

Gold farming in the MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game), World of Warcraft. An ethical perspective on a controversial growth market.

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Video games have an almost ubiquitous status in today's industrial nations. One exceptionally strong growth segment is MMORPGs; these games are attracting increasing attention for their relevance to academic research and are the subject of studies both at individual and interdisciplinary level.

World of Warcraft (ActivisionBlizzard, USA), the economically most successful MMORPG and simultaneously most successful digital entertainment product of all, is a good example to illustrate the academic and non-academic points of discourse with a focus on ethics. Many video games are opposed (most recently and forcefully in the Kölner Aufruf gegen Computergewalt - "Cologne appeal against computer violence") on the grounds that they are potentially addictive, or they are criticised for the violence they portray or accused of dumbing down. In terms of method, these and the counterarguments (positive socialisation effects, learning stimulation, encouraging physical activity (Wii), etc.) share the same primarily empirical functional approach to questions of value in relation to this culture-defining phenomenon of virtual worlds as a form of entertainment. However, given the nature of the questions being raised in this booming online sphere, a primarily normative approach may prove more appropriate.

Drawing on the example of gold farming in the context of World of Warcraft, i.e. where gold and other economic items of value are systematically generated under the WoW economic system and sold to gamers who are either unable or unwilling to invest the time needed to generate them themselves, this paper sets out to develop an ethical perspective in relation to video games. Here, alongside legal aspects (legality, taxation, etc.) and economic considerations (market development, pricing (currency rate, etc.), real money trading, etc.), the moral level above all is relevant.

Is the use of gold farming as a form of web socialisation not only ludologically irritating but also morally unfair towards the other players? Are exploitation and oppression in fact fostered in the mainly Chinese gold farming organisations? Or does gold farming actually create valuable jobs? According to the Chinese market leader for online information and communities in the games segment, www.17173.com, the Li Yang Network Technology Service Center in Wuhan is the first officially licensed (Wuhan Administration of Industry and Commerce) provider in China. Or is the question of whether

manufacturers build economic systems into their MMORPGs at all rather a matter of corporate ethics? Are gold farming contracts not a blessing for developing countries, their providers pioneers in the growth area of virtual goods in a virtual economy? Is gold farming not ultimately a productive step in the process of utilizing and developing web culture in the sense of "Metaverses" (Stephenson) and general commodification (eBaying), whether as a user or a provider – or morally dubious after all?

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