

Virtual Values

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Selling your Bigger Bugfinder Blade for 15 million Meat

01

"You're fighting a Protagonist

This is a 12-year-old boy who has somehow become one of the most powerful warriors in the world. He's on a quest to both save the world and somehow redeem himself from a past he doesn't remember. Perhaps getting a little bit of a smackdown will jar his memory. He gets the jump on you.

He hits you in the skull with a sword the size (and sharpness) of a cricket bat. Ouch! Ow! Ow! Ouch! Ooh!

You lose 17 hit points."

(The Kingdom of Loathing, Asymmetric Publications LLC, 2005)

"The Kingdom of Loathing" is a browser-based and relatively small MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game), or rather a parody of several MMORPGs and various other pop-culture phenomena. The game is largely text based and the graphics are hand-drawn stick-figures. The player can choose from three character classes, roughly following the typical, or even cliché, system of an online fantasy game. After creating a character the player is free to adventure in the "Kingdom of Loathing", mostly by performing duties from the "Council of Loathing".

The currency in the Kingdom is not gold, nor dollars, pounds or euros, the valuta is "meat" and it serves several purposes – paying for items, crafting new items, etc. Small quantities of meat – sometimes accompanied by (special) items – are dropped by defeated monsters, just like the bags of gold you can loot from a corpse in a World of Warcraft.

The Kingdom has a lively economy based upon the exchange and accumulation of meat. Players can buy or sell their goods gathered by adventuring at the Flea Market, or at the Mall of Loathing, as soon as they reach a level of five or more.

The Mall of Loathing is of particular interest because a player can buy a store in the Mall and start selling their goods directly. The Flea Market is a bit one-dimensional, common – and therefore cheap – items are always sold for very high prices, taking advantage of low-level players who can't access the Mall yet. There are also a lot of other in-game stores, but these – as well as the Flea Market – have no significant influence on the economy of the game and don't require any player-to-player interaction.

Players can also trade directly, by proposing a trade to another player. This action will allow the player to communicate with the opposing party in a special chat-channel. This is a very direct method of trading and doesn't effect the game economy on a large scale very much.

The Mall is the place for players to get rich by hunting for bargains and selling valuable property for reasonable prices. The prices in the Mall are based on several factors. One is the rarity of an item. The “Hypnodisk” for example is an extremely rare item. There is very little chance that a player will receive such an item by defeating a monster, thus creating a scarcity. The high price – the average is 39.000.000 meat – of “Hypnodisks” in the Mall is very consistent and the item is considered a prestige object among players.

“Disembodied brains” or “clockwork keys” are also hard to get, but you can still acquire them by extensive adventuring in the relevant areas. The price of those items fluctuates a lot.

The items mentioned above can be used to craft powerful new weapons, armour, food, drinks, etc. The “Hypnodisk” is an exception as well as other items comparable to the “Hypnodisk”, the prices of those items are based upon their rarity or the special attributes they possess. Because of their usability the prices of those items rise accordingly. Several attempts have been made to undercut the regular prices item by buying these particular items in huge quantities and selling them under the current price. Most of the attempts failed because there were too little items in stock and after selling every single product the sold goods reappeared on the market again at a much higher price within the hour. Therefore a massive, structural change in this economy requires a massive quantity objects to be sold, thus creating a quick inflation of the market.

There have been several cases of hyper-inflation in the Kingdom. There is an example where a group of people hacked into the database and redistributed a lot of money to their player accounts. This exploit became a common practice for a very short period of time, thus resulting in great amounts of players having too much money. Because just reverting the amounts to their original status was not an option several “meat drains” were implemented. People could spend their superfluous meat on several extremely expensive “services”.

One of the most wanted items in the Kingdom is one you can’t acquire by adventuring. The game is free of any charge and also ad-free. The reason the Kingdom still exists after almost two years is because of the many donators. When a player donates ten dollars he receives a special gift, a Mr. Accessory. This item has special and favoured abilities, it can also be spend in a special store which has monthly renewed special merchandise in stock. A Mr. Accessory (or Mrs.) with a real value of ten dollars sells for the average virtual price of eight million meat and is the reason why many players are wanting to be multi-millionaires. Becoming a multimillionaire takes several weeks up to months of buying and selling products in the Mall of Loathing. Trying to become a millionaire by simple adventuring a lot isn’t a very swift way to do the trick.

There is of course a much quicker way, but that’s not exactly a legal practice. There have been several reports of scammers trying to swindle precious goods or even money out of players. The Mall and the player-to-player trading system can be exploited to a certain extent. Sometimes by using malicious external scripts, but this is becoming harder and harder because of the many security precautions regarding trading.

The most common way to scam people is by selling existing, high-level accounts on auction-sites like eBay. Some of the account-auctions are genuine and organised by players who don’t want to play anymore. But most of the time the auctions are a scamming practice. The player has no guarantee that he actually gets the account after paying the money. Of course the player can be given the name and password of an existing account. But a password can easily be changed, leaving the bidder with a redundant password and less money.

Making money out of virtually nothing?

02

The MMORPG described in the rather lengthy introduction is a very small one compared to “World of Warcraft” (Blizzard), “Lineage 2” (NCSOFT), “Star Wars: Galaxies” (LucasArts), “EverQuest” (Sony) or “Guild Wars” (ArenaNet). However, the economical procedures as described in the introduction are very much the same when compared to the large-scale MMORPGs. One difference is of course the scale of the economy in larger online games. With a bigger world and a larger user-base comes a bigger and maybe a more sophisticated economy. The downside of this is that the fraud and other illegal practices happen on a more grand and professional scale.

Exploiting the game-mechanics of MMORPGs – or MMOGs, (“Massive Multiplayer Online Games”) in general – has become quite a serious business involving a lot of money.

“Farming” is the biggest field of interest and not strictly illegal. It basically comes down to gathering as many high level items with as much characters as possible. Thus the valuable items are sold for gold – or whatever game-currency available – in stores or at auctions held in-game. That gold/valuta is then offered on external websites (see www.team-vip.com, www.mysupersales.com or www.ige.com), not affiliated with the game itself, for real American dollars.

All tough this practice isn’t that well-known it is still a very profitable one. An American programmer – nicknamed “Smooth Criminal” – has become so very rich due to his abuse of certain game-mechanics in “Star Wars: Galaxies”, that he was able to buy his house from the profit he made. His doorbell plays the opening music of the “Star Wars” saga.

“Smooth Criminal’s game cartel made \$1.5 million from Star Wars Galaxies alone last year, and individually, he’s made as much as \$700,000 in a single year.”

[“Wage Slaves: From sweatshops to stateside corporations, some people are profiting off of MMO gold”, James Lee, 1up.com, 2005]

The farming is done mostly by underpaid teams in Asia, controlling several bots, who ultimately control the in-game characters and do the farming for them. These “farms” are hired by American “entrepreneurs” and are becoming a flourishing Asian industry. A bot-operator has to check if a bot shows any suspicious behaviour and adjust this behaviour to a more natural game-pattern. Strings of repetitive actions are an example of suspicious activity.

“How does it work? The macros for World of WarCraft, for example, control a high-level hunter and cleric. The hunter kills while the cleric automatically heals. Once they are fully loaded with gold and items, the “farmer” who’s monitoring their progress manually controls them out of the dungeon to go sell their goods. These automated agents are then returned to the dungeons to do their thing again.

Sack's typical 12-hour sessions can earn his employers as much as \$60,000 per month while he walks away with a measly \$150."

["Wage Slaves: From sweatshops to stateside corporations, some people are profiting off of MMO gold", James Lee, 1up.com, 2005]

Large scale farming is illegal because it can ruin an entire in-game economy and is therefore pursued by game developers. Drowning an economy with massive amounts of farmed items and gold is of course a very bad thing for any economy. Some might say that it's a logical effect of an economy in the first place and that similar processes can be found in real world economies. But this is not entirely true, because the practice of farming is something which exceeds the boundaries of the game economy and can be found in the real world economy. It's a technique that operates on two different levels, something which can't be found in the actual world economy.

Apart from the grand scale illegal activity in the fantasy worlds of "World of Warcraft", "Lineage 2" or "Second Life" (Linden Lab) there are also more modest things happening. For example the quite common in-game scamming techniques which affect players directly. This is known as "virtual crime" and a very common practice in online games. Scamming people by asking them to lend them certain valuable items is one of the most basic exploits one could think of. Pretending to be a game admin and asking for items is another method. Practising both regularly will most probably result in being banned from the game server.

There are also less fraudulent methods one could imagine. In the game "The Sims Online" a 17-year old boy managed to set up a brothel where people could enjoy minutes of cybersex if they were willing to pay a hefty fee in "Simoleans", the in-game currency of "The Sims Online". The brothel was eventually shutdown and the game-account(s) of the boy, who went under the nickname of Evangeline, were banned. (**"Censorship in TSO", Dan Hunter, Terra Nova, 2003** and **"Evangeline: Interview with a child cyber-prostitute in TSO", Urizen, Alphaville Herald, 2003**)

In Asia, and South-Korea in particular, where the number of people playing (online) computer games is extremely high, virtual crime has actually led to the initiation of special police forces investigating virtual crime – online and when applicable off-line.

The Chinese case of Qiu Chengwei is one of the most recent incidents when a swindle came to a fatal conclusion to one of the players of a MMORPG, in this case "Legends of Mir 3". Chengwei was sentenced to life in prison by the Chinese court for killing a fellow gamer, Zhu Caoyuan. Caoyuan had lend a special in-game item of Chengwei (a "dragon sword") and sold it on eBay for ¥7.200. The Chinese law doesn't cover "virtual theft" nor "virtual property" and out of frustration Chengwei took matters into his own hands by stabbing Caoyuan to the death. (**"Does virtual crime need real justice", Mark Ward, BBC, 2003** and **"Gamer slays rival after online dispute", Cao Li and Jiao Xiaoyang, CHINAdaily, 2005**)

Proprietorship in a virtual world is a strange thing. If something like music has lost his value because of the intensive file sharing on Internet, how can it be that buying virtual goods and fighting over the ownership of those goods is becoming increasingly common inside the virtual worlds rapidly emerging on the Internet?

First of all it is a matter of prestige. Having a particular sort of armour, or a nice – and large – piece of virtual land is a way to distinguish oneself from all the low-level players who are just mediocre compared to the grandeur of the high-level prestige classes.

This sort of prestige only exists in the context of a game, there are not a lot of people who will proudly fulminate about their newly acquired "mithril armour" or their accomplishments as an Orcish druid in "World of Warcraft" on a birthday party of their mother-in-law, but the longing for in-game renown and expensive items is universal and a certainty in the hierarchical society of games. . Of course one could say that same is happening in the real world. Owning gadgets like iPods, the latest advanced mobile phone, designer clothes, a stylish car etc. is indeed a matter of prestige and a way to distinguish oneself from the grey masses. How questionable this might seem, it's still a reason for people to buy certain products in order to raise their esteem. The value of the product is not exclusively determined by its actual (financial) value, quality or usability, but rather by the hype the product has generated.

The value of prestige items in the virtual worlds is determined significantly by the usability and quality of the product rather than the popularity. Possessing better weapons, armour, etc. is the only way to really progress in the game, because the high-level fights will be tougher and will require better apparel. The ownership of prestige items is also a token of the achievements of the gamer being someone who's devoted to the game and has spend a lot of time adventuring to become a character of some standing and to accumulate such high-level items.

With substantial illegal activity surrounding the virtual worlds of MMORPGs the prestige items have become available to just anybody willing to spend money on acquiring them, or even buy a complete high-level character. But this hasn't lead to virtual society where (marketed) hypes exist and items are sold based on these hypes.

This could change when game developers incorporated the option for users to set up marketing schemes or similar processes. In RPGs like "World of Warcraft" there is no such option, but a fairly small game called "Second Life" – being more or less a simulation of society or a virtual society – is an exception. In "Second Life" the player is able to create almost anything they want, including sellable wares. A player nicknamed "Rathe Underthorn" set up a platform for people to advertise their own goods in exchange for in-game money.

"Second Life lets you have property rights to the things you create, which is unusual for a 3D environment like this," said Underthorn, who has a background in digital marketing and would not share his real name. "It has a dynamic economy to it. As that started to grow, I felt people needed a way to get the message of their products out."

["In 'Second Life,' a Virtual Ad Agency Arises", Zachary Rodgers, ClickZ.com, 2005]

According to "Underthorn" his virtual ad agency "MetaAdverse" is a success and "virtual advertising" actually works, based on 1.2 million impressions on the MetaAdverse network.

Another example from the same game – or platform as Linden Lab tends to call it – is the acquisition of a complete island by Wells Fargo Bank to launch new game, called "Stagecoach Island", from within the game "Second Life". "Stagecoach Island" is a financial learning tool for youngsters, where they can just play but also learn something about money management. The island is only accessible for players with an invitation from Wells Fargo, making the island a completely private area controlled by the bank. (**"Stagecoach IslandSM", Wells Fargo, 2005** and **"Money matters in cybercash game", BBC News, 2005**)

In the game called "Project Entropia" (Mindark) virtual property has been sold for unprecedented prices. A 22 year-old bought an island for \$26,500 during an online auction. He started commercialise his investment by initiating taxes and selling plots of land to people intending to build homes on the land. The investor made his money back within a year. Following the success of this investment other players have entered the market, thus creating a very interesting real estate market in "Project Entropia".

(“Gamer buys \$26,500 virtual land”, BBC, 2004, “Virtual property market booming”, BBC, 2005 and “Gamer buys virtual space station”, BBC News, 2005)

Virtual economies are evolving and becoming more complex and will continue to do so. There is also the ongoing development of certain aspects in virtual economies becoming more and more interesting in a financial way for businesspeople from the outside. This leads to bigger investments in game economies, proving the increasing relevance of economies for MMORPGs being part of the essential game-play value, and ultimately to the maturing of these economies.

The ongoing attempt to create believable virtual realms

03

In the case of (MMO)RPGs, crafting believable and cinematographic worlds has always been one of the main goals of the gaming industry. With the recent advancements in technology a certain shift can be noticed regarding the shifting focus of game developers to other fields of interest rather than the visual part. The introduction of social elements like governance, laws and linked to those features; crime is an example. This ties into the idea that a believable, lively world doesn't solely depend on the quality of the visuals. Stimulating, or even inventing, a more sophisticated economy – rather than the one-dimensional buying and selling, which has been around in online games from the late eighties – is something developers are really interested in, as well as the development of other social aspects.

In an article on Wired News regarding the launch of the MMORPG "Star Wars: Galaxies", Haden Blackman of LucasArts talks about the economy in the game.

“Traditionally that kind of kill-the-rat, get-your-five-gold-pieces model hasn't changed with most (multiplayer online games),” said LucasArts producer Haden Blackman, referring to the revenue strategy pioneered by the early text-based multi-user domains on which modern MMORPGs are based. “One of the things we wanted to do is have a more viable player-run economy from the very outset.”

(“Online Game Economies Get Real”, Jason Whiting, Wired News, 2002)

"Star Wars: Galaxies" addresses problems which are quite common in older game-economies, such as superfluous money. Another problem are the many items (like food, armour, etc.) which do not decay or break over time, stocks are thus preserved infinitely. This is of course not very realistic and a negative impulse for an economy. But with modern RPGs like "Star Wars: Galaxies", "EverQuest" and every other serious endeavour on the online gaming market these particular aspects have been ironed out by developers.

Older online games just offered a very basic set of "tools" for players to communicate with each other or create a notion of a society of players. Features like a messaging system, a chat box, market etc. served as a very basic platform for this online "society". There was no real involvement or interest in developing these features, because it wasn't the main focus of online games. The main focus of classic MMORPGs is the character and the quests a character undertakes. Self-centered, or rather character based, storytelling is the most important asset of an RPG – whether online or off-line.

The newer games offer a slightly more in-depth set of tools, just because developers are focussed more on the social aspects of their games. Edward Castranova, being an economist, is very interested in game economies and has published a book about it; "Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games" (University of Chicago Press, 2005). His opinion is that MMORPGs are real "virtual worlds", or "synthetic worlds", rather than just a game. In an interview with The Guardian Castranova

explains why people don't experience modern day MMORPGs as games but rather as some sort of second society. For Castranova the reason why jobs, as well as blatant consumption, risk and danger and noticeable inequality, exist in the virtual realm is because of the realistic appeal to its players. Furthermore Castranova is very optimistic about "virtual worlds" and their significance to other fields rather than online gaming. For example, Castranova is talking about the field of social science. He thinks that "virtual worlds" can and will be used as a learning tool to simulate various social systems and points out that business schools are already heading in this direction. Ultimately the line between the "real" and the "synthetic" world will blur over time according to Castranova. For him this is a positive development, moving to a better world where physical inequality is eliminated for a large part.

"A lot of human inequality comes from physical inequality. In the synthetic world, we can shape the body however we want – cyber slimming, cyber nip and tuck, for ever young. People who can't make it in the real world can have a wonderful social life in the synthetic world. That's good."

(*"The ideas interview"*, John Sutherland, *The Guardian*, 2005)

Science-fiction and fantasy writer Tad Williams has explored the themes mentioned above to a certain extent in his series of books called "Otherland". The first book was published in 1996 and one could question the somewhat pessimistic approach of the author and the narrative themes in the book, but Williams has managed to construct a believable future to a certain degree. "Otherland" describes our future world, covered by a large network, similar to the Internet, where people spend as much time "living" on the Net as they do in real life. When several children disappear online and fall into a coma in the real world, a group of people from all over the world start their own investigation into these disappearances. Eventually they uncover a plot of very old, rich men trying to become immortal beings in a vast and complex "virtual realm". Even though it isn't so much about online economy, all though mentioned in the first part of the book, Williams illustrates the fact that "virtual worlds" might someday be a very realistic alternative to real life quite well and detailed. The choice of a group of men to become gods in their own "virtual playground" is believable, because the alternative world they have created – with all its advantages and disadvantages – is believable and life-like. "Otherland", being Williams' "virtual world", is an environment where people actually feel it's another place, just as realistic as the physical world. In the virtual realm created by Williams, the social aspects, risks and dangers Castranova describes are happening. Of course all of this happens on a prodigious scale, suited to the kind of novel Williams has written, but it happens nevertheless.

"Otherland" is an example of a world where the actions of individuals have a significant impact on the way the virtual world is revolving around them. The user has evolved into a "protagonist", having a more comprehensive influence on the "virtual world". A world where the actions of a user or group of users determines the way a world will develop both socially and narratively. This is a difference between the traditional model of the current online games, where players may have a sense of freedom, but still have to play along the guidelines set out by the developers of the game.

For Timothy Burke, Associate Professor in the Department of History at Swarthmore College, this process of playing along the boundaries set out by the game developers is the major obstruction for online games to become realistic and believable "virtual worlds". In his essay "Rubicite Breastplate Priced to Move, Cheap" Burke acknowledges the merit of having a "virtual economy" and sees technological promise in a not too distant future – being the near future from 2002.

"A game-world that is persistent is an environment where accumulations of value and power are not only possible, but absolutely central to the interaction between players and between players and the environment—and thus central to the willingness of players to pay the monthly subscription fee that makes these games viable commercial enterprises."

(*"Rubicite Breastplate Priced to Move, Cheap: How Virtual Economies Become Real Simulations"*, Timothy Burke, Swarthmore College, 2002)

Burke describes how in-game economy could become an important feature if they mature to "political economies", where the actions and financial transactions of a player have a significant and noticeable impact on the game – elements that are currently lacking in MMORPGs. He isn't convinced by the state of the current in-game economies as implemented by developers, because of their attempt to somehow create a "roadmap" to control the players' actions. Burke points these futile attempts out by mentioning "nerfs", immediate and extreme changes to the rules of online games and heavily disliked by most players, and how they could be fatal to a game economy. This sort of central and structural changes should be avoided at all time if one wants to sustain the idea of a virtual economy. According to Burke "Nerfs" oppose the idea of a preferable type of game-play where the actions of players are absolutely central and have a noteworthy influence on the game and the virtual world itself.

In his 2002 essay Burke came to rather optimistic conclusion by concluding that the future and technology showed great promise for the believability and realism of virtual worlds. However, in an article from 2004 – "The 'Narrative-Nudge' Model for Massively-Multiplayer Online Games" – and an in-depth article on "Star Wars: Galaxies" Burke is more pessimistic about the creation of fully-fledged, immersive and realistic "virtual worlds" and actually contradicting his statement that the implementation of "virtual economies" is an asset to the game-play in current games. He states that the way developers are forcing their players on predefined economical, but also other social stratagems is still obstructing the development of virtual worlds defined by its players. Therefore, Burke is proposing a "temporary solution" where MMORPGs do not incorporate a virtual economy and stop pretending to be a virtual world at all. "City of Heroes" (PlayNC) being an example of how an online game should look like at the moment; just an action-orientated game, without any aspirations to become a virtual realm in the first place.

"MMOGs designed along the basic deep patterns laid out by their purely textual predecessors, MUDs and MUSHs, should not try anything particularly exotic with their virtual economies. In fact, they should seriously consider doing what the current game City of Heroes has done, which is to eliminate the player economy entirely. MMOG economies to date are not satisfying as world-simulations and they are not satisfying as games."

(*"The 'Narrative-Nudge' Model for Massively-Multiplayer Online Games"*, Timothy Burke, Swarthmore College, 2004)

Considering the profitable commercial endeavours on relatively small platforms like "Second Life" and "Project Entropia" Burkes point regarding the failure of realistic virtual economies in every contemporary online game might have become invalid. Of course "Second Life" and "Project Entropia" focus more on the game economy itself than the, rather classical, RPGs Burke mentions in both his essay and articles, but they could serve as a "benchmark" of how an in-game economy should look like.

Virtual values in the future

04

It's hard to say how fast the developments will continue to progress and if we see something like the ideal virtual world as envisioned by Edward Castranova is something in the near future. The new approach for MMOGs to become real virtual worlds, a model which he calls the "narrative-nudge" as proposed by Timothy Burke in his 2004 article is rather significant for development of MMOGs. In short, the "narrative-nudge" model is a branched tree of narratives based on pre-set conditions, but allowing a greater freedom of choice for the player to advance in the story or world. He is aware of the fact that his model is currently and even in the near future impossible, both technically, theoretically, organisation-wise and apart from all that, it would be an extremely time-consuming endeavour for game developers.

Of course developers are trying to create realistic virtual worlds, an asset which has become especially crucial in RPGs. Bethesda Softworks started a series of RPGs in 1994, called "The Elder Scrolls". Currently the series consists of five titles, each exploring the possibilities of game-play where freedom of choice and play is one of the key-elements. "The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind" is the current high point in this development, but it will soon be surpassed by the next instalment of the series called "Oblivion". Both "Morrowind" and "Oblivion" are examples of an attempt to create an open-ended game-play where the player decides how and when the story progresses, as well as several other processes based on choice and mimicking a more real-life behaviour than exhibited before in a RPG, or any game for that matter.

The fact that freedom of choice and Burkes "narrative-nudge" haven't been implemented in current MMOGs doesn't mean these games can't be virtual worlds, or can't incorporate a believable virtual economy. They might not be the most sophisticated or ultimately desired examples of virtual worlds and economies, consider them being the best possible way at this moment. Players of MMOGs are largely satisfied with the current state of affairs in the virtual world of their choice. So following the advice of Timothy Burke to cut features like in-game economy the game-play because it currently isn't offering players a satisfactory economy based on their actions, and go back to action-oriented multi-player platforms would be a bad decision. His proposal for a structural change in the design mechanics of MMOGs is commendable, but the available contemporary games fulfil the current needs of gamers worldwide. For a player the present-day MMOGs are indeed in many ways, including economically, immersive and believable virtual worlds.

The commercial efforts on fairly free-form platforms like "Second Life" and "Project Entropia", prove this point. As well as the recent in-game burial of a female player who died while playing in "World of Warcraft". Collections of screenshots of the funeral, which attracted massive amounts of players, can be found all over the Internet, being a kind of awkward digital equivalent to a traditional family photo-album.

In that light we have to agree with Castranova when he refers to MMOGs:

"From an economist's standpoint what's happening in these games is real.

[...]

You've got a distinct territory with specialization of labor, gains from trade, a floating exchange rate – real economies are happening."

["Online Game Economies Get Real", Jason Whiting, Wired News, 2002]

One can only add that these economies will "continue to happen", develop, mature and might one day become as important as our world economy is to us now.

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