Chinese Gold Farming: Discourses of Space and Legitimacy in Virtual Worlds

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The anthropologist Tom Boellstorff argues in his book, Coming of Age in Second Life, that the lives people carry out in virtual worlds online can help them to achieve a greater sense of self, unhindered by social constraints (Boellstorff 2008:121). Indeed, the anthropologist Alex Golub asserts that virtual game worlds, like Second Life or World of Warcraft, are more about developing relationships between real people in virtual spaces than about an experience of sensory immersion divorced from the physical world (Golub 2010:21). These relationships and personal development take place in virtual worlds that are often intertwined with the physical world in surprising ways.

In online games like Second Life, virtual items are purchased for use in the game with virtual money that is directly exchangeable for real currency. These real world economic transactions are termed “real money trade” (RMT) and are viewed as a legitimate part of the game. By contrast, in massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) like World of Warcraft, real money trades are considered illegitimate, illegal and a violation of the terms of service of the game (Nardi and Kow 2010). In other words, players in Second Life are allowed and encouraged to purchase items for their avatars using effectively real currency, but players in games like World of Warcraft are explicitly forbidden from doing so.

This difference stems from the fact that MMORPGs have their own internal economies based on virtual currencies that players must earn by completing various tasks and challenges in the game. This currency can then be used to improve a player’s character and purchase virtual items like armor or weapons, but it cannot legally be exchanged for real currency. Not all players have the time or interest to complete the often-repetitive tasks needed to amass large sums of currency in these games. An illegal shadow economy thus exists where certain players will exclusively perform these repetitive tasks in order to amass virtual currency or items that are then sold for real money. These players are referred to as “Chinese gold farmers” and in China, this virtual world shadow economy is believed to employ up to 500,000 people as their real world job (Raut and Schrader 2008:17-18).

Using recent research from various social scientists, this article will explore how the use of virtual space acts to define players of online games as “legitimate” or “illegitimate.” In general, MMORPG community members see Chinese gold farmers as illegitimate players because they utilize game virtual space for illegal employment purposes rather than for leisure.
Real Money in Virtual Worlds
China has risen as a major center for virtual “gold farming” due to a combination of accessible high speed Internet and low wage labor (Ahmad, et al. 2009:2). Despite the high demand for illegal gold farming services, the practice is generally regarded very negatively in MMORPG communities because it may destabilize the virtual world economies (see Steinkuehler 2006:206). Moreover, gold farming can be used to launder real world money because it is so difficult to trace financial transactions in games like *World of Warcraft* (Irwin and Slay 2010:43).

Although the practice of gold farming is generally associated with China, not all gold farmers are Chinese and not all Chinese players of MMORPG are gold farmers. In the game *Everquest II*, for example, less that 17% of Chinese language players were found to be gold farmers. However, of the players found to be gold farmers, 77.6% were Chinese (Ahmad, et al. 2009:3). The popular MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, has approximately eleven million players worldwide, half of which are Chinese, but only a small percentage of those players are gold farmers (Nardi and Kow 2010). Nonetheless, the act of gold farming is seen as specifically “Chinese,” and many North American players assume that the behaviors of gold farmers are products of Chinese culture and society (Nakamura 2009:130). Economic activities are thus reinterpreted as inherently cultural and specifically “Chinese.”

Gold Farming and Use of Space
In order to maximize profit, gold farmers sometimes engage in behaviors that are disruptive to other players. In *Lineage II*, gold farmers often game in groups and delineate certain hunting areas in the game as their own territory. To deter other players from encroaching on that territory, gold farmers may harass other players in the area by killing monsters that players are hunting, pillaging monsters that have been killed by other players or healing monsters that other players are attempting to kill (Steinkuehler 2006:203). In games like *World of Warcraft*, territories frequented by gold farmers are called China Towns by leisure players (Dibell 2007:5). Certain uses of game space, like repetitive hunting in groups, are thus racialized by leisure players as specifically “Chinese” and these virtual spaces become geographically marked and delineated by labels like “China Town.”

Resentment against gold farmers leads players to survey and profile others to determine if they are “legitimate” leisure players. If players engage in certain repetitive tasks, remain in certain territories, or if they fail to respond to chat messages in fluent English, their characters may be harassed or even killed (Nakamura 2009:133). In some games, certain character groups have become racialized as “Chinese.” In *Lineage II*, for example, players using the character group of “girl dwarves” are assumed to be Chinese gold farmers and the term “Chinese” is used as an insult by English language players of the game (Steinkuehler 2006:208). In this way,
Chinese gamers, and more broadly non-native English speaking gamers, are assumed to be “illegitimate” players and potential targets for discrimination by “legitimate” English speaking leisure players.

**Legitimacy Through Leisure**

Many in China see the Internet as a space without social responsibility where youth can express individualism, develop their identity and enjoy leisure time (Golub and Lingley 2007:13). However, when working as gold farmers, Chinese players cannot socialize freely or utilize the currency or items they gather for their own enjoyment in the game (Jin 2007:463; Nakamura 2009:141). The virtual spaces of game play are thus an unequal terrain, where wealth in the real world allows for leisure in the virtual world. Nonetheless, gold farmers do usually enjoy the games they play and even play them in their leisure time (Nardi and Kow 2010). Some gamers may therefore act as both “illegitimate” illegal gold farmers and “legitimate” leisure players. But prejudice in these virtual worlds means that players from countries like China frequently face stereotyping that may disrupt their ability to enjoy and access leisure game play.

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