

The Commodification of Play in Diablo 3 –
Understanding the Real Money Market Place

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes the real money market place, a feature of the game Diablo 3. To do so I compare the concepts of the audience commodity, prosumption, produsage and playbour to the model of Diablo's real money market place. The conclusion is that the market place is not fully described by any of the proposed models but is something in-between. Using interview, participant observation and online media this paper then explains the consequences of this feature on the game and the emerging game culture of Diablo. With letting the business model of Diablo 3 influence the game design Blizzard is not acting according to its own core value but instead following suggestions from marketing research and let the design follow the business model. (Hamari and Lehdonvirtä, 2010)

This behavior of a company does fit the first filter of the propaganda model. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) Game companies as media producers are in a capitalist system forced to act according to financial considerations and not artistic or ethical ones. It marks the departure of even AAA games from a focus on producing the best possible product for their audience to abusing audience labor and to forging games after a monetization model instead of vice versa.

Keywords: commodification of play, political economy of digital games, Diablo 3, real-money trade, game design, playbour, produsage, prosumption, audience commodity,

Introduction

Digital games as a medium have been growing in many ways in recent years. The economic growth to a total of 24.75 billion dollars spent by consumers in the U.S. in 2011 (The Entertainment Software Association, http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2012.pdf, accessed 07.09.2012) of the gaming industry is only one aspect. Because of the spread of gaming as a free-time activity, hobby, or profession through many parts of advanced capitalist societies and on many different devices gaming merits consideration as an important object of scientific study. With the inclusion of games into social networks and the rise of massively-multi-player online games and virtual world the game industry is quickly developing new models to monetize on their games. Micro-transactions, freemium models, and virtual item sales are examples here. These new business models might have an influence on the design of the actual game from which the social interaction of the players and the culture of the game emerges.

A new model of monetizing on a MMO can be seen in the “real-money market place” (typically abbreviated RMAH for “real-money auction house”) in the game Diablo 3 (Blizzard Entertainment). The RMAH allows trading of virtual items acquired by players in the game for real money¹. Trading virtual items for real world money, also called real-money trade (hereafter RMT) is in itself not new. Trading of virtual goods over online auction houses

¹This is not to say that currencies like US Dollars are any more or less real or virtual than gold in Diablo 3. Castronova (2005) explains that there is no difference between virtual and analog currencies in terms of how real they are. Castronova wrote on the case of the RMAH that “The RMAH erases any line between the gold piece and the dollar, as far as regulation goes.” (Castronova, http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2012/06/diablo-iii-real-money-auction-house-first-thoughts.html#more, accessed 07/09/2012).

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like e-bay or and commercial farming of gold and tradable items have been around since the first online games. RMT has even become a lucrative industry with a turnover in the billions of dollars (Yee, 2006; Dibbell, 2006, 2007). The RMAH allows this same real-money trading of virtual items inside the software of the game. It can conveniently be opened while inside the game and makes it possible to sell items directly from the inventory of one's characters or to put bought items inside a chest for them to access.

The RMAH is connected to the monetization model of Diablo 3. There is a fee for selling items in the RMAH. Blizzard is thus earning money from the trades of the players. However, play as work that can be exploited and the commodification of play has been discussed (Terranova, 2000; Harambam et. al., 2011; Coleman and Dyer-Witheyford, 2007) and is not specific to this case. What is specific however is that with this inclusion of the channel for RMT into the game now the game company is profiting from it instead of a third party that would have been brokering the trade of virtual goods otherwise. That new source of income might influence design decisions for the game in order to maximize the income from the RMAH. If and how that happens and what it means for the game and its players is what this paper is going to investigate.

Aim of the Study

The Aim of the study is to analyze the real money market place in the game "Diablo 3" in terms of its business model and the way it influences the design of the game. This will be done by comparing it to the concepts of playbour, produsage, and prosumption. The way it uses players' labor will be understood by comparing it to theory about real-money trade in virtual worlds.

Theoretical Framework

In order to be able to analyze the RMAH it is necessary to have an understanding of what exactly it is and how it works. The theoretical part will therefore start out with a

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description of the RMAH and an analysis of the way it uses players and their labor to generate profit for Blizzard. This way to monetize on player labor will then be compared to the existing notions of playbour, produsage, prosumption, and real-money trade. Finally Diablo 3 and the RMAH will be compared to the notion of the audience commodity.

The real money market place of Diablo 3

Diablo 3 is an action role-playing game. In Diablo the player levels and gears up her avatar by killing computer controlled enemies and collecting experience and the treasures the monsters leave behind. The equipment, armor and weapons, of an avatar are decisive for its power. Trading of items is a central part of the game by design.

This isn't a new concept. In Diablo II gear was randomized and so absolutely ridiculously rare that you could almost be guaranteed to never find the exact item you were looking for just by farming for it yourself. To be the best you had to trade items with others, as you might find an extremely rare item, they may be willing to trade for yours. If you wanted to get ahead within any reasonable amount of time you had to trade. [...] We're not forcing anyone to do anything, and if you don't ever want to trade with other players that's your choice as well, but due to the nature of drops in Diablo games, if you want to be the best you need to trade.” (Bashiok, Blizzard Community Manager, 27/05/2012, <http://us.battle.net/d3/en/forum/topic/5150112701?page=17#325>, accessed 13/09/2012)

The items can be trade over a number of channels. As a player you can “jump into the Trading Forum, post up your item/s and then meet someone in-game and barter a trade. You can also use the in-game Trade channel, and again barter trades. Or you can use the auction house system” (Bashiok, 2012). The auction house is works like similar institutions in virtual worlds like “World of Warcraft” (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). Players list the items they

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want to sell, a starting price for biddings, or a buyout price and other players can then search the auction house and purchase items for their characters. The auction house's default currency is gold, the in-game currency of Diablo 3. The RMAH however uses real money (meaning US dollars, Euros, or others depending on the location of the player). To be able to trade with real money players either have to charge their account on the Battle.net, Blizzard's distribution and online-play network, with real money or earn this money by selling virtual goods. This means that even though somebody might never have paid in any money to this account she can still trade with real money by acquiring it first through selling for real money. Blizzard charges a number of fees for the use of the RMAH. The fee is either one Dollar/Euro (depending on the currency one is using) for items like weapons and armor or 15% of the final sales price for commodities like gems and for gold sales. In addition there is a 15% fee for cashing the money out to ones bank account. It will be possible to buy Blizzard games and merchandise paying directly from the battle.net account circumventing the 15% cash out fee but forcing the players to buy Blizzard's wares.

However, Blizzard does only earn money from the RMAH if players decide to actually trade their virtual loot for real money. Blizzard thus has a reason to create incentives for players to use the RMAH. The nature and persuasiveness of Blizzard's financial interest in players using the RMAH can be seen when examining the choice require an internet connection during normal play for Diablo 3. That means that in contrast to the earlier version of the game it will be impossible to play the game off-line and as a single-player game. It also means that players get forced to deal with the downsides of online play like lags and "rubberbanding"² compromising the play experience for players who want to play the game single-

² Rubberbanding - This occurs in online gaming when latency is relatively high. Players (or yourself) will appear to move in one direction, and then suddenly be teleported back several feet where they once were a few seconds ago. This can be extremely annoying in twitch-based

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player. The decision of Blizzard to force players to play online has been discussed in a recent episode of extra creditz³, a weekly online show about games as a medium and the gaming industry by James Portnow, Daniel Floyd and Allison Theus. As they note the decision to force players online will exclude a number of potential players that do not have a stable internet connection available for play. The team of extra creditz estimates that globally at least 100.000 players might be excluded from playing the game because of the always-online requirement leading to a loss of three million dollars on the side of the game's publisher. This tangible financial loss will have to be made up for by the real-money market place. The estimated income from the market place must, as extra creditz argues, be seen as at least as big as the sales loss caused by the internet requirement. That means that "the number they [Blizzard's publisher] expect this new marketplace to bring in has to be substantially larger than three million."(extra creditz, 2012). In the explanation for this expectation extra creditz states that the value of RMT and gold farming is so high that even taking a small percentage of that turnover will ensure Blizzard a profit for as long as players continue playing their game.

The real money market place and playbour

After having explained the real-money market place and how Blizzard is going to earn money using it is now possible to compare is model to the different concepts in the theory part. The concept of playbour "seems a radical departure from the established business models of the leisure industries that the games industry not only sells entertainment products,

online games such as first person shooters, as it will hinder one's aiming and shooting.

<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=rubberbanding>, accessed 13/09/2012

³Extra creditz, Season 3, Episode 17, The Diablo III Marketplace<http://penny-arcade.com/patv/episode/the-diablo-iii-marketplace>, accessed 07/09/2012

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but also capitalizes on the products of the leisure derived from them.”(Kücklich, 2005)

Kücklich uses the concept to discuss modding and player-created content and compares it to open source development. The development of user-created content like additional levels and modifications (mods) to the game is also a way of playing the game. (Scacchi, 2010) While it yields considerable financial gains from unpaid labor for the game industry (Postigo, 2007) the authors of the modifications are often well aware of this situation but tend to not see it as exploitation as long as their way of playing is still possible and fun. (Kücklich, 2005, Sotamaa, 2007)

Playbour as a concept is a hybrid between play and labor. That is not to say that play and games are pre definition the opposite of work/labor. Malaby (2007) dismisses correctly these imposed categories and calls for working close to the actual practice of gaming and play and Yee (2006) shows how the boundaries between play and work blur in games looking at the actual practices of play in online games for example discussing grinding. This is what Goggin describes as playbour, “‘farming’ and ‘grinding’ in ‘virtual sweatshops’ where workers are engaged in producing virtual items for sale on the internet for low wages” (Goggin, 2011).

Both these concepts of user-created content and play in work-like conditions, e.g. grinding have relevance here. The items that are traded in the RMAH are to some extent created by players as they would not exist if the players had not earned them through play. However, the player is not creating something new in a creative process when looting an item. She is merely creating a copy item designed and coded by Blizzard. This is not playbour according to Kücklich’s point of view. The act of killing the monster, especially if it happens in a work-like manner of repeatedly killing the same boss, could be seen as playbour according to Goggin. The RMAH does not create this kind of work-like play. That has been existing before when virtual good were traded over other channels. However, it lowers the entrance

barrier to selling goods thus making playing as work a more feasible option for players of Diablo 3.

The real money market place, prosumption, and produsage

This is a useful model for understanding what is happening in massively multi-player online (MMO) games as well. MMOGs profit from the activity of their players is in that they with their social interaction provide the content of the game. Prosumption and produsage describe this process of adding value to the game by participating in and playing it well. However, the real money market place is going a step further.

Other concepts relevant to understanding the RMAH are “prosumption” and “produsage”. The term “prosumption” is a combination of production and consumption. (Ritzler, 2010:13) The concept is applied to digital media by Deuze:

“Crucial to understanding how work, life and play have come to mean more or less the same thing is the realization that not only we are spending more and more time producing – information, knowledge, products, stuff – we are also increasingly engaging in acts of consumption.”(Deuze, 2007:27)

Deuze makes a link here to games and sees MMOGs as personal information spaces similar social networks where “people carefully cultivate their identities through the creation of virtual representations of themselves” (Deuze, 2007:31) as the production side of the consumption of the game. Produsage on the other hand is the production of a community or service while and through using it.⁴

“The concept of produsage is such a term: it highlights that within the communities which engage in the collaborative creation and extension of information and knowledge that we examine in this book, the role of

⁴ For a more integrated discussion of both the terms of knowledge labor and presumption in a Marxist model of capitalist production see Fuchs (2010, 2011).

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‘consumer’ and even that of ‘end user’ have long disappeared, and the distinctions between producers and users of content have faded into comparative insignificance. In many of the spaces we encounter here, users are always already necessarily also producers of the shared knowledge base, regardless of whether they are aware of this role-they have become a new, hybrid, producer.”(Bruns, 2008:2)

Both concepts prosumption and produsage are relevant to the RMAH. Players are adding value to the game by participating in and playing it. Without other players there would be no market to sell and no offers to choose from and there would be fewer reasons to buy items because they would not award social status, one of the major selling points of virtual goods. (Nojima, 2007; Hamari and Lehdonvirtä, 2010; Lehdonvirtä, 2009) The income from the market place is not generated by Blizzard or their work but it originates in the work and the interactions of the players. As trading items is a core part of the game play of Diablo then players are already by playing increasing the value of the game for the other players and for Blizzard. If nobody would be playing the game then Blizzard could not sell the game as well. However, Diablo 3 goes even a step further. The real money market place extracts money from the players themselves when they are using it.

The real money market place and the audience commodity

Corporate broadcast networks generate income by attracting an audience with their free content to then in turn sell this audience to advertisers who pay for the operational costs of the media channel and contribute to its profit. Jhally puts it very clearly when he, referring to media channels, states that “They are not in the message-making business. They are in the consciousness-selling business”. (Jhally, 2011) Smythe notes that “Because audience power is produced, sold, purchased and consumed, it commands a price and is a commodity. Like other “labor power” it involves “work”.” (Smythe, 2001:233) The customer of such a media

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channel is not the viewer or the audience. In contrast, the audiences are the workers. They provide the product, attention, viewing time, audience consciousness, which is then sold to the actual customers of the media channel, namely the advertisers. (Smythe, 2001:232; Jhally, 2011; Fuchs, 2010, 2011) This is increasingly happening in games as well with in-game advertising and product placement (Meehan, 2000).

This business model has two consequences that are relevant for the relationship of the RMAH to the design of Diablo 3. The first consequence is that in this business model imposes the rationality of productive work on leisure, relaxation and self-actualization. This has been observed for a number of games and game genres (Rettberg, 2008; Postigo, 2003; Gunster, 2004; Terranova, 2000). Rettberg (2008) sees World of Warcraft, another game by Blizzard Entertainment Inc., as a “capitalist fairytale” and concludes that the “players are both participating in the globalized economy as consumers and learning how to efficiently operate within it as “players” and good corporate citizens” and Kline et al. (2003) describe it as “the perfect play for the construction of the consumer-subject” while Coleman and Dyer-Witford (2007) see an ongoing negotiation of these spaces as a “commodity-common” form. This discussion of the commodification of play is relevant for Diablo 3 but it is not the most central point for understanding the connection between the RMAH and the design of the games.

The second consequence of the business model of broadcast networks is that they are not designed and managed to serve the interest of the viewers but the interest of the advertisers, the networks’ actual customers. (Jhally, 2011; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010; Herman and McChesney, 2010) In the “Propaganda Model” by the first to Chomsky and Herman (1988) the first two lenses “(1) the ownership, size and profit orientation of mainstream media; (2) advertising as the principle source of revenue for mainstream media and the

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corresponding influence of advertising values on news production processes”⁵ are relevant for the case of the RMAH. The profit orientation of the media has been used implicitly in the argument that Blizzard would not introduce the RMAH if not to earn money with it. The second lens links the advertisement-based business model of news to their content. This can be adapted to Diablo 3. The question then becomes how the business model of the RMAH influences the content and design of the game. The RMAH charges players for trading virtual items for real money in a form of RMT.

Real-money trade and business model of the RMAH

This culture of trading items spawned also an industry that today is working with many MMOs like for example World of Warcraft, the industry of real-money-trade. RMT has been discussed with a number of different foci⁶. The first focus is on “china-farmers” or players, often from low-wage countries like China, that are paid for playing and that then sell their virtual goods to international concerns that sell them further to western customers (Dibbel, 2006). The second focus is on the interaction of RMT and the “magic circle” (Huizinga, 1950[1938]). This line of research is discusses if the influx of power and money from the physical world influence or breaks the autonomy, economy, or value system of a virtual world or online game. (Bartle, 2006) The magic circle is here seen as a membrane (Castronova, 2006) or a weak boundary (Pargman and Jakobsson, 2008) that permits some transfer between the virtual and the physical world. Harabam et. al. (2011) developed taxonomy for the commercialization of games. The game as a commodity is the first order of

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the “Propaganda Model and its use in political economy research see Mullen and Klaehn (2010).

⁶ There have been a number of academic publications specifically dealing with RMT. An example here is the special issue of the Journal of Virtual World Research: Virtual Economies, Virtual Goods and Service Delivery, Volume 2, Number 4 (2009)

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commercialization, RMT the second order and a marketplace of virtual creations the third order of commercialization. The last level that is not relevant for the RMAH is the presence of corporations inside a virtual world. Harabam et. al. conclude:

“some orders of commercialization – that is, the game itself as a commodity and the construction of its world as a virtual marketplace – are compatible with free play since they enhance players’ in-game agency. Other orders of commercialization – that is, ‘real money trading’ and the colonization of the game world by multinationals – are experienced as commodifying and undermine the spirit of play.” (Harabam et. al, 2010)

The problem with commodification is seen in that ‘Commodification brings reality into virtuality’ (Bartle, 2006) as well as hinders immersion into the game. This is also a point Castronova makes in relation to the RMAH. “Slave away, you pimply nerds! I bury you with VISA! But of course there was no immersion possible” (Castronova, http://terranovalogs.com/terra_nova/2012/06/diablo-iii-real-money-auction-house-first-thoughts.html#more, accessed 07/09/2012).

Diablo 3 is going to not only take the stigma from real-money-trade but include it as one of the core features into the design of the game. This removes the substantial barrier to participation in real-money-trade that existed before and makes it very convenient, even encourages it.

The third focus of literature is on the usability of RMT in some form for monetizing on the game in the form of virtual item sales or a fee for trading them. (Oh and Ryu, 2007; Lehdonvirta, 2005, 2008, 2009). Hamari and Lehdonvirtä (2010) suggest as a marketing strategy for companies that “The whole customer relationship, from acquisition through retention to monetisation, could be modelled as an interactive game.” (Hamari and Lehdonvirtä, 2010) For games they suggest that the marketing aspect and the business model

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should be more closely woven into the design of the game because the rules and the design of the game have a central position in driving people to virtual goods. In order to maximize the impact of this marketing inside the game design Hamari and Lehdonvirtä recommend that business model should be integrated into the game design from the start. I will quote them here in some length to show their recommendations for game designers in their own words.

Based on the findings, we assert that game designers, by creating and modifying the rules and mechanics of the game, SNS or other online hangout, have an essential, but sometimes unrecognised role in planning the marketing of virtual goods. **MMO operators are able to adjust the environment in which their products are sold and marketed, and the rules according to which the products are used, not to mention their role in creating the environment to begin with.** [...] Even though virtual world operators have been forerunners in coordinating the efforts of game design and marketing, there still seems to be way to go before game design is harmonised with overall business logic. Many virtual world operators find themselves in a situation where revenue generation logic is distanced from the design of the service itself. [...] One potential direction for future research could thus be found in examining how **business models and service design, including game design, could be integrated and aligned from the start.** (Hamari and Lehdonvirtä, 2010; emphasis added)

Diablo 3 is not the first MMO with a market place for the trading of virtual goods for real money. The first case where this happened was the marketplace of “Everquest 2”(Sony Online Entertainment, 2004).

In summary, SOE [Sony Online Entertainment] started out with a Laissez-faire attitude towards real-money trade, but when problems surfaced, it attempted to

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enforce an Embargo. The Embargo was not very successful however, and now SOE is beginning to experiment with Laissez-faire on an operator-controlled marketplace. (Lehdonvirtä, 2008)

The difference between the operator-controlled market place in Everquest 2 and the RMAH in Diablo 3 is that SOE only opened the market place for Everquest 2 as a reaction to ongoing RMT outside of the software of the game after they had already designed and published it. In contrast Diablo 3 has been build around the premise of earning money from the RMAH. Blizzard had the plan to monetize on the game during the development and design phase of the game. That paradigm of monetization on the RMAH cannot have pervaded the design of Everquest 2 as much as it could have the design Diablo 3. In other words, Blizzard might have followed the suggestions of Hamari and Lehdonvirtä (2010) and might have designed Diablo 3 to maximize the use of the RMAH to in turn maximize their profits.

Summary

The model of the real money market place is not totally described by any of the used concepts. Instead it is a hybrid that touches on all of the concepts but becomes something more than each one of them. The increase of the value of the game through the participation of other players in the market place is well described with presumption and produsage. The act of creating virtual items through repeatedly killing bosses to then sell the items to other players fits well into the notion of playbour. The structuring of leisure time according to labor models is a part of the model of the audience commodity and the working audience. The system of trading virtual goods for real money is not only exploiting the players by putting them to work to generate profits for the company. There is also the possibility that the RMAH as a way to monetize on the game pervades the design of the entire game. The next step will be to analyze the design of the game in order to see if this is happening.

Method

In order to understand the relationship between the RMAH and the business model of Diablo 3 and the design of the game this paper analyzes the discussion of the design of the game by the community managers of Blizzard Entertainment Inc. and some central members of the community around the game as well as some narrative evidence from participant observation.

Analysis

Game Design

The design of Diablo 3 shows the very different stance taken by its owner, Blizzard Entertainment, to RMT in comparison to the approach that can be seen in the design of World of Warcraft. Items in World of Warcraft can become “soulbound” which means that they cannot be traded to or used by any other character. This typically happens when a character first uses an item or even when she picks it up and has it in her inventory. That means that trading of high-end items is very limited so only the handful of items that can at least be held in the inventory without becoming soulbound. This severely limits the possibility and impact of RMT. Diablo 3 on the other hand does not feature this mechanism. It makes it possible to use and trade items freely. The soulbinding mechanic was also helpful to prevent or at least slow down “inflation” (Castronova, 2005) which without any such mechanism is running rampant in Diablo 3.

Community Reaction

In order to understand how the players see the RMAH it is useful to take a look at the way it is discussed in the community around the game. For this we will look at two figures central to the community around Diablo 3, Force and Athene⁷. Force started his website,

⁷ Both Force and Athene are the official nick names of these players which they use for their professional gaming websites and youtube channels.

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www.forcestrategygaming.com, after building a successful youtube channel with teaching videos for Starcraft 2 (Blizzard Entertainment) players. He started gearing his channel and website towards Diablo 3 already before the release of the game, covered news around the beta, and prepared to be a central community actor for this game. His channel has 180,587 subscribers and all his videos have 67,449,835 views. However, in his video “Why I stopped playing Diablo 3”, with at the time of access 149,522 views, he informed his viewers that he would stop playing Diablo:

“As soon as I crossed that threshold and purchased items in the real-money auction house it just killed it for me. I really do wish that it was not in the game. I do understand Blizzard’s reason behind it. I understand the fact that buying items existed in Diablo 2. It exists in many RPGs. It just happens from outside sources. I understand all that and that transpired. But the fact that it is in our face now and the fact that it feels, not that it is, but it feels necessary to progress, the fact that it feels that way as a player, just kills the desire for me to actually play the game.” Force,

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aed55ZYRv4c&feature=player_embedded, accessed 11/09/2012)

The other community actor, Athene, the self-proclaimed “best gamer in the world”, explained in a video on his youtube channel with 649,668 subscribers and 356 million views that “I can’t buy any upgrades unless I pay real money.”

(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_o3qrnYrlCg&feature=plcp /accessed 11/09/2012)

This happened despite the fact that both players in a video that made together before the launch of the game explained their excitement about the RMAH and the possibility to earn money while playing a game. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKDtjtxjUmA> accessed 12/09/2012) However, this only shows that there is a link between the RMAH and the way the

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players play the game and build the community. It somewhat confirms the fears that RMT would disrupt immersion and compromise the authenticity of the game world. (Bartle, 2006; Harambam et. al., 2011)

Personal experience of the mechanism of influence of the RMAH on play

To illustrate the connection between the inclusion of the RMAH into the game and the emerging behavior of players I want to present an example from my personal experience. My younger brother found in the first weeks after the release of the game a sword of very high quality. His character could not use this kind of weapon though which is why he offered it to me. At the time I was just leveling a Barbarian and was planning to reach the maximum level of sixty within the next days. We agreed on that he would give it to me once I hit max level. However, a day before I reached that goal the RMAH opened its virtual doors. When I finally asked my brother for the weapon he replied that instead of virtual weapon in his characters inventory he now had 110 Euros on his real bank account.

This example also gives an account of the mechanism by which the RMAH influence the game, the players, and their culture. The RMAH did not determine by brothers behavior. He could have chosen to stick to his word and not have sold the sword. He also did not know for sure if he really would be able to sell it for so much money and was curious to see what would happen. However, the RMAH did have some kind of influence on him. In this case this is visible because the RMAH was released and led to a change of affairs. Following an actor-network theory approach it can be said that the RMAH does have agency and is an actor because it alters the existing network of other actors (Latour, 20 Reassembling the Social). According to Latour's vocabulary the introduction of the RMAH presents a change in the network of actors that makes their relationship traceable and indicates agency. It is important that this event, the introduction of the RMAH, was when the change occurred. The possibility to sell the sword had already existed before the RMAH. It would have been the same real-

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money trade of virtual items that has existed for Diablo 2 and many games before that where virtual items are traded over another online market place like e-bay or a third company brokering between the seller and the buyer. However, the inclusion of RMT into the software of the game changes its influence on the players. The design of the economy is not determining but it is an influence. In the case of Diablo that means that where an item might before have been given away freely as a present to somebody who could make more use of it in Diablo 3 the same item will be worth real money. Giving somebody an item will thus be a lot like giving that person money. Social interaction in games is often built around the mutual beneficence of helping each other. In MMORPGs players often magically enhance each other and increase each other's power just by being together in a group. The design of Diablo however is more focused on confrontation, conflict and competition. If I am playing with a friend and we find a powerful weapon that he can use but that is useless for my character I would normally have given it to him even for selfish reasons because I would profit from a power increase on his side as well. With the market place it makes more sense from an economical point of view to keep the item and to sell it for real money. This is a huge change. It is a change deep in the infra-structure of the game that will have a heavy influence on the emerging game culture and play and it is an intended change with the aim of not making the best game possible but of maximizing the financial gain of the producer.

The examples in the analysis show that the RMAH has an influence on the game and the players and point towards the mechanisms of that influence. However, the central question of how the business model influenced the design of the game cannot be answered conclusively from them.

Conclusion

One of the core values of Blizzard Entertainment Inc. is “Gameplay First”. In front of the Blizzard headquarters in California is a statue of an orc riding to battle on a giant wolf.

The core values are built into the foot of the statue.

“Everything we do at Blizzard Entertainment is based on the success of the gaming experiences we provide our players. The goal of each discipline within the company -- be it art, programming or customer support -- is to make our games as fun as possible for as many people as we can reach.” Blizzard

Entertainment Mission Statement (<http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/about/mission.html>, accessed 14/09/2012)

I have shown in this paper that the fun of the players is not the ultimate goal of Blizzards game development. Instead motives of profit maximization influence very central core aspects of the design of the game which is changed according to the business model of respective game. Diablo 3 is a high-profile game by the extremely successful developer Blizzard Entertainment. That means that if this business models works well and generates sustainable income over the years it will be played it might very well be followed by other, similar titles. Diablo 2 inspired a number of clones of the game and the even though this business model requires a certain infra structure to be in place to work, the money associated with the accounts in the game, it might be easy to integrate something like this into for example social networks.

Another of Blizzard’s core values is “Lead Responsibly”.

“Our products and practices can affect not only our employees and players -- but the industry at large. As one of the world’s leading game companies, we’re committed to making ethical decisions, always keeping our players in mind, and setting a strong example of professionalism and excellence at all times.”

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Blizzard Entertainment Mission Statement (<http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/about/mission.html>, accessed 14/09/2012)

With letting the business model of Diablo 3 influence the game design Blizzard is not acting according to its own core value but instead following suggestions from marketing research and let the design follow the business model. (Hamari and Lehdonvirtä, 2010)

This behavior of a company does fit the first filter of the propaganda model. (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) Game companies as media producers are in a capitalist system forced to act according to financial considerations and not artistic or ethical ones. It marks the departure of even AAA games from a focus on producing the best possible product for their audience to abusing audience labor and to forging games after a monetization model instead of vice versa.

Further Research

A next step to take would be to conduct quantitative analysis on the way players use the real money market place and the way they perceive it as a way of ideology analysis. Another issue that is very central to this discussion about virtual property and real-money-trade are legal questions of ownership of virtual items, questions of the validity of end-user license agreements and questions of power and governance. Now with the raised stakes of real money being involved the question of controlling the design of a game change in nature and might need to be re-examined. (Lastowka, 2010). In terms of linking business model to game design it would be useful to interview the lead designer of Diablo 3 about this issue. Finally it will be interesting to see how the RMAH and the financial account in connection to the Battle-net account it has established will play into monetization plans of Blizzard down the road. One plan that has been discussed in the community around Starcraft 2 was to trade access to user-created maps for the game on a market place for real money making it possible for player creators to earn money with and live from their modding while Blizzard would be taking a part of the payments again profiting from this time actually creative players labor.

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This would also link the literature discussed above about unpaid labor and modding directly to the issue of this paper.

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