more then made up his initial investment (Economist 2006). It is important to note however that some games such as *Second Life* actually encourage real money transfers while MMOs like *World of Warcraft* and *Everquest II* discourage it. Regardless of whether these transactions are encouraged or frowned upon, they are big business.

This presents many problems. Researchers who investigate online transactions often point out how hard regulation is. The internet does not

occupy any physical space and has no real home country, so enforcing law is very difficult. In South Korea, gold selling accounts (in game accounts that would “farm” and sell gold for real world money) were hacked into. The gold was stolen and the thieves sold it for more than one million dollars in profit. Police were called in to investigate, but their efforts were fruitless (Economist, 2006). Even if the criminals were caught, enforcing punishment or proving guilt would be near impossible.

The final main point found about online transactions is that the “hardcore” players find it unfair. In many MMOs, players must kill thousands of monsters to obtain money and items. However several companies allow for players to purchase online money or items for a small real world fee (www.ige.com has 500 gold in World of Warcraft listed at about thirty to forty-five dollars, depending on the server). IGE is based in Miami Florida, and Los Angeles, California. They also have a wholly operated subsidiary in Hong Kong. IGE does not make claims as to their yearly earnings; however they estimate that the virtual money exchange for real world currency was around \$900 million (<http://www.ige.com/about>). Many truly committed players who put in countless hours to get the best items and significant amounts of in game gold feel this cheapens their game experience, drives up prices, and takes away from the “hardcore” aspect of the game (McCauley 2006). However, as stated earlier, it is a big business and the end of online transactions for real world money does not appear to be coming anytime soon.

Virtual and real world economies

Economic growth plays a major role in the overall structure of a country. It can help determine the standard of living, the unemployment rate, and, overall, how well off a country is. Economies in video games are similar; however all they really do is determine how much digital gold it takes to buy an item. As the demand for digital gold rises, people begin to see opportunity to exchange in game currency for real life currency. As this happens, the virtual economies become more and more real, almost to the point where now they can be viewed as separate, unique real world economies. The structure of a MMO economy greatly mirrors that of a real world economy, and we can see several parallels between the two realms.

A strong market structure is vital for a strong economy, both in the real world and in game. The market structure is the basic foundation for how a market is set up and the factors that define a particular market. There are six determinants that define a good market structure: product complexity, offering size, data transparency (how available is information on the product), clearing risk, liquidity, and regulation (Tabb 2006). Video games possess most of these characteristics, but in a lesser way. There is definite product complexity, as most MMOs offer a huge array of items, with data available on these items with a click of a button. The offering size in a MMO varies. If an item is crafted, the number of willing crafters will determine the offering size. If the item is random treasure one gets from killing monsters the availability will be almost completely random. As for liquidity, video games offer something that does not exist in the real world. Even if no other player characters want an item a player in a MMO

can make a sale. In MMOs, characters (programmed by the game designers) exist that buy nearly any item, so liquidity is not a real problem. Regulation and risk of default on a transaction are hardly a factor in MMOs, as well. If a player truly feels they were scammed by another player, then they are able to contact GMs and often receive their gold or items back. Overall, MMOs follow closely to the traditional market structure.

In a MMO the economy serves a different purpose than in the real world. In the real world, markets and economies are designed to maximize efficiency, while in video games they are meant to maximize the “fun” people have while in the games. The difference in designs creates a need to regulate trading. MMOs are often fantasy games where players go “from rags to riches” and earn what they have. Games such as World of Warcraft frown heavily upon the complete free economy, especially when it comes to real world exchanges (A Model Economy, 2005).

These economies, despite the efforts of many game companies, do hold real world implications. eBay and other online sites are ripe with people looking to buy and to sell virtual accounts, items, or gold. For example, a player named Julian Dibbell wrote of his experiences supporting himself for a year by playing Ultima Online (Musgrove, 2005). While his overall income is unknown, income from Ultima Online was his only source of income for that year and he made a “comfortable” living. Overall these virtual markets are slowly losing that “virtual” adjective as they become more real and more complex.

Gold farming

Gold farming is another unique phenomenon in MMOs. Farming in a video game occurs when a player repeatedly defeats monsters in a specific area for a period of time. Often these monsters are either very easy for the player to defeat (allowing the player to defeat many monsters very quickly and without stop) or they have a very high reward rate based on their difficulty. The reward players get from farming is either experience (levels that make their character more powerful) or material rewards (virtual currency or items). Gold farmers are players that occupy specific areas in a MMO where gold and rare item drops are at the highest and do nothing but farm monsters purely for the gold reward (usually they are at the maximum level).

On the surface, gold farming seems like a natural and profitable thing to do in game, and throughout the course of a game most players will farm for gold on more than one occasion. Gold farmers however pose a potential virtual economic risk. Gold farmers (as opposed to players farming for gold) spend nearly all of their in-game time farming monsters for gold and items only to sell the items or gold later on sites like IGE.com or eBay. There is a distinct difference between gold farmers and players who farm for gold. Throughout the course of a player’s time in a MMO, they will need in game currency, often more than they can obtain during their usual play. When this occurs, the players engage in similar activities to “gold farmers.” The key difference is that gold farmers engage in farming with the intent of selling everything they find outside of game, while players that farm do so to achieve in game goals (such as a new

sword, or to buy new skills). Often gold farming is often outsourced, making them essentially the new sweatshop. Asian countries (where much farming is outsourced to) have become so common that they created the stereotype of “Chinese Gold Farmers” (Porter, 2006).

How do gold farmers influence the economy? They have players occupy the most efficient spots to gain wealth and items other players are forced to compete even more in order to obtain items and gold. In a MMO certain spots have monsters with a higher percentage chance to drop valuable items or that drop more gold than other monsters (or monsters that are easily killed and offer less potential gold, but many can be killed very quickly). Often groups of gold farmers will constantly kill all the monsters in these spots and wait for them to reappear, they are usually able to claim these areas as theirs and theirs alone. On top of that, by selling items and gold for real life currency, prices will rise because there is more gold in the market. This gives an advantage to players who are willing to spend extra money on the game (ExtremeTech Staff, 2006).

Gold farming allows players with more desire to spend money a chance to increase their online status. It has gotten to the point where people are literally paying hundreds of dollars (at most recent check, IGE was selling gold in World of Warcraft for over \$100 for 1000 gold) for others to play a game for them (The Roanoke Times, 2005). However, as Potter states, there is more for sale here than just gold and items. Just as people seek status in real life (cars, a fancy house, and other material goods) the MMO community seeks “material” wealth as well (Potter, 2006). Whether it’s a powerful new sword, a strong piece of armor, or just the ability to buy anything a player wants, the toils of gold farmers inflates the economy, but boy do they sell status.

Black market economies and possible connections in MMOs

Economies consist of markets for goods and services. For the most part, as was seen in the section on market structure, markets are regulated and tracked. However potential for profit exists beyond these regulated markets and secondary markets often form. Sometimes these secondary markets are legal, but sometimes they are illegal or heavily frowned on. Black markets are such secondary markets, as they often exist to buy and sell goods that are illegal or unregulated. In a MMO the buying and selling of gold (for real life currency) is often considered illegal by End Game User Agreements that players must adhere to in order to play. Yet, as is seen on countless websites selling gold, items and accounts, there is a demand for these goods resulting in the formation of a black market.

Looking at black markets in more physical economies will help show the effects of these markets on economies as a whole, especially in MMOs where the punishment for violation of economic regulations is less severe.

In Zimbabwe, a secondary currency exchange market so strong exists that it has essentially become the primary market. Zimbabwe is a developing country with a near worthless currency and a crippling economy. This has led to an underground market to develop for nearly everything. In this market

prices are marked up nearly two hundred percent, yet it still flourishes. The market developed because people bringing in foreign currency were afraid to go through the government, instead choosing the underground markets where profit potential was greater. This has led to a secondary, illegal market that is as strong, if not stronger than the primary market (Mugari, 2005). In a MMO that allows gold sellers to operate completely unchecked, this example of an out of control black market would be hyperinflation as the result of an abundance of gold in the economy, while server populations must remain relatively steady.

Zimbabwe has shown what can happen if a black market is allowed to grow unchecked. Corruption on the other hand leads to black market creation. Bhamani-Oskooee and Goswami argue that corruption in a government can increase both supply and demand in an economy. They argue that in poor, developing countries, a stronger demand for foreign currency leads to a closer control on these markets and an increased likelihood that those with the means to obtain foreign currency will go out of their way to obtain it, even skirting the law (2005). Now apply their findings to a MMO. There is a demand for gold and people do possess the means to obtain it by going beyond the rules of the game (real life currency). Therefore there is a black market for these in game currencies.

In April, 2006, the Associated Press released an article discussing how the black market exchange for pesos works. This is a parallel to real world exchanges for in game currency, only using two real world currencies. By making contracts with drug cartels, currency dealers are able to obtain large sums of American currency to exchange with legitimate companies that deal regularly with the United States. When the legitimate business occurs, the dollars are back in the United States economy, and the pesos are in the Colombian economy. The currency dealers profit by charging both cartels and the legitimate dealers a small fee (Associated Press, 2006). This illegal market is also known as money laundering. A similar parallel to MMOs would be a farmer providing a "legitimate" player with a constant flow of specific items in exchange for currency.

By creating this secondary market for goods and currency in MMOs, the potential to destroy or inflate the economy exists. Whether or not huge price increases or decreases as a result of these markets are a matter wide open for debate.

Study Design

This study examines how black market and legitimate market operations work to influence an overall economy. I argue that game crafting and gathering constitute a legitimate market in game, while the exchange of real world currency for in game items/currency creates a black market. The overall exchange of all goods (crafted or otherwise) is the main economy. To understand these issues, I interviewed x players from the gaming community.

I recruited participants by looking at online trade skill forums. Since player created items are a particular market I was looking at, these forums

allowed me to directly contact crafters. Often the more experienced crafters answered my call (see Appendix A for my crafter recruitment message). Crafters have to go to great lengths to obtain the necessary materials to craft their wares, so these players often tend to have strong opinions of farmers. Since player crafted items are often in demand, crafters tend to be relatively in touch with the general economy of a game to keep them from setting prices so low that they lose out on money, or so high that they cannot make sales. Overall, moderately experienced crafters with experience with farmers and with selling their items were the best candidates for my research.

After finding interested parties, I set up several interviews. Most of these players felt more comfortable discussing my questions over a series of e-mails. My main goal was to gather a sense of how experienced the players were with the overall economies of their chosen game (I was able to assess this by discussing their experiences with selling items both crafted and found using in game methods), their experiences crafting, and their views on farming. Afterwards I followed up by asking the interviewees to elaborate on their views and discuss their particular impact on the virtual economies (mostly done by talking about their ability to make money in game). See Appendix B for a list of the initial questions, as well as Appendix C for a list of forums used for recruitment.

Results and Discussion

The results were discovered through a series of interviews conducted via e-mail and as a response to the survey posted in Appendix C. A total of 26 respondents answered questions through one of these areas. To protect the confidentiality of the respondents, they will be referred to as Rx with x being the order their quotes appear in the paper. Of the 26 respondents, eighteen games were represented, with World of Warcraft, Everquest, and Everquest II as the most commonly played games. All 26 of these players have experience as casual players who do not profit outside of the scope of the games; however one also ran a farming company. The farmer's point of view will be discussed in the results, as well as that of the players.

The player perspective

Farming and crafting have at least a small impact on the economy of a MMO. Players, however disagree strongly on how much these activities actually influence the games economies. The players were divided fairly evenly among the "yes they do affect the economy" and the "no they do not affect the economy" schools of thought. Overall the effects of crafting seemed to be downplayed, but all players had a strong opinion of farming.

"Not to long ago a friend of mine bought 3000 gold online. He used it to buy out every arcane crystal on the AH which caused the prices to sky rocket from 20g to 50 and 60g a piece." -R1

"Yes they have, Ace of Warlords 1g? S--t used to be like 300g"- R2

Both of these players show how some players feel the economy is affected by farmers. The first player describes how farming raises prices. Farmers bring extra currency into a game economy, which in turn gives players that purchase the ability to purchase more. When the player described by R1 brought the newfound wealth into the market, he was able to purchase all of a particular item that was available. Since the player had so much currency the price was not an object for him. In order to counter this, prices slowly rose until they were about triple the previous price. All players (not just those that purchased gold from farmers) feel the sting of these higher prices and the benefit should they be selling the particular items.

R2 however shows a different consequence of farming. The Ace of Warlords is an item in World of Warcraft that at one time was very rare and valuable. However, farmers began to actively seek out this item and soon the market was flooded with them. As players and farmers fight to make sales on items that saturate the market they undercut each other's prices until a formerly valuable item is worth next to nothing. Both are legitimate concerns and have a legitimate effect on the economy.

Whether these affects on the economy are good or bad is a matter wide open for debate. In both cases the price changes were great for one group and bad for another (in the first example sellers benefited while buyers were hurt and in R2's example the sellers felt cheated while the buyers were thrilled).

"They then have gold from the server which is pure profit and not affecting the economy at that time (gold from mobs is generated from the server with its unlimited amount of gold). Which is all gravy until that gold is used to buy items from the AH which then that massive amount of gold is thrown into the system at once and is pretty harsh to the economy, unless its put back into the server (ex: buying mounts)." -R3

This sentiment is echoed by several players and is a valid explanation for why they feel the economy is changed because of the work of farmers. The server creates the currency players use and as of yet, no monetary limit has been reached. For many purchases the trade is among the players. So once currency is introduced into the economy, it stays there for a long time.

On the other hand, an equally vocal group felt that farming had little to no affect on the economies of their MMO. Some players feel that farming provides a balance between goods and currency in the market.

"By bringing more items into the World of Warcraft auction houses, gold farmers keep the prices of such items down by providing more supply. On the exact opposite note however, due to the increase of sales volume, the gold generated from these sales causes the overall value of gold to decrease causing the final price of items on the AH to increase. It's a unique balance of the value of gold vs. price of items on the AH." -R4

There is no argument that farming increases the number of items for sale, and most agree that they also increase the currency in the economy, and this player argues that the increase of items is countered by an increase in gold available. This is a fairly twisted application of supply and demand. Usually as supply increases, price goes down, but because so much money is in the economy the prices are not really affected. The other way to look at this is that as players will lower prices by undercutting each other. Eventually prices will get so low that the buyers will buy everything available and prices will rise again. With an influx of items, a large number of players undercut each other, but the large amounts of currency allow players to buy items out at higher prices, achieving the same equilibrium that would be reached if farmers were not present.

“Actually I don't think they've affected the economy as much as people believe they have. It seems like [this] tends to both up the amount of free money and the number of items [in the market], basically canceling each other out. If anything they have made the economy a bit more robust and less likely to suffer from drastic increases in inflation or deflation.” – R5

This is another valid explanation as to why the economy is not greatly affected by farmers. It again falls with the idea that as more items enter the economy prices remain unchanged because more currency exists too. The economy is kept in check because the currency and item prices stay similar.

While players varied greatly on their opinions of the economic affects of farming, they seemed to be in relative agreement on how crafting fits into the economy. For the most part, players felt that crafting was more of a money sink and something they picked up out of need rather than their main money making source. In nearly all games, increasing one's skill in a crafting profession takes either a significant amount of currency or a significant amount of time (and luck) gathering raw materials.

“I sell off the lower level items, which helps getting money some, but that's not my main reason for doing it.” –R6

“In WoW [World of Warcraft] base materials sell for more than crafted items. That, in itself, makes crafting a losing proposition.”- R7

This was the overall sentiment of crafters in MMOs; gathering can be used to make money, but crafting, as a whole, lost money. Players could use gathering raw materials as a money maker to fund crafting, but overall, crafting wasted time and money. Why then do players choose to take up crafting skills? Crafting, while not the best money maker, offers players an array of items not otherwise available in the game. Obtaining these items may not be efficient, but is often critical for guild advancement.

“Still, my main character dropped skinning and took up alchemy (at level 58). Why? Well, my guild needed someone to make those stonyscale potions (among others) for use in raiding.” –R7

R7 was the most effective money maker I interviewed, so the money was not his reason for picking up a crafting skill, but because he was so effective he was able to ignore the monetary struggles crafting often causes. He made the switch to help his guild. Crafting, as an economic factor, is minor, if it has any impact at all.

Whether or not farmers actually affect the economy of a MMO players have formed strong opinions regarding farmers. Much like with the economic impact, players have complete opposite opinions on whether or not farmers are a good or bad influence on the game. The opinions players form are often strong, and they defend their views passionately.

The players formed several distinct opinions on farmers. First some players felt that farming was okay, and they either have done it or do it regularly. The second group felt that farming was okay, but not something they would do. The third group was strongly against farming, and the final group had no strong feelings either way. The purchasing and selling of accounts received less attention, as most players had no strong opinions about them.

“Sure, it goes to why I pay someone to mow my lawn, I could cut the grass myself but it takes a long time and can be hard work. I buy {World of Warcraft] gold so I don’t have to spend 500 hours behind the computer grinding.” -R8

This is the basic sentiment behind most players who have no problems buying currency/items online and have actually done it. This group of players feels that farming for gold is a chore and feel that their time would be better spent achieving other goals in game. Like cutting the grass, these players see farming for their own gold as little more than wasted time, especially when they possess the means to obtain it easier.

The players that are okay with farmers but have not purchased gold or items themselves have a much more relaxed attitude about it.

“I really don’t care what others do with their money; it’s their own money, they are allowed to do whatever they want.” -R9

“Yes, I have no problem with any transaction that does not involve coercion or any other illegal business practice.” –R1

The basic argument for gold farming being okay (whether or not the players actually purchased the gold) is that the players that do purchase gold are not really doing anything wrong (in their opinion). These players are just using their own money to make a transaction, nothing more. These players, much like those neutral about farming, do not really have strong opinions about farming.

The players that are against farming and real money transfers for in game currency (RMTs) feel that it is lazy, cheapens the game experience, and kills the economy.

“The fact that they worked for it in real life has nothing to do with the virtual environment. This is especially true when it is so easy to make money within the game. RMT is not only cheating. It also points to laziness and expediency. People who say ‘It’s boring’ or ‘I’d rather be in a [Battle Ground]’ are providing excuses, not reasons, for being poor.” –R7

By purchasing gold or items online, some players feel that players are skipping part of the game and being lazy. Surprisingly, the economic damage was not the major concern of those against farming. Rather the fact that they felt those that bought gold were being lazy and skipping out on part of the game was the main problem.

Account purchasing was viewed much less harshly by players. The perceived economic impact of account purchases was nonexistent. Accounts that get sold rarely have significant amounts of gold because, oddly enough, the gold would usually sell for more separate from the account. However, players did feel that people that purchase accounts have an impact of the overall game play.

“They are noobs.” –R10

A “noob” is video game slang for a new player or a rookie (often said in an insulting manner). The problem with most account purchasers is that they skip over most of the actual leveling of their characters. So in many players’ eyes they fail to learn all the subtleties of the character they acquire. Players do not respect nor feel as comfortable playing with these people because they feel they are “noobs” and will only slow down progress because of their mistakes (which most players feel those that actually “earned” the level of their characters would not make).

Overall the effects of farming remains wide open for debate, as players have varying opinions on the actual economic and game play effects of farmers. They do agree fairly unanimously that crafting and account selling have minimal impact on the economy, but significant game play implications.

The farmer’s tale

The stereotype for a farmer is the “Chinese Gold Farmer,” which is used to describe nearly all people who farm gold and items for the purpose of selling for real world currency. This stereotype came into play because often gold farming companies use cheap labor, often outsourced to China or other Asian countries. However, this is not always the case, the farmer interviewed was a fairly well off teenager looking to make a profit.

“I had a group of EQ players who would farm items for me that I would then sell on eBay.” –R11

“I had no real interest in MMOs, but I did have some interest in business and in the game of ‘making money’” –R11

The farmer ran a “shop” of 20 players in original Everquest. The players were all high level, experienced, and had a strong understanding of the mechanics of the game. They would farm for items and the “owner” would sell them on e-Bay. The farmer that ran the shop never actually played the game; instead delegating the playing to the team of farmers she had working for her. Farming was a business, and for this particular farming shop, a very profitable business. Over the four months the shop was open it made about \$10,000, but the players only dealt with items and did not spend a lot of time in game obtaining these items. This was only a small time, single server operation (done several years ago at around the time original Everquest was made popular) that only dealt with a small part of the money making potential, so imagine what a multi-server, hundred farmer operation dealing both in game currency and items can achieve. It makes IGE.com’s projected multi billion dollar industry seem a lot more feasible.

There is a huge disparity between the representation of normal player’s views and the views on farmers. As mentioned earlier, 1 out of 26 respondents was a farmer while the rest are normal players. Part of the reason for this disparity is that farmers want to keep their identity quiet. The interview was conducted only after a guarantee was made that I would in no way reveal the players identity. Also, despite about half of the respondents being okay or neutral towards farming and purchasing currency, it is still a relatively “secret” process. Players that purchase gold do not like having their names associated with buying gold or farming, so those that sell are even more secretive.

Conclusion

The farmer debate will always exist among players. The economic impacts are nearly impossible to measure, but the legitimacy debate of the gold farmed and sold will wage on, too. The initial questions posed only presented more questions. The debate about the effects of farming on MMO economies appears to be in full force. One of the major problems with this study is that too much of it is trying to look back at the game after farmers have come to servers. It is difficult to examine the economic implications of something when it has already been introduced into the economy and the economy has adjusted for it. One potential way to counter this would be to open a private server where only non-farmers are allowed then slowly introduce farmers into the server and watch what happens.

Sony Online has taken a major step towards rooting out farmers (which, depending on if your view of farmers is good or bad). By offering the SOE Station Exchange, they allow the buying and selling of accounts and items in games like Everquest II. However as was seen, players that are against farmers

are more against the idea of buying and selling items and gold than they are against the farmers themselves, So while the SOE Station Exchange may address the "problem" of farmers it does not help the "problem" of people selling items and gold for real life money. Such is the nature of the farmer and economic debates; there is no clear answer because there is no agreed upon problem.

Whether or not players agree with farming, whether or not they feel it influences the economy, and whether or not players purchase gold or accounts, they will all agree on one thing: it is a big business, and if future MMOs have the millions of subscriber success that World of Warcraft has had, then the business will only grow bigger. In order to truly understand how farming impacts an MMO further research should look to MMOs with economies that farmers have not yet appeared on and then watch how the markets change as farmers begin to appear. Another way to further research the impact of farming is to look at each side of the arguments individually, rather than as a whole. This would allow for greater detail to be paid to each side, rather than a split among the differing views.

Appendix A: Recruitment Message

Hello,

My name is Sam, and I am an undergraduate enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months, with characters ranging in level from 10 to 27. Our primary characters are members of the guild The Vindicators on the Antonia Bayle server.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts on tradeskills and the effect of spending real life currency for in-game items/currency in MMOs.

These interviews could take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an anonymous instant messaging connection. I will preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on this topic, please contact me at:

mmporgecon@hotmail.com

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thanks in advance for your time.

Sam

Appendix B: Research Questions

(Note: these were the preliminary research questions and were often tailored to initial responses to my recruitment thread to avoid asking questions already answered).

- 1) What are your experiences with selling and purchasing items in game with either in game auction systems or use of trade channels (WTS/WTB)?
- 2) How do you feel farmers and gold selling services have affected prices? Has the recent banning of several known farmer accounts affected prices on your server, if so how
- 3) Have you ever purchased gold/items/accounts for a MMO using real life currency?
 - a) If yes how has this affected your game play? Why did you decide to do this? Was it worth while?
 - b) If no why do you chose not to make these transactions?
- 4) Are you an experienced craftsman or gatherer in a MMO?
 - a) If yes how has crafting affected your monthly income?
 - b) If no why do you chose not to craft?
- 5) In a typical week how much in game currency do you make:
 - a) Selling items you find?
 - b) Grinding?
 - c) As a result of crafting or gathering?
- 6) What do you spend most in game currency on?

Appendix C: Forums used for recruitment

Allakhazam

Allakhazam is a virtual database for several MMOs. It offers information on trade skills, quests, items, as well as a variety of guides for the games. I posted in a handful of the trade skill forums here and received several comments from the WoW forum.

Everquest II Crafting Forums (Official Sony Site).

This website provided a lot of information about crafting in EQ2. It offered forums, but despite the heavy traffic few responses were received from members of this community.

I also used several guild websites (guilds that I am connected to members of or a member of myself) and posted recruitment there. To protect the privacy and reputation of the guilds who allowed me use their forums will remain anonymous.

I also received e-mails from several people who read about my proposal on live journal.

I also posted a survey on Survey Monkey so players could quickly respond to a few questions.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=818322102370>

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