

# **Ethical gaming: problems and opportunities**

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Degree thesis

Online media

2012

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<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>I framtiden kommer alla att spela datorspel av något slag. Eftersom det inte finns någon universal lag som kontrollerar spelutveckling så finns det aspekter inom industrin som kan anses vara oetiska. Bör spelutvecklarna handla i sina kunders bästa intressen? Detta arbete förklarar hur online-spelindustrin är byggd kring att generera så mycket pengar som möjligt på bekostnaden av ovetande kunder. För att komma till det som anses vara roligt i ett spel så måste spelaren tillbringa timmar om inte dagar på annat i spelet – allt för att försäkra att spelaren är så länge som möjligt i spelet. Parallellt dras till hasardspelande: även om folk varnas att inte börja med sådant så varnar ingen folk om att inte börja spela vissa online-spel. Det har inte gjorts mycket forskning inom området så för detta arbete fick mycket information tas från Internet. En studie och analys över Activision Blizzards World of Warcraft och ArenaNets nya titel Guild Wars 2 gjordes. Med dem som bas kommer detta arbete förklara problemen som finns i så många online spel i dag, samtidigt som det förklarar hur saker kan komma att göras i framtiden.</p>	
Nyckelord:	etisk hasardspel spel spelutveckling online warcraft
Sidantal:	70
Språk:	Engelska
Datum för godkännande:	

DEGREE THESIS	
Arcada	
Degree Programme:	Online media
Identification number:	3797
Author:	
Title:	
Supervisor (Arcada):	Owen Kelly
Commissioned by:	
<p>Abstract:</p> <p>In the future everyone will be playing video games of some sort. Because there are no universal laws governing game development there are some aspects of the industry that can be seen as unethical. Do the developers have an obligation to act in what's in their customers' best interest? This thesis explains how the online gaming industry is built on maximizing revenue at the expense of its unknowing customers. To reach the parts of a game that's deemed fun players have to spend hours or even days doing other things in it – all to ensure they spend as much time as possible in the specific game. Parallels are drawn to gambling: even though people are warned not to start a bad habit the same is not said about online gaming. Not much research has been made on this topic prior to this thesis so a lot of information had to be searched from over the Internet. A case study and analysis was made of Activision Blizzard's World of Warcraft, and ArenaNet's new title Guild Wars 2. With using the two as examples the thesis will pinpoint the unethical problem found in so many online titles while showing how things can be done in the future.</p>	
Keywords:	ethical gambling game development online warcraft
Number of pages:	70
Language:	English
Date of acceptance:	

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Foreword

Addiction, compulsion, wasting precious time... Gamers keep hearing from friends and families they're just wasting their lives playing games. Back in the 90ies when the gaming industry really took off it was almost shameful to admit liking playing games. To sum it up:

Early gamers were often depicted as nerdy and awkward, like the arrogant loner who runs the Android's Dungeon, the game and comic shop on The Simpsons. (Beck, John C & Wade, Mitchell. 2006. P. 31)

The climate has become a better for gamers, and gaming as a whole has become more accepted with the increase in gamers numbers. Still, the whole "you're wasting your time playing those video games"- argument left me wondering. What is to say that playing video games is a worse way to spend your spare time than say, watching TV or reading books every day? When it comes to extra curricular activities it has in fact, even been argued that playing games is actually a lot more productive than aforementioned engagements (McGonigal, Jane. 2011).

Never have there been as many people under the age of 18 playing video games as there are today. Author Jane McGonigal stated in an interview on the Colbert Report that "in the future we're all going to be gamers" – which is one of the reasons I chose this thesis topic. Considering games are a big part of the entertainment options of the present and even more so the future, I want to discuss the possibilities and problems that arise with nowadays online game models.

Some argue that playing games is detrimental to your social life, but what makes reading a book on your own more "sociable" than playing a game on your own? When things come down to it – it's to do with what's deemed acceptable in society. Things are changing every so quickly with the massive on-going digitalization of the world as we know it:

Today's average college grads have spent less than 5,000 hours of their lives reading, but over 10,000 hours playing video games (not to mention 20,000 hours watching TV). (Prensky, Marc. 2001).

Furthermore; games aren't necessarily enjoyed best on their own. Nowadays there are many games to indulge in online over the Internet with friends as well as with strangers. For this thesis the main focus will be on virtual worlds' gameplay and development.

When you bought a game in the mid 90ies, you actually got a *whole game* you could enjoy for a few hours at a time whenever you liked. Nowadays the trend seems to be leaning towards buying a *fraction of a game*, only to have to buy additional parts for it later (extra weapons, more gadgets, better and improved maps – you name it). Especially typical massively multiplayer online roleplaying-games of today take a tremendous amount of time to play. The companies of the aforementioned game types make sure customers stay hooked on their game. They ensure the customers pay for the additional content that will be implemented later by making them pay monthly subscription fees or similar. It is arguably questionable. Is this reasonable – or even ethical of the gaming companies to do? This thesis will try to put the cat on the table.

## **1.2 Research topic**

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on the questions that arise when pondering the ethicality of modern games' game design models. Can ethical gaming, or gaming models exist and what are the opportunities and problems that arise with them?

## **1.3 Motive for research**

I've played video games for as long as I can remember. From the time I was mashing buttons on the Commodore 64, or enjoying a bit of Super Nintendo together with my cousins as a toddler, things have changed drastically. And it's not just the platforms that

have evolved and developed – or the graphics that have changed. I feel the *games themselves* have changed.

Having played World of Warcraft I was like the majority of its players, not giving the actual ethicality of the game a second thought. It wasn't until I grew bored of it, after a good couple of years, that I actually started questioning the games' mechanics –its *gaming model* – how it lures the gamer in. I started noticing the same occurring in other games I was enjoying (and admittedly, still am) too.

When I was a kid we didn't have to *log on* to our games on a daily, or at least, weekly basis to get the most out of them. Nowadays the trend in online games seems to be *keeping the player playing*. Companies will go far and use clever means to keep you interested in their game – but at what cost? We lose money, not to mention precious time, doing side-quests, mindless farming or mini-games in order to enjoy the real content of our favourite games. Before you're allowed to use a gun actually worth using, you have to mow down 300 enemies with a chain saw. Or in order to cook food in your restaurant you have to log on consecutively for x amount of days in order to get ingredients for a certain dish.

It makes me wonder if the intelligence of the gamers as a whole can be questioned. It's not as simple as stating that *gamers are stupid*. I think it's rather the game developers being very clever using working game models to get the most profit out of their games. But won't gamers figure these tricks out eventually? To some extent they already have.

With this thesis I want to present a different path for games and their development, in hope that in the future we'll see a new and a more ethical game model being used.

## **1.4 The scope of the thesis**

This thesis examines the problems and opportunities of the modern gaming industry – mainly within the genre of massively multiplayer online roleplaying-games. It sheds

light on whether or not ethical game development has a chance of surviving in the current gaming climate dominated by strict, highly lucrative, models.

Whereas there have been many studies on whether or not video games are making people, and especially children, violent, this thesis will not bring up thoughts on that matter.

## **1.5 Methodology**

Considering the subject of this thesis isn't widely researched thus far I had to rely a lot on articles online for information. I read official as well as unofficial gaming forums to back up my research. I also conducted personal research and analyzed games by playing them.

## **1.6 The structure of the thesis**

In the second chapter of this thesis I will present a concise historical development of games. Emphasis will be put on how games' structures and models have changed during the past fifteen years. I will leave out subjective thoughts for this part and deal with the section in the most objective way possible.

After presenting how games have developed the past years, I'll explain how current online game business models work – and what ethical problems arise along with them. I will follow this in short by shedding light on uprising paths of development, and how the future of the online gaming market will look.

Stating what is and what isn't ethical when it comes to computer games can be tricky. This thesis will present the idea of companies inserting compelling elements into their online games. This means either inserting an element which requires you to log in every single day, or making simple tasks take an exorbitant amount of time, in order to keep players playing longer, therefor keeping revenues going strong. After discussing ethical gaming in the third section of the thesis the reader will be introduced to the dominant

and revolutionizing models of game design. We'll look at the dominant model, and why it's been so successful. After that we'll have a look at the other branches of game design.

In the fourth section I will present case studies and game analysis. Representing the dominant "unethical" game model I've chosen Blizzard Entertainment's blockbuster from 2004: *World of Warcraft*. I will discuss my subjective findings from having played the game and from doing extensive research on Internet forums.

I will also mention in short other games following the same principles that made WoW such a successful game – such as applications found on Facebook.

After presenting the readers with the dominant model's case study I will ponder the more "ethical" opportunities for other game models to develop and evolve. For my second analysis I've used ArenaNet's upcoming *Guild Wars 2* that will be released later this year. The game has been through thorough beta testing for the last year, and the game content and business model are finalized at this point. ArenaNet have been showing up at gaming conventions worldwide, holding discussion panels about the game, as well as giving interviews and extensive information on their official site from which I've gathered information.

Author and game designer Jane McGonigal has inspired parts of this thesis and will also be mentioned in this section. She presents a minority of game developers that put emphasis on games being able to do good for society. I will look deeper into what she has to say and how her ideas can be, and in some extent, are already used in making more ethical games.

Thereafter follows the final chapter with my findings and conclusions. I will give my opinions on what I think should happen to change the gaming climate as it is and what I actually possible, using my research finds to back these claims up.

## 1.6 Terminology

When discussing games you are bound to bump into very specific semantics and jargons. To understand and follow the content of this essay it will be essential to be familiar with the basic lingo, so here follows a short but useful dictionary of sorts:

### Addiction

Ever so often do we find people say that gamers, who spend most of their spare time playing games, are addicted. However; for this thesis it will be essential to be clear on what is meant by addiction, as it will be hinted at in later chapters.

Traditionally, the term addiction has been used to identify self-destructive behaviors that include a pharmacological component. ... This definition usually includes a strong physiological craving, withdrawal symptoms, and the need for more of the drug to get the same effect (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). (CiClemente, Carlo C. p. 7).

This definition would not include gamers and their extra curricular activities, as gaming is a behaviour, not a substance you can intake or suffer physical withdrawal symptoms from. However; there is a slight dilemma in that modern day medicine the term addiction includes behavioural changes and problems with relations. CiClemente argues that if what is labeled addiction becomes too broad – the word itself will become devoid of meaning (CiClemente, Carlo C. P. 7).

For this thesis I will stick to the more traditional term of the word to avoid dwelling too deep into the psychology behind gamers' behaviour.

### Digital Native / Immigrant

The term *Digital Native / Immigrant* was created by author and game designer Marc Prensky. He ponders the generations of today and how the current western education system can be seen as outdated used on today's young considering how different the environment they grow up in is compared to a few generations ago. Children of today

spend their entire life surrounded by the digital media with video games, mobile phones and the Internet. As such they are completely integrated into the digital society and have no problem using its tools.

What should we call these “new” students of today? Some refer to them as the N-[for Net]-gen or D-[for digital]-gen. But the most useful designation I have found for them is *Digital Natives*. Our students today are all “native speakers” of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet. (Prensky, Marc. 2001)

Prensky even goes as far as to nurse the thought of the Digital Natives brains working different to Digital Immigrants (those not Native and born before the digital revolution took place) because of how they were brought up around the digital media.

## **Gamer**

For this thesis the term *gamer* will be used to describe digital natives that play modern games created during and after the year 2000, on a more than three times a week basis.

## **Grind and farm**

Gamers like to describe time-consuming actions in a game as a *grind* or *grindfest*. Depending on the game, and what genre the game is, the grind is different and suits that style of game. For example: in a fantasy role-playing game, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), a typical grind is where the players have to collect materials (picking herbs, skinning dead monsters to get leather and similar) from which they can create an item of need. In an FPS the grind consists of shooting a certain amount of enemies in order to unlock a new and better weapon unavailable prior to unlocking it.

Time spent killing a specific monster over and over again in hopes for great, uncommon items can also be labeled *farming*. Most gamers don't like grinding or farming but are compelled to do so in order to enjoy the other aspects of their game more – as in with the example with the FPS and acquiring an improved weapon from having spent that extra time.

## **FPS**

Abbreviation of *first person shooter*. The player controls his character mostly in first person view and handles firearms to shoot at enemies. FPSs can be played online in versus modes against other players.

## **MMORPG**

MMORPG is short for massively multiplayer online role-playing game. An MMORPG allows people to play together over the Internet in a virtual world on a server. Characters played in MMORPGs are customizable.

Because of the sheer amount of people in MMORPGs they have to be divided into separate servers to avoid one server becoming over-populated and impossible to play on due to lag-issues.

Unlike traditional video games, MMORPGs usually come with a looser more flexible story without a concrete ending. The main focus in most of them is the social aspect of the game and the interactions between the gamers.

## **Mini-games**

Miniature games, or *mini-games*, are games that exist within another game. An example would be the famous *Plants vs. Zombies* (PopCap Games, 2009) that was made available in Blizzard's *World of Warcraft* in 2011. Mini-games don't have to be original titles within another game but can also be a task or reoccurring quest within the game itself that is detached from the main plot or storyline.



## **PvE & PvP**

*PvE* means Player versus Environment. It is used in MMORPGs to describe game content where players battle it out against the in game monsters – such as quests and raids. *PvP* stands for Player versus Player and is when a player commence in effort to defeat other players in fights.

## **Dungeons and Raids**

In terms of MMORPGs the word *dungeon* is used to describe content typically experienced in an environment with a small amount of players, usually five. Five players play together in a instanced environment with monsters and bosses exclusive to the area. Dungeons are considered harder than normal gameplay and require teamwork to complete. Monsters in dungeons are harder than in other parts of the game but the rewards are also better.

Raids are like dungeons but require even more players to complete and have better rewards than offered in dungeon. In World of Warcraft this number can be 10 or 25 players. It is almost always required for you to be max level to participate in raids. Raids are also bigger in size compared to dungeons and generally take longer to complete.

## **Time-sinks**

The term time-sink is used when gamers talk about actions in games that take a long time to do. Time-sinks don't add value to the game as such and can be found in many MMORPGs. More in-depth description of this term will be present in chapter 4.

## **EpicWin/fail**

Gamers refer to situations that make them feel ecstatic or otherwise happy with themselves or the results they achieve in games as *EpicWins*. A *fail* is when the gamer feels something went wrong or they did something that didn't have a positive outcome.

Game Designer Jane McGonigal explains the word to entail the feeling they get when they achieve something extraordinary they never imagined themselves be able to do.

## **Levels & experience points**

Gamers can *level* their in-game character. Levels are a simple way to show the relative power of the character. Usually levels are obtained by receiving *experience points*. Experience points can be awarded when killing monsters, completing quests or tasks, or by spending enough time in a certain area. Most MMORPGs are level-based and gamers strive to reach the maximum level in order to get all power-ups possible for the character. Levels also filter the player-base through the game as areas within the game come with level-restrictions. Traditionally end-game content such as raids are available only to those having reached the maximum level in the game.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

### **2.1 Games became an every day thing**

Games as a form of entertainment have been around for decades. There isn't a clear opinion as to which is the very first video game (Peter Nowak, 2008). Some say the first video game came as early as 1947, when Thomas Goldsmith and Estle Ray Mann created a missile simulator using a cathode ray tube connected to a computer. However; the

first inventions couldn't be called proper "video games" because the computers used for them were incapable of generating moving graphics.

The first system to come out with proper video games was the *Odyssey*, created by engineer Ralph Baer and distributed by Magnavox in 1972. Despite the fact this was the first ever video game console available for the general public it wasn't successful. Because of the general misconception due to poor marketing, people believed it only to be functional on Magnavox televisions. This led to the poor sale of a mere 100 000 units and to the fall of the Magnavox Odyssey.

It wasn't until Atari released the tennis simulator *Pong* that the video gaming industry really took off. With better marketing than the Magnavox Odyssey had used, Atari paved the way for the gaming industry. The popularity of the Atari was at its zenith in 1981. About 1 500 games were made for the Atari, with about 20 million consoles sold worldwide. (Beck, John C and Wade, Mitchell. 2006).



*Image 1. The Magnavox Odyssey allowed people for the first time to play video games in their homes in 1972.*

After its success in the early 80ies, Atari annual sales dropped. Soon enough society was ready for a new console to hit the market, with better graphics and a superior en-

gine to that of the Atari. In 1988 people welcomed the new console, the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) into their homes.

Soon, NES was the best-selling toy in North America. Two years later, Nintendo's Super Mario Brothers 3 became the best selling ideo game of all time, grossing a half-billion dollars. Researchers found that, for kids, Mario was literally as famous as Mickey. (Beck, John C and Wade, Mitchell. 2006. p. 31)

Beck and Wade found that in 2006, over 92 per cent of children aged two to seventeen in the United states have access to video games – and that 8 out of 10 households with children have computers.

They say that because the NES became so popular with kids in the 90ies it explains a shift in how games are perceived nowadays. Kids who grew up on the NES are now the adults with income they can spend on entertainment of their choice for themselves and for their own children. This explains why the gaming industry is blooming like never before.

### **2.1.1 Of MMORPGs**

Early games such as *Island of Kesmai* (CompuServe, 1984), was an online game that cost 12 dollars an hour to play, and the server held up to 100 players at once. Despite being one of the first games allowing several people to log on to a server and play together at the same time, it cannot be classified as massively multiplayer online roleplaying-game by today's standards.

Considering how much 12 dollars was at that time, and that the fee was hourly, the game cost quite a bit to play. On the subject of costs for massively multiplayer online games in the earlier days Executive Consultant for Online Games, Jessica Mulligan said:

Our average MMOG customer spent \$156 per month, the equivalent of 32 hours at \$3 hours per hour to play. However, the hard-core players averaged three times that and accounted for nearly 70% of the

total revenue. The top 0.5% had truly astronomical bills, well over \$1,000 per month. (Mulligan Jessica and Patrovsky Bridgette. 2003. P 448).

Understandably – these games had to come with quite large expenses. Server upkeep was a much bigger and financially challenging issue than today; subscription-fees were warranted.

The first MMO with a 3D engine was *Meridian 59* (Studio 3DO). It was the first in its kind in two ways: First, the 3D engine allowed the player to see the game through the eyes of its in game character. Secondly – The player had to pay monthly for it. The game came out in 1995 and in 1996 the publishers added a fixed subscription fee for its players. About the costs associated with the game, Co founder Andrew Kirmse said:

Meridian's sales were not up to 3DO's expectations. Chris and I had argued that we give the client away to as many people as possible, and then charge monthly fees. The standard \$50 retail sale, on the other hand, allowed 3DO to recognize all of the revenue for the game immediately on shipment, which made their balance sheet for that quarter look healthier.

With the Internet making its way into more homes around the world, more Internet based games were developed.



Image 2. *Meridian 59* was the first MMO with fixed subscription fees and a 3D engine.

*Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997) can be classed the very first massively multiplayer online roleplaying-game. In the first ever annual Game Developers Choice Online Awards the game was added to the Hall of fame for being a key part in making the genre a success story. 14 years later it's now part of Electronic Arts and still being further developed and patched.

Activision Blizzard's (at that time Blizzard) *World of Warcraft* set another milestone for the genre in 2004. It proved the most successful MMORPG to date, reaching over 12 million subscribers worldwide at its zenith in 2010 and grossing billions of dollars in revenue since its launch.

Bioware's *Star Wars: The Old Republic* is one of the most recent MMORPGs to hit the market in December 2011. The game cost an astounding amount of money to produce and is Electronic Art's most expensive title ever created (Fritz & al. 2011). Despite the \$200 million that went into just creating the game it's only reached a million subscribers thus far. SWTOR shares a lot of features with WoW, but also lacks a lot of staple MMO features and has for this been ridiculed in the gaming community.

## **2.2 Different online game business models**

The games of today come in different forms. As mentioned earlier games used to be all about the fun you could get out of them. Once paid for, it was yours forever to play – as much as you wanted, whenever you wanted. The growing online game market has made game developers go in different directions and come up with new game design models to make their titles the most attractive to their customers.

While this section consists of a few key elements found in different game models, there are some details that unify most of them:

1. Online games are available only to those with access to the Internet and a computer or console to run them.

2. The majority of massively multiplayer online-games are a *theme park* in nature. The rest are *sandbox* in nature. Theme park-games offer the players things to do, but the players cannot change the actual content of the game.

In the lingo of gamers, the term sandbox is used to describe the possibilities to form one's online character's own destiny, background story and interests. The gamer chooses where to go, when to go and what to do within the game. The reason it's called a sandbox is because it's similar to when children play. Give them a spade and bucket and they'll create castles, mountains or a city, within which they can interact with their toys, making up *their own story* as they go play.

3. MMORPGs come with patches, bug fixes and updates to solve existing problems, or offer new content to the players.

4. When the games become old enough and the content has been played through by most of the games' player base the developers add *expansions*. Expansions usually come with an additional fee but offer content packs greater than in normal patches and bug fixes. New character customizations, new areas to explore, new stories, quests, dungeons and raids might be available.

Mentioned in the subsections below are models that distinguish one game from another; different types if you may. In rare cases are there games, such as Activision Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*, that are built on several of these models at the same time.

### **2.2.1 Subscription model**

Subscription based MMORPGs such as *EVE online* (CCP, 1997) require the players to first of all, buy the game client. After it's installed the player will shortly thereafter (typ-

ically 2 weeks after purchase) require to pay a sum of money each month in order to be allowed access to the game. European customers need to pay 14.95€ per month in order to play EVE online. The more months' subscription fees they pre-purchase the less they have to pay (annual-plan equals to 10.95€ per month).

In order to keep the revenues going, companies with subscription-based games try to get their players to stay in their games for the longest time possible. To succeed in this, the companies make their games as compelling or alluring as possible so that the players want to play them and pay for them each month.

There are also games that are free to play once bought but that come with subscription fees for additional game content otherwise unavailable – or available at a higher cost if bought separately as downloadable content (read 2.2.2).

### **2.2.2 Downloadable content**

A popular trend amongst game publisher nowadays is downloadable content available in in-game specific cash shops. The consumer can play the game upon purchase but if he or she wants additional items or maps they'll have to buy them separately from the store. DLC, or Downloadable content doesn't necessarily make the game better. However; for example for first person shooters it is tempting to get all the DLCs. Purchasing maps and weapons can make the game a lot more appealing to the gamer.

A typical example of this is the most popular FPS game in history; Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3, which hit 1 billion dollars of sales after 16 days after release. The players can purchase map-bundles that include all new maps. In order to play with friends online that have the specific map in a bundle you're obliged to buy the bundle yourself. If you subscribe to the game you'll automatically get all the new maps as they're made available to a discount price compared to if you bought each map separately.



### 2.2.3 Micro-transaction model

Micro-transactions entail purchases available online for small fees. A player chips in a relatively small amount of real money in order to get something in game of use or value.

In the free to play (read 2.2.4) game *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) champions represent the player in game and each comes with unique skills used when battling enemy players' champions. The in-game cash shop offers new unlockable champions available for *Riot points*. Riot points are acquired by online purchase, and on average a champion amounts to approximately 5€.

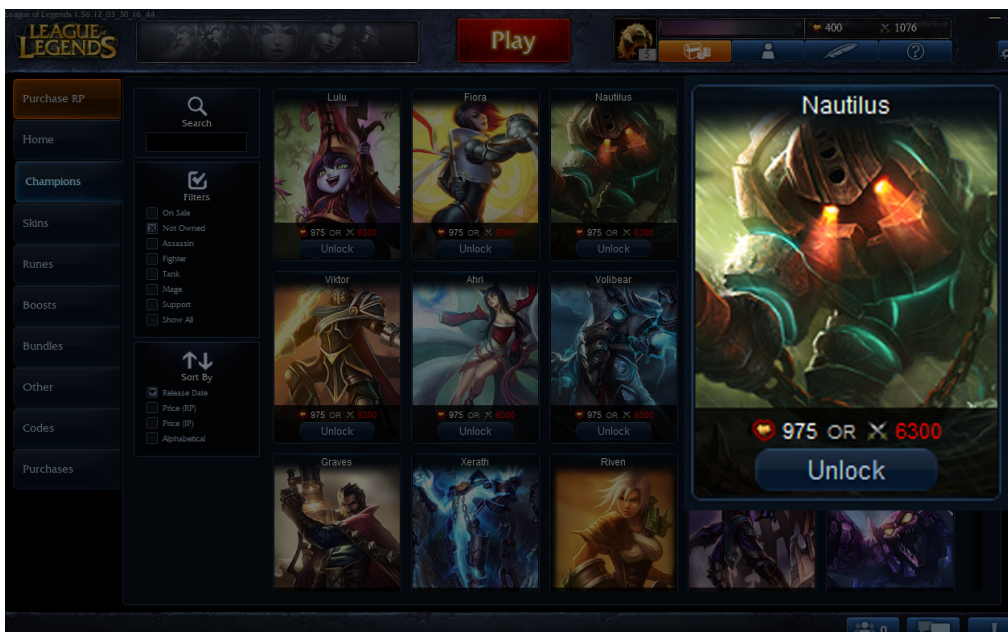


Image 3. In *League of Legends* the player has to spend 975 riot points, or 6300 influence points (awarded when winning games) in order to unlock the champion Nautilus.

### 2.2.4 F2P-model

The F2P or *Free to play*-games come without subscription fees and don't cost anything to download. The fact that they are free to play make up for a lot of their popularity, and many are made available over immensely popular social networks such as *Facebook*. The developers still need money in order to further improve their game, run servers and pay salaries. As such free to play-games usually come with micro transaction opportuni-

ties with in-built cash shops. People can also pay for merchandise such as stuffed animals and t-shirts with related game prints online.

One of the most successful free to play games, if not the most, is *League of Legends* (Riot games 2009). Its developers announced hitting a staggering 32,5 million users worldwide at the end of 2011, with over a million gamers playing at the same time each day and with over 11 million users in game on a monthly basis.

Because of the cash-shop's affordable prices and the immense player base – Riot Games hoard in vast sums of money each year from their players. In the year of 2010 Business Insider said estimated the company to up to \$250 million.

### **3 THE MODELS DISSECTED**

What is seen as *ethical* is subject to one's own perception of what is right or wrong, based on one's own morals. Therefore defining what is universally ethical is nearly impossible. Dictionary.com defines ethical as:

1. pertaining to or dealing with morals or the principles of morality; pertaining to right and wrong in conduct.
2. being in accordance with the rules or standards for right conduct or practice, especially the standards of a profession: *It was not considered ethical for physicians to advertise.*

What can be seen as unethical about gaming within the scope of this thesis is the time gamers are compelled to give their game. Successful games online are usually made to be if not addictive then at least extremely compelling. Especially games that come with subscription fees are designed to attract the player to keep playing, to ensure profit.

In the chapter to come this thesis will present a case study of World of Warcraft. Therein will be a more subjective, personal explanation on what can be deemed ethical for the game in question. What can be said in general about the subject follows this paragraph.

### 3.1 On the ethicality of game design

When it comes to video games what is deemed acceptable or ethical is open for debate. The British Video Standards Council stated that most games don't require legal classification and go under the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) age-rating system in Europe. In America games go under the Entertainment Software Review Board (ESRB). However; neither of these rating systems are fool proof.



Image 4. The different age rating systems based on the ESRB found on game boxes.

It is also said, that games go under the British Digital Economy Act 2010. However; it is yet to be made effective, so for the time being there is no law governing the game industry.

In an article written by Ben Kuchera published by world-known digital magazine *ars technica*, the Supreme Court of the United States decided on case in 2011 that:

Video games qualify for First Amendment protection. Like protected books, plays, and movies, they communicate ideas through familiar literary devices and features distinctive to the medium.

If video games can be used to express whatever opinions under the protection of freedom of speech it would be even more important to have a clear conduct on ethics for games in general. Right now there is no clear conduct or universal law other than what's applicable in different countries, and developers have to follow their own instincts as to what is deemed OK to do or not.

Because of the unclear guidelines for gaming developers some methods within the industry have been developed in a way, which would be deemed unethical in other forms of entertainment.

### **3.2 Skinner's box: gambling methods found in gaming**

Because gambling can be so detrimental to people's economy and personal life when misused, the industry comes with strict codes of ethics. Gambling cannot within the scope of this thesis be *addictive* due to the sheer fact you cannot intake gambling as a substance, nor suffer physical withdrawal symptoms from it. However; it is highly compulsive, and the mentality of games in casinos follow the principles of behaviourist B. F. Skinner's idea of *operant conditioning*. In 2005 Author Lauren Slater described Skinner as follows:

He is known in the field of psychology for his famous animal experiments in which he demonstrated the power of rewards and reinforcements to shape behavior.

Skinner used a box in which he placed a pigeon. When the pigeon tapped a button in the wall of the box it would be rewarded with food. To begin with, the pigeon received food after every tap to the button. Gradually, Skinner rewarded the pigeon only after so many taps. Despite the fact that the pigeon wasn't getting rewarded after each tap, the gradual change in conditioning was enough to make it continue with the activity. From this point on the pigeon would continue to tap the button no matter how many unsuccessful taps it had to do before being rewarded. It had been successfully conditioned into repeating the same action for the chance of small reward.

With this experiment Skinner wanted to show that behaviour could be taught through positive (or negative) reinforcement. This experiment is referred to as the Skinner box and the principles of it are used in massively multiplayer online role-playing games.



Image 5. Skinner's box with a pigeon receiving a reward after pressing a button.

The Skinner box principle is found in most games people perceive as addictive or compelling. Online game researcher Nick Yee explained the use of Skinner's box in the virtual world *EverQuest*:

Skinner claimed that the frequency of a given behavior is directly linked to whether it is rewarded or punished. If a behavior is rewarded, it is more likely to be repeated. If it is punished, it becomes suppressed. This deceptively simple and straight-forward theory may explain why *EverQuest* is so addictive.

He says that in the MMORPG *EverQuest* the gamer starts off getting increase in levels and rewards fairly easy. It's not until later the rewards become increasingly hard to achieve. Yee explains that *EverQuest* uses a random ratio schedule that will level the players up after a random amount of monsters killed. This means the players never know exactly how many times they have to kill monsters before they get their character to the next level. The only thing they know is that eventually they might be rewarded with increase in level by killing them – much like the pigeon in Skinner's box. This is, according to Yee, the reason why they are so compelled to playing this game.

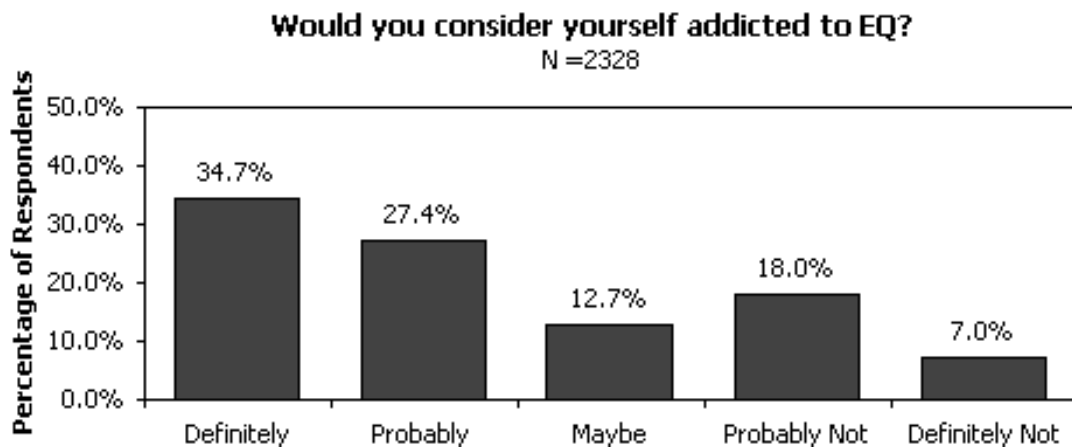


Image 6. Over half of EverQuest's players, gender and age irrelevant, thought themselves to be addicted to the game.

The British Board of Film Classification had research done for them to better understand video games and what it is that make certain people enjoy them. Although the research came to conclude that games are part of a normal life, it should not substitute for it. Gamers seem to run a risk of finding their online games too compelling, with detrimental impact on their social lives:

However, many gamers would acknowledge that it is possible to devote too much time and thought to games. Playing very intensively can make gamers isolated, anti-social and boring (because they neglect other interests) ... It appears to be online games like **World of Warcraft** that are most 'addictive' and which have the most potential to distort personal priorities with unhappy results. (Dawson, Cragg R. & al. P. 12)

The ethics of certain types of games can be questioned, much based on the fact that gambling, that has similar traits to online games, is largely questioned in society. People have been more exposed to the problems that involve intemperate gambling since it's been around for longer than virtual world problems. The American Psychiatric Association named excessive gambling *pathological gambling* in 1980, indicating it a *psychiatric disorder* (Grant and Potenza, 2004). Gambling is detrimental not only to the affected person's economy. Grant and Potenza recognize problems with pathological gamblers social life; they turn anti-social or experience otherwise detriments to social life – much like hooked online gamers:

“I know someone who used to come out with us all the time but now he’s always on the computer playing games... He’s probably got quite a serious problem. He’s never come out in two years... He thinks he’s fine. He gets home, does a bit of homework, then just plays on it most of the night... His mum is worried about him.” PD9 M 13-14 C2DE light Newcastle. (Dawson, Cragg R. & al. P. 67)

In essence: immensely popular games like World of Warcraft and EverQuest use gambling mechanics in their games. Despite this fact nothing is mentioned on the exterior of the game boxes or even in the official end user license. The PEGI system (unlike the EBRs) does warn when a game is *gambling in nature or encourages gambling* like a poker game or a casino simulator – but fail to entail compelling games in their list. Nothing is mentioned about the compulsion found in so many online games, much because the area hasn’t been studied for long enough to shed light on these problems this thesis brings up.

At large gamers don’t seem to realise how much they are being enticed to spend their time in certain games by simple virtual Skinner boxes, much to the fact that this is just the way the online gaming industry has gone. In fact, some gamers have become so indoctrinated by the time-sink mantra that they are even prepared to defend it rather than want to abolish it (see image 7).

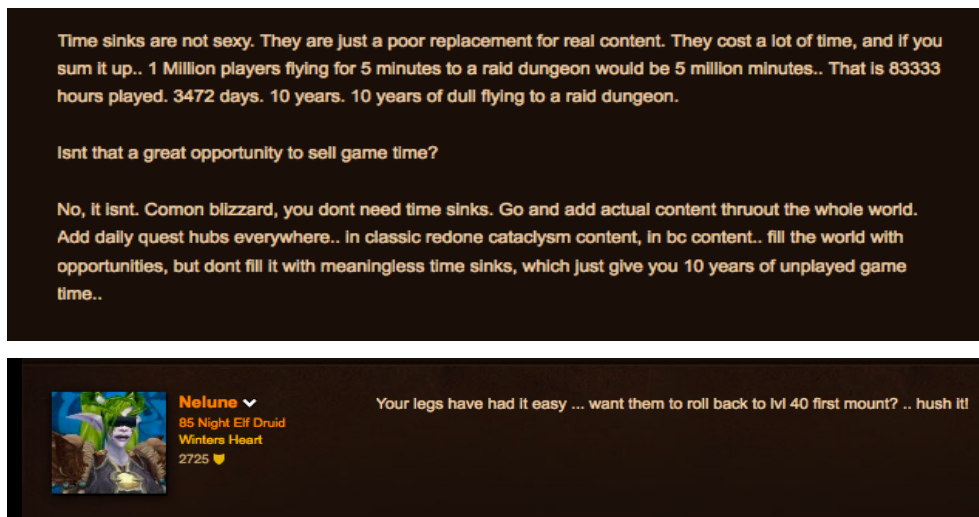


Image 7. Pseudonym Schmonz posted a thread on the official WoW forums where he expressed his dissatisfaction with the time sinks found in the game. He used long time spent on travelling from one place to another as an example. User Nelune defends the time it takes to travel with the fact that it was worse when the game first came out (Vanilla = First edition of World of Warcraft).

We've become desensitized to the problem so much we fail to see it. Even if certain aspects in World of Warcraft have improved there's still problems. This can indeed be questioned on an ethical level.

### **3.3 The dominant game model unravelled**

As mentioned before in the second chapter of this thesis, the online gaming industry offers game's that can be categorized into different models, depending on what the developer's found the most suitable or profitable for their game. Game developers strive to make money just like anyone else running a business. Just like any form of entertainment, customers are willing to pay money for their fun, as long as the expenses are reasonable for their wallets.

Within the scope of this thesis, the term *dominant game model* will describe the combination of game business models used to create extremely compelling and time-consuming virtual environments. The dominant game model strives to make as much profit as humanly possible, and in many ways it gets away with doing just so.

Games that come with subscription fees are always made compelling. Without captivating elements in the games the gamers wouldn't pay every month for them. However; this doesn't mean that games without subscription fees are less compelling. In fact – many online games that aren't subscription-based still come with components that make players feel the need to log on them on a daily if not weekly basis.

### **3.4 Understanding the key business models**

#### **3.4.1 Compelling free to plays**

In the late 2010 the *High Scalability* website presented that The *Playfish* company, part of the *Electronic Arts*- company, had a staggering 50 million monthly users. The site



presents the success of these games as a result of the games being social and casual. Moreover; the games are *asynchronous*, meaning the players can play together with friends even if they're not online at the same time. This gives people the chance to interact with each other when it in traditional games would've been impossible. You as a player simply pick up from where your friend left off.

In an interview for the CNBC in November 2009, the COO and Co-Founder of Playfish, Sebastien de Halleux, stated: "Social gaming is all about attracting a new audience". Facebook is a perfect ground from which game developers such as Playfish can get a vast audience. Taken from the official Playfish website:

Since 2007, Playfish has led the social gaming industry in innovation and creativity with award-winning, category-defining games designed for friends to play together. The company is changing the way people play games by creating more social and connected experiences.

In the same interview the head of the *Major League Gaming* electronic sports organisation, Sundance DiGiovanni said:

"The key to it all is the community. How good am I compared to my friends? ... It comes down to the quality of the game. You have to attract an audience. Once the audience is proven, then you have to monetize the audience. Otherwise where do you go from there? I think you'll see a mix of both. Again – these free games typically have a route to being monetized whether it's display advertisements or *unlockables*.

What was meant by what he said was that games that start out as free usually don't stay that way if they want to remain strong. In order to stay economically afloat a lot of these free to plays still get their money by allowing advertisements for other companies in their games, or offer the players unlockable items they have to purchase with real money in order to use. Even when dealing with free to plays the term "Nothing is for free" truly can be used. Many follow the simple principle of Skinner's famous box experiment.

In Playfish's *Restaurant city* the goal for the player is to collect ingredients with which he or she can improve her menu in their personal restaurant. When virtual customers come and eat at the player's restaurant they pay in-game money with which the player can buy more ingredients. The better the menu equals more popularity, which leads to

more customers and income for the restaurant owner. With the money the player can also expand his or her restaurant, add more furniture and personalise it further. This is the fun aspect of the game – spending time improving the menu, refurbishing the restaurant – having a laugh with the design and comparing it to your friends’ designs.

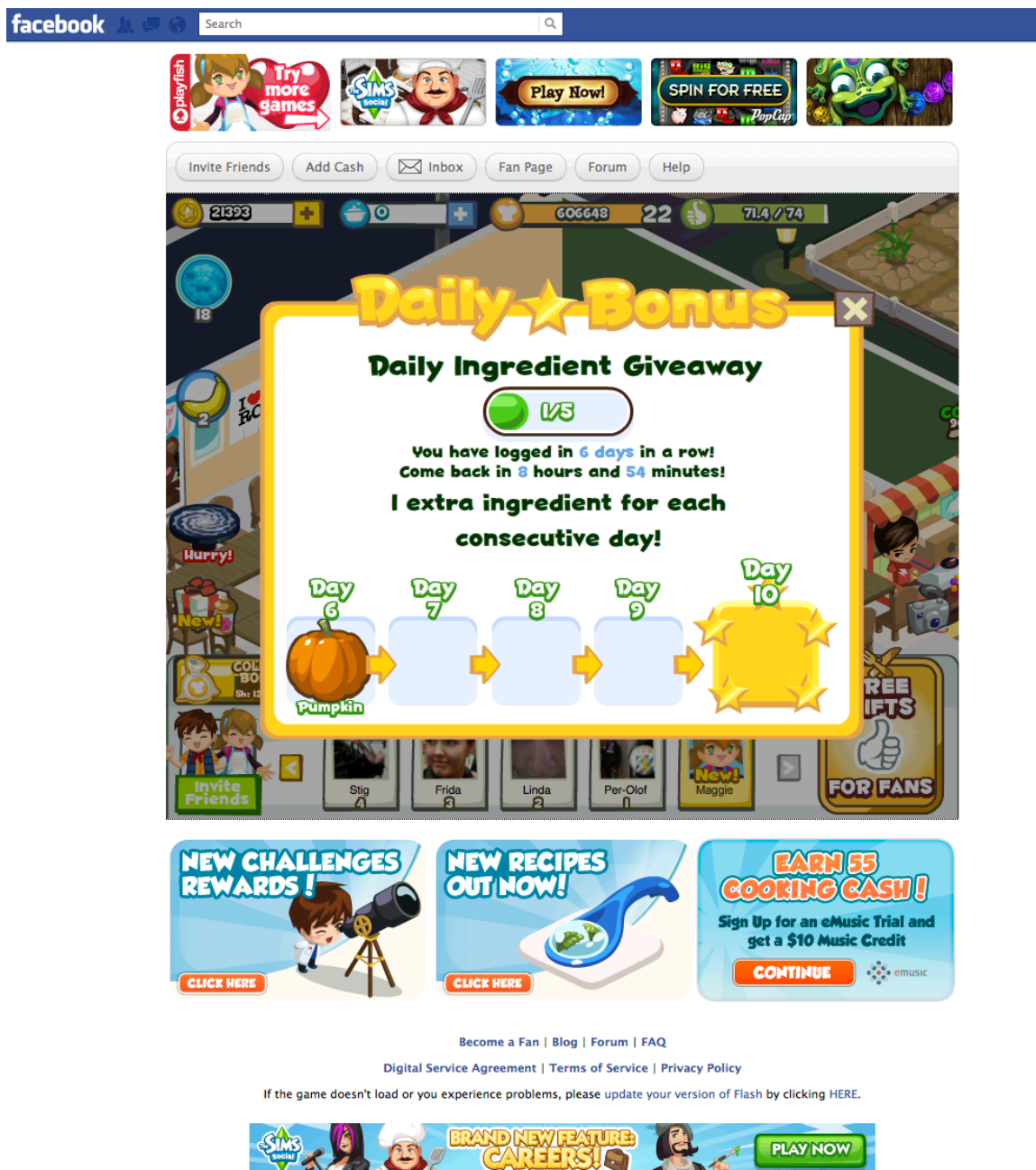


Image 8. Playfish’s *Restaurant city* comes with Skinner box elements. Here depicted what the game looks like when you’ve consequently logged in 6 days in a row. For each day you gain a mystery ingredient, and on the tenth day you gain a mystery ingredient of higher value.

With the promise of getting a free ingredient people will log on to the application on a daily basis to check what they got (image 8). Considering the vast amount of different herbs, vegetables, meats and spices the game offers – the chance to get exactly the right ingredient needed for the specific menu is pretty slim. Still, people will log on each day just on the off chance they will get the ingredient they wanted – very much like Skinner’s pigeon desperately tapping a button on the off chance some good reward will be given for the effort.

The shop from which you can buy ingredients in the game only offers three different ingredients each day. If the ingredient you wanted isn’t on offer that day you can always buy it by using locked ingredients with real money instead. Also to mention: In Restaurant city the player stands a chance of getting money when shaking trees outside friends’ restaurants or when cleaning them from litter. The more friends that play the game the more shrubbery and litter. This is a great marketing strategy (and just one of the many presented in the game) implemented by Playfish to make sure players want to invite their friends to play the game.

### **3.4.2 The subscription model, explained**

When *Meridian 59* (Studio 3DO) came out in the 90ies, servers cost a lot to run. The technology then used wasn’t as developed as it is today, and even the physical boxes holding the servers cost a whole deal more than they do now.

It’s easy to get away with misleading the general public that doesn’t know much about database administration on how much servers actually cost to maintain. The subscription fees of today are fossil remains of a time past where servers actually were a lot more expensive to obtain and maintain.

On September 16<sup>th</sup> in 2008, Luke Plunkett posted an article for the website Kotaku, stating that *World of Warcraft* had thus far cost \$200 million to run:

That's *it*. Staff payroll, hardware support, customer service (which, interestingly, they say is their largest department), the lot ... Sure, in isolation \$200 million is a lot of clams, but when you put \$200 million in the "expenditures" column then put \$300 *gazillion* in the "revenue" column, you're not just laughing all the way to the bank, you're *cackling*.

Bearing in mind, the profits will have become even greater to date, considering the WoW player base is larger now than it was in 2008.

People are still willing to pay \$15 for games such as *World of Warcraft* each month because they are mal-informed thinking the money goes into maintenance and game-development mainly. Pseudonym Cableoz replied to the previous article:

One of the primary reasons I quit WoW (in 2006 after only a few months playing, but well over a year since release) was that even though they are raking in huge profits per subscriber (which this story confirms), they were investing little in ensuring top line servers/network/hardware infrastructure.

In games where new content isn't released, and patches aren't done on a regular basis the customers basically pay straight into the developers' pockets.

### **3.5 Questioning the server transaction fees**

Some online games such as *Lord of the Rings Online* (Turbine Inc. 2006) or LotRO come with character transaction fees. When a player that plays on a specific server of the game wants for one reason or another, change his or her server, a fee has to be paid to the company. In games where transfers are available the system implemented to allow this is already functional in the game. This means that moving one character from server A to server B costs nothing extra to the game company itself. The fee in LotRO came to a hefty price of \$24.95 per move.

Arguably, the reason why impressive transaction fees exist is that game developers don't want their players changing servers too often, as it would cause imbalance in the player base. If everyone could move servers on a whim, companies fear that one day one server becomes over-populated and another void of players.

However; this cannot explain why certain subscription-based games such as *Rift* (Trion Worlds, Inc. 2011) offers their players free server transfers. *Rift* also comes with monthly patches, offering extensive new content previously unavailable in game – all funded with the money earned with subscriptions.

### **3.6 What can be seen as ethical game development?**

In contrast to the unethical online gaming models, the games that aren't deliberately designed to take as much time, compelling players to spend needless hours in game, can be seen as ethical within the scope of this thesis.

#### **3.6.1 Fun, not compelling**

*Minecraft* (Mojang, 2009) is a massively popular (over 5 million units sold by February in 2012), yet simple buy to play sandbox type of game. Gamers get to create their own worlds using tools and materials collected in game during the daytime. In the night, monsters crawl out to try to kill the gamer's character – so it's essential one builds a good house in which the character can remain safe during the night.

The game has compared to today's standards extremely poor graphics, but this hasn't stopped the game from becoming a major success. Games don't need brilliant graphics nor need to be time consuming to be enthralling - fun. Developer, Markus Persson comments on the official *Minecraft* site:

I make sure to play the game a lot, and I've built my share of towers, and flooded my share of caves. If something ever doesn't feel fun, I'll remove it. I believe that I can combine enough fun, accessibility and building blocks for this game to be a huge melting pot of emergent gameplay.

Game developers should strive to make games fun rather than making parts of them fun only reachable after so many hours of grinding. A general consensus when looking at

forums online seems to be that people don't find the actual act of grinding all that appealing.

### **3.6.2 Make a change**

Games can be used to do good. Even if some massively multiplayer online roleplaying-games play on people's compulsion, there are aspects that can actually be seen as respectable. For instance: learning new things.

MMORPGs can teach people how to better understand the value of money. In MMORPG there's currency with which the characters can trade for items with other players or with in-game vendors. Auctions are put in the game's market where people try to compete with each other over the prices; making a perfect environment in which someone can learn some basic economy:

I myself am learning a bit about economics by playing a massively multi-player online game. So they can teach a lot of things. (Ratajski, Caroline. Discussion panel, Santa Clara University)

Ratajski continues with another example of how games can be used for teaching people values:

The military has created a game developer, America's Army, which uses games to recruit and train people for our military, and I believe with this power we can get people to think about ethics and to think about philosophy. Games have a huge untapped power and I sincerely hope that we see it used to its full potential.

In may's issue of 2011 the *Therapeutic Innovations in Light of Technology* magazine published an article, *Saving the game: The Use of Gaming within Psychotherapy*, written by psychiatrist Mike Langlois. In the article he wanted to express the fact that gamers aren't necessarily living in a false world. He finds it disturbing that even cognitive therapists themselves make the mistake in believing gamer's online experiences aren't happening in "real life". What he means is that many live under the false impression that just because gamers experience things in a virtual world it means no bearing to them outside the game.

Gamers deploy real skills to solve real problems and their neurological responses to an “EpicWin” or “Fail” are real physiological responses. (Langlois, Mike. 2011)

Another figure representing this idea is author and game designer Jane McGonigal. She has come with some hands-on suggestions with which games can in fact improve the real world. Rather than shying away from the problematics of games, she thinks we should use them to their full potential to make the world a better place:

Game designers, virtual world builders, social media developers, and other “funware” creators have the potential to offer essential design strategies and economic theories for otherwise “serious” initiatives.

She hasn't just come up with research results hinting at games having the power to do good – she's even designed games that do just so. In her game *Superbetter* (Superbetter labs, Inc. 2009) developed together with psychologists amongst others players find themselves doing quests that boost real life mental resilience, spirit and strength. The game is designed to help people with health or habit issues. This can definitely be seen as ethical game development.

### **3.7 Future opportunities**

The free to play model seems to be the way into the future trying to make an online game successful. Nowadays Lord of the Rings Online is a free to play game with micro-transactions, having been a subscription-based MMORPG since its launch in 2006. Interestingly enough this change made the developers huge profit. Justin Olivetti said in January 6<sup>th</sup> in 2011 in an article relating to this, that Tribune had seen their profits triple since they changed the game model in 2010.

People are more willing to play a game if they feel they can pay for it. Subscription-based games come up to costing more to the players in the long run in subscription fees than the actual game itself cost upon purchase, which makes them less appealing. Also, micro-transactions are just that: minor. Gamers pay for the upgrades, collectibles etc.,

they actually want, rather than getting content every now and then they might not have been really that interested in to begin with.

## 4 CASE STUDIES

John C. Beck and Mitchell Wade humour the thought of mindless games such as *Bejewelled* or *Atomica* to be productive (Beck, John C & Wade, Mitchell. 2006. P. 64). One could see the brain as having two sets of minds – one for minor tasks and another for deeper thoughts. When playing these miniature games the minor task mind would take over, leaving the deeper thought part to recuperate for challenges ahead. An example used was the authors' acquaintance who would de-stress going through several decks of cards playing solitaire when writing a book to hone her *proper* thoughts on the writing. Could it be argued that the Digital Natives need this element, these "mindless task games" within their games to keep them keen in the actual game content?

The following case studies will argue pros and cons of two massively multiplayer online roleplaying-games' models. Chosen to present the *dominant model* (see is section 3.3) is Blizzard Activision's *World of Warcraft or WoW*. This game in question is a perfect game to explore further in what can be seen as unethical in game development within the scope of this thesis.

To date it's the only MMORPG which has all game models, explained in the third chapter of this thesis, implemented and thriving. This case study will provoke the intelligence of the gamers giving into mechanical habits found in WoW.

The case study will explain:

- The success behind WoW
- On the ethics of the WoW gaming model
  - Presenting the time sinks
  - Questioning the ethics



- The future of WoW  
Is it thriving?

To discuss the other end of the perspective, ArenaNet's *Guild Wars 2* or *GW2* will be analysed. Still being an MMORPG, this game does not come with the same dominant model explained in the aforementioned case study. To argue what Beck and Wade presented, this game does not come with the same unethical traits found in many MMORPGs. This analysis will shed light on:

- What will make GW2 survive the industry
- What can be learnt from the GW2 model

#### **4.1 Dominant model: World of Warcraft**

World of Warcraft is a massively multiplayer online roleplaying-game set in the fantasy world of Azeroth. It was released in 2004 by Blizzard Entertainment, a company that later merged with Activision to form Activision Blizzard. To better understand how the game model works, one must know what the gameplay is like.

##### **Making one's character**

To begin with, the player gets to make his or her character (see image 9). It can either be part of the Alliance- or Horde *faction*. These factions represents teams, that cannot interact with one another other than in Player versus Player situations. Each faction has cities only representatives of that faction can enter without risking being killed by the other faction's players or town guards.

Once the player has chosen his or her faction they can choose one out of six *races* to be. The Alliance consists of humans, dwarves, night elves, gnomes, dranei and worgen. Horde consists of orcs, undeads, taurens, trolls, blood elves and goblins. Each race comes with race specific abilities – such as being able to regenerate health quicker (Trolls) or render itself invisible to other players (Night Elves).



Image 9. The World of Warcraft character creation screen. Here: a human female warrior chosen.

Each race can then further choose from a menu of 10 different *classes*. These include: Warriors, Paladins, Hunters, Rogues, Priests, Death Knights, Shamans, Mages, Warlocks and Druids. All races cannot be every class. Classes come with skills and talents only available to them, and each class is divided into three sub-groups, making WoW a very versatile game with something most gamers would find appealing to play.

Once the character can be further customized with skin tone, faces, hair styles and colour, plus other features such as piercings for humans or tusks for trolls.

## Of the gear

At the beginning of the game the player gets a starting-kit with whatever gear his or her character can use. Gear is class-specific to the extent that, caster type of classes (priests, mages and warlocks) can only use items made out of cloth. Lightweight melee classes (rogues and druids) can use leather items. Heavy ranged classes (hunters and shamans) can use mail items. The heavy-duty classes like the warrior, paladin and death knight can use plate items.

At the start of the game the items don't add anything special to the character, other than protection and a minor boost in damage. Towards the end of the game the character gets to pick up items that add significant boosts to its attributes (see image 11-12). The better attributes, the easier to kill things.



Image 10. Screenshot from WoW where the same character's attributes are shown when wearing no apparel (to the left) and when fully clothed (to the right). The attributes are significantly better with clothes on.

## The levelling system

At the start the game consists of a lot of levelling. Characters get *experience points* whenever they slay monsters, complete quests or kill players of the opposing faction.

The experience points work towards filling the *experience bar* (see image 11). Once its filled the character gains a new level. The maximum level obtainable in the third and latest expansion *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* is 85. The first version of WoW had a level-cap of 60.



Image 11. Screenshot from WoW where the character gains 50 experience points or XP for slaying a wolf. The purple bar below indicates how much progress has been made into the next level.

Experience points needed to reach the next level is logarithmic. At the start of the game one level can easily be achieved within a matter of a minute or two – whereas the last levels can take a good 15 hours achieve if playing non-stop.

Most MMOs have a levelling-system. Levelling is fun by many players. Humans like bettering themselves in general. The levelling-system gives a sense of achievement throughout the game. You start playing the game and before you know it, you're telling yourself: “just one more level before bed time...”. The first time maximizing a character to level 85 can be seen an “epic” achievement. On a test character reaching level 85 took 12 days of time played. Add the fact the player had to eat, sleep, go to work etc. in between playing the game it actually took closer to two months just getting to the maximum level.

Once a character has reached a certain level he or she can gain access to new skills specific to the played class. Starting out with just a few skills the character grows more powerful, having as many as 30 by the end of the game.

Also, areas have monsters of certain levels. Generally a monster of level 30 is only killable by characters around that level or higher. As such there's a lock of sorts preventing too low levels venturing into a higher level area.

## **Dungeons and raids**

Dungeons are areas sealed off by every other player on the server except for those in it. Dungeons come with some sort of story and contain monsters and bosses, the latter being a unique monster harder to defeat than the others.

The story can consist of a computer controlled character that needs rescuing from the end boss in a dungeon or similar. In WoW dungeons require 5 players to complete and are available from the level 10 upwards. Monsters in dungeons hit considerably harder than same levelled monsters outside of it but also give better, dungeon-specific, rewards.

In order to safely complete a dungeon in WoW the party has to have a *tank*, a *healer* and *3DPS* (=damage per second). This is referred to as the *holy trinity*. Specialized warriors, paladins, death knights and druids can fulfill the role of a tank. They make sure the monsters attack them rather than the rest of the party. Specialized druids, priests, paladins and shamans can be the healer. Their main priority is to heal the tank and also make sure no one else dies due to low health. Every class can fulfill the role of damage, providing they're the right subdivision of their class for it. A dungeon typically takes anything between 10 to 60 minutes to complete, depending on how skilled the characters are. It takes a whole day before the monsters in a certain dungeon comes back to life after being killed. This means that if the item you wanted did not drop of that certain boss, you're going to have to wait for a whole day before giving it another shot.

Raids are either 10-man or 25-man. Depending on what raid the group of people will consist of x, y and z amount of tanks, healers and DPS. Raids are considered dungeons on steroids: they come with epic battles and proper storylines. Each raid has several bosses, and each boss requires an intricate strategy in order to kill. Raids at end game level takes hours to complete if not days of hourly sessions. Raids are reset on a weekly basis, so if a certain item didn't drop this time you're going to have to wait for a whole week before giving it another shot.

## **PvP**

There are 8 different *battlegrounds* in WoW and 2 general battle areas. Battlegrounds are big arenas where many players try to defeat characters from the opposing faction, while trying to achieve a battleground specific goal. This mode of game is called Player versus Player, or PvP. Each battleground is located in servers of their own to which the character gets teleported to when joining one.

For each kill the character does he is awarded with experience, honour and conquest points. For each finished battleground the character receives extra points – the winning team members being rewarded more graciously than their looser counterpart. Conquest points are only awarded to those on the winning team.

With the honour points players can buy *PvP gear* for their characters from special vendors. The PvP gear is crucial to those who want to do well in battle grounds, as it makes them more resilient to character-dealt damage. The more pieces of PvP gear one is wearing; the tougher he gets to kill by opponents. The best pieces can only be obtained by trading in conquest points.

There are also smaller arenas in which a player can compete. Depending how well the player does in the arena he gets ranked by the game. Some pieces of PvP gear is only purchasable by those of very high rank.

## **Crafting professions**

In WoW players can create items too. There are different professions at which the character can specialize. Just like your character levels, so does your proficiency at the job you selected. For someone who picked up blacksmithing he or she gets levels in it by creating items. At the beginning you'd create something simple, and as you train you get to create more complex items. To be able to create the very best items of your profession you have to be at max level of it. You are only allowed two professions per character. Professions take a lot of materials to level to max level, and take a very long time to become an artisan of.

## **Guilds**

Guilds are semi-permanent groups to which a character can belong. Guilds consist of however many characters and a character can only belong to one guild at a time.

Because the game in essence is built around the social aspect, the guilds are a crucial part of the game. It becomes your in-game family of which you can ask for help when facing quests you cannot complete on your own, or when you need a certain item crafted.

Guilds usually serve a purpose. There are Raiding guilds, that raid on a weekly basis. People who join these are obliged to the rules of the raiding guild; usually it entails having to log on every week for specific times during which the guild tries to defeat bosses in raids. PvP guilds welcome those that want to do battlegrounds together on a regular basis. Then there are guilds for those who just want to have a broader social network in the game, consisting mainly of friends and the like.

#### **4.1.1 The success behind WoW**

MMOs gave the world the first type of game where the players could truly interact with each other in much larger scale than before. Humans being social by nature, the MMO gaming industry was heading for a bright future. One of the co-founder of ArenaNet Jeff Strain says that in the end of summer of 2000, there were roughly over 80 MMOs being developed at the same time. Blizzard's World of Warcraft taking approximately five years to develop, it was one of those eighty games being made at that time when it came out in 2004.

Important to know is that MMOs take a lot of time to play. If a traditional FPS offers content to up to 50 hours to the player, an MMO contains hundreds if not thousands of hours. Especially in terms of subscription-based MMOs this has to happen. A person would not be willing to pay a fee each month if the gameplay only lasted for so many days or weeks, regardless of how fun the game might have been.

At WoW's release the world had not seen anything quite like it before. Far outclassing the subscription-based MMORPG of the time EverQuest in terms of graphics and game content, WoW fast became the new thing to play. So what made Blizzard succeed where others had failed?

A lot of money went into game design and development – but most importantly of all: into marketing. It is essential to spread the word about your product, especially when it's different from what's been around before. Blizzard beta-tested their product for 7 months in march 2004 (Wowpedia.org) before releasing it. Typically a game goes through beta-testing for 1-2 months before launch (Chandler, Heather p.207). The long beta-testing period resulted in a highly polished game. This contributed to WoW becoming so popular in a relatively short amount of time.

Arguably, WoW would not have made the same success had it been released today. Even now there has been drops in subscriptions over the past two years with 10 million compared to 12 million. In an article online, novelist Mortimer Jackson suggested the recent worldly economical recession can be a reason why the figures have gone down.



More importantly, there has been new games such as Star Wars: The Old Republic coming out that fight over the same customers, which will make it harder for WoW to stay the strongest on the market. On the subject, senior producer at Blizzard, John Lagrave said in an interview by John Bedford made for the Eurogamer site:

"Of course people are trying Star Wars - our development team are trying Star Wars! I'm one of the few people who's still playing it actually, but yeah we've seen a dip in subs."

Expansions are a good way to bring back old customers, as well as welcome new ones. In BlizzCon 2011 Activision Blizzard announced its current development of WoW's fourth expansion, *Mists of Pandaria*. Accordingly to site übergizmo's George Wong, this is a vital move of the company to battle rivalling upcoming games.

#### **4.1.2 Of time sinks**

Time sinks are what gamers call non-essential actions or grinding within games which require a lot of your time and patience yet are still necessary in order to enjoy other aspects of the game. They can be seen as chores: doing the laundry isn't generally something people find fun to do. But most people like having clean clothes. Having clean clothes is nice. Spring cleaning isn't seen as nice either, but people tend to do it not to be overrun by the dust mites in the house. Having a clean house is seen as nice too. So what chores or time sinks were found in WoW after some extensive research? This section will be dedicated to shed light on the ones that universally can be seen as time sinks.

Before looking at what was generally considered a time sink we'll define what was not a time sink; what was the actual content of the game if you may.

- In WoW the main objective for most people is to reach maximum level, play PvP modes or do raids.

- Humans are collectors by nature and many do find it enjoyable to collect items such as vanity pets or mounts. Though even collecting these items can be seen as a grind to some. When it comes to this aspect of the game it really turns into a question of individual appeal.
- Sense of exploration is crucial in online worlds. The player wants to feel he or she is not at home but rather out there somewhere, on a great adventure. WoW offers epic scenery and delicately designed areas that achieve just that. Many find travelling places gives a sense of being somewhere other than at home. You can start familiarising yourself with your character, feeling you are indeed a “super hero” with unique skills.

Raids are generally hard. Overcoming challenges is what makes people raid. It gives the gamers a sense of accomplishment; it's fun for those not minding spending a few hours a week dedicated to the cause. It takes a long time to perfect a strategy with which the raid group can defeat a certain boss, and when they do defeat a boss, they get a sense of EpicWin (McGonigal, Jane. 2009).

To combat against other players to see how well you fare in Player versus Player modes is great fun for those into that. Most humans like to compete, it's in our DNA. We want to see just how much better we are than someone else, and if worse, we want to improve in order to reach that “EpicWin” sensation. The problem with WoW's PvP system is that it is not very balanced. Depending on good the character's gear is it gets considerably easier staying alive in the battlegrounds.

We all want to become better. Levelling gives us a sense of progress: we see our in game character grow stronger for each level, and we can't wait till we reach the next one in order to get even better. Once we've reached maximum level in WoW, we want to improve even further by getting gear that makes our characters even stronger than before.

In WoW most things come after a cycle of time-sinks. Before you can raid, you have to have good gear. A max level character spends a lot of time doing easier dungeons be-

fore even being considered geared enough to raid. Before you can PvP competitively you have to get PvP gear piece by piece, and that takes a long time to achieve.

This ordeal is called the *gear treadmill* and it's designed to make you stay in the game for months. To remain good in either raiding or PvP you have to dedicate a lot of your time to the game.

### **The players contribute to the compulsion**

The player base itself can become compelling. Many argue the social aspect to be the most compelling in the game. You log on to chat with your friends in the guild and to do things together with people. It doesn't matter so much that you do similar things every day because even the most tedious of actions can become tolerable with a friend doing it with you.

Because raid content is only accessible once a week, it is crucial for a member of a raiding guild to log on every week. If he or she can't make it to a raid that week there can be consequences.

To be fair, this is actually the norm: raiding guilds use the carrot and stick model to make sure guild members behave in a manner that's in the best interest of the guild as a whole. Guild members look down upon people who don't show up to raids because it might lead to the rest of them not being able to kill a boss successfully without him or her. If a guild member doesn't join a raid for the time that was scheduled for it, he usually gets punished by not being allowed any items from the next raid. If a member zealously shows up for each raid every week, he is usually rewarded by being first in line to get the item he needs if it drops.

This isn't as much a deliberate compulsion implemented by the game developers on purpose as much as it's a result of the game design.

In order to stand a chance to receive the best gear for your character you have to log on for when the raid takes place. A boss typically has about 15 or so items that it can drop upon death. When it dies it only drops about three of these items so it's not very likely that you will get that reward out of all the other people that also want that specific item when it does drop. This will ensure your continuous revisit to the raid each week, which is a great way to ensure money for the company. The raid resetting on a weekly basis, and only having a few possible item drop each raid, is very much a deliberate game mechanic implemented to keep players from unsubscribing.

## **Questing**

When playing World of Warcraft the most blatantly obvious time sink is the questing system. Quests are given by non-playable computer generated quest givers. In wow there are hundreds of quests to complete before reaching level 85. Understandably the game developers couldn't make hundreds of unique systems for all the quests. But all too many quests are built on the same system of the *kill-and-return*.

The character is told to kill monsters of a certain type to collect a certain object from them. But not all monsters of this type carry these items, and it's impossible for the player to recognise which one has it. The only way to find out is to slay as many of the monsters as possible, and hope to collect the right amount of eyes, legs or whatever it was they needed for the quest. This is a classical virtual Skinner box.

Considering questing is the most efficient way of levelling, and a large portion of the quests being this type, this makes for a lot of dead game time where the player was just mindlessly slaying monsters rather than enjoying himself.

## **Professions**

There are two different kinds of professions in WoW: gathering, and crafting. The gathering professions allow the players to gather materials needed in crafting professions.

For example: a leatherworker will need leather in order to make his objects and leather is obtainable only to those with skinning as a profession. To level skinning the player has to skin low-level animals, progressing up to higher-level animals as the lower level ones no longer award experience points.

This can be highly frustrating and inconvenient for players that are in one area with monsters that suits their character's level, but doesn't suit its gathering profession level.

If the leatherworker doesn't have skinning as his second profession he can always buy pelts from another player who does. However; this is very expensive. Skinners not only have to hunt down the right kind of animals and kill them before they can skin them, but the actual act of skinning takes time too. As such skinners or any other gatherer tend to sell their items for high prices, making sure they get paid for the time they spent collecting them. The higher end recipes require more complicated combinations of leathers and are therefore very expensive indeed to fund if you're not willing to do skinning yourself. Getting gold also takes time in the game, so ultimately you pay with time regardless of how you go on about it.

Now, each profession comes with items that are very useful in either PvP environments or in raids when fully levelled, so most people agree on that having two professions or at least one is a good idea. Some of these sought-after items are only available to those who craft them so if you want them kinds you really *have to* level up a certain profession. No one who takes raiding seriously or PvP:ing doesn't level one. This is another great way of making sure players stay in the game for longer and is ultimately just another time sink.

Pseudonym Cerúlean voices a lot of people's opinions on the matter on the official WoW forums:

In TBC professions were grindy as hell but you did them because if you weren't in a good raid guild (many players were not) it was some of the best gear you could get. The sense of reward wasn't really a sense of reward as much as a sense of relief that you had the grind over with.

TBC is acronym for The Burning Crusade, and was the second World of Warcraft expansion released in 2006. Cerúlean mentions TBC because the professions used to be even more time-consuming then compared to Cataclysm's standards.

## **Reputation**

There are groups of non-playable computer generated characters to which gamers can gain reputation. Reputation with a certain group is awarded when a character completes quests for it. Usually these quests are repeatable on a daily basis and you can only do so many of them a day.

Reputation points are needed in order to buy certain items from the vendors of these groups. If the character hasn't done the group enough favours they deem them not worthy enough to buy certain things or even access certain areas such as raids. As such tremendous amounts of time can go into doing the same set of quest every day.

The general consensus of the forums seem to be that even if it's a grind and it's boring doing the same thing over and over again – it's still worth it. Pseudonym Milhouse replied to Gnarlie when he had been wondering why he had to spend so much time just to get access to a certain vendor in the game:

It's actually "only" one month to get everything unlocked, so like +-20 days to get your desired vendor. You just have to endure it ;).

In reality this is an understatement. The aforementioned vendor is indeed unlockable in 20 days time if you do all the related quests available every day. To those who don't have the opportunity or time to do so, it's going to take even longer to unlock the vendor.

This proves to say that the general WoW population has been conditioned into thinking this is what the game should be like. The gamer base on the forums generally give the "no pain no gain"- impression. You have to endure some suffering before you can get

your reward, rather than just having fun in the game. Some will go to the extent of saying they even enjoy the reward much more if it took a long time achieving it. Of course; humans like feeling like they've earned what they have. But that shouldn't mean that every single thing you own you had to work extremely hard for, not in context of entertainment anyway.

## Achievements

A player can get achievements by doing certain things in the game. Achievements are entirely optional and give the character no boost in attributes whatsoever. They are implemented solely for the collective value and aren't needed for anything. As such they cannot be classified as time sinks because of this.

However, there are some achievements only doable during a certain season during the year. For a devout collector having to wait till next if missed one is the only option. These sorts of achievements can be seen as compelling game design.



Image 12. The achievements can be wacky in World of Warcraft. Getting them doesn't alter the character in any way; they're implemented solely for the collection value.

## **Travel time**

As shown in images used earlier in image 8-9 there is some discontent with the travel system in World of Warcraft. The fact of the matter is, when playing WoW you have to be prepared to travel a lot. Quest givers usually send you on errands long distances away from where they are – and then to receive the rewards you have to get back to them again. For instance: There is quests, which require characters to move from one of the two continents to the other, then back again. This whole ordeal can take up to a staggering 15-20 minutes just in travel time.

### **4.1.3 On the ethics of WoW**

It was essential for Blizzard to make sure players stayed in their game for thousands of hours and beyond. It's needed to secure subscriptions. Making money isn't a shame, all companies strive to do just so. It's the way they went on about making sure people stay in the game for months on end that can be seen as unethical within the scope of this thesis.

Moreover; publisher ActiVision Blizzard state in their code of conduct that their company's business activities has to follow all applicable laws. This statement is open to very loose interpretations.

### **Server migration costs**

It's not just the subscriptions the customers pay for; it's also for the game's micro-transactions. People who want to change their horde character into an alliance character have to pay a sum of money in order to get it done. Also, the same applies when someone wants to change from one server to another. The latter being an important option when and if someone wants to a) move to a server where his friends are playing or b) when he feels harassed by select people on a certain server. Especially in the latter situation it would be only right if the company offered free migration to another server.



Checking whether or not someone has received threatening in game messages shouldn't be a problem since Blizzard stores chat sessions on their servers. They even said this in their end users license agreements.

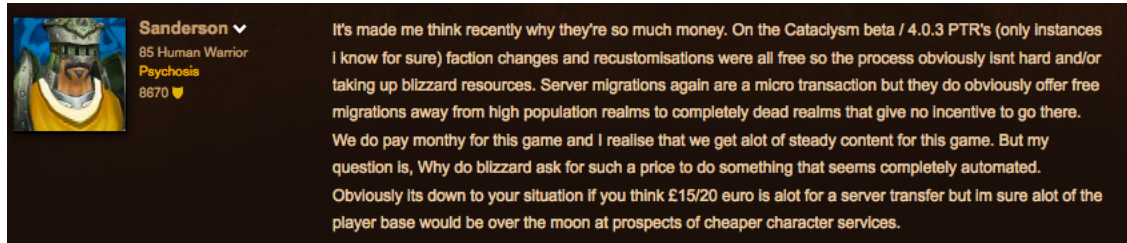


Image 13. Pseudonym Sanderson wonders why the transactions cost so much in the real game when the test servers offer them for no cost at all.

People have been wondering the same thing on the official forums. On January 1<sup>st</sup> in 2011 pseudonym Sanderson asked the developers whether it is reasonable to have such expensive migrating costs (see image 15). The Public Test Realms used to beta test new patches offers free migration from any odd server to another, without hassle. The ordeal seems automated and instant, which wouldn't explain why a hefty cost has to be paid for the same service on a normal server transfer.

To this he received a reply from official blizzard assistant Nephadne stating that although the service is indeed automated it needs to cost something for the time Blizzard employees have to intervene:

Keeping the services available also requires the a network of support in place to maintain them, handle queries and correct erroneous requests, so although I can appreciate your argument that it's an automated service so it can run itself I'm afraid that things will seldom work out that way. Therefore, with such changes to a character being made by players mainly for cosmetic or preference reasons, this hopefully provides some level of explanation as to why any cost at all is associated with the services.

If the problem with letting characters migrate freely were that servers might become over populated, or people would misuse it by doing it too frequently – surely an automatic lock can be implemented in the string of code that allows for the migration to happen in the first time? The people who are monitoring services in the first place are paid on a monthly basis. In what other industry do people generally get paid monthly as

well as for jobs done? To say the least the reply of Nephadne didn't go well with some people on the forums.

#### **4.1.4 Product of its time**

WoW is a product of its time and is now almost ten years old. A lot of things have changed over the ten past years – for one, as mentioned earlier, servers really don't cost that much to upkeep any more.

A game is supposed to be something for leisure, for spare time relaxation. Now the millions of players who play it, undoubtedly, see WoW as fun. The real question is whether or not they would find it that fun anymore if they'd realise just how much unnecessary time they spend in the game, doing inane actions that could've been used on something that actually was generally seen as fun. If they'd realise how many hours extra they spend on tasks that don't serve any other purpose other than to keep them in the game for as long as possible, surely people wouldn't spend hundreds of euros in subscription fees.

Interestingly enough – having a look at World of Warcraft's official forums, many do seem to think the game isn't as fun nowadays as it was before. This can have something to do with how people perceive most things: “it was better back in my days...” Even Plato said youngsters when he was young treated elders better than they did when he was old himself. It's in human nature to look at things of the past with rose-tinted glasses.

Generally people new to the game think it's nicer than people who have been playing it for years. But what makes people play the game for years, if it isn't that fun any more?

As mentioned earlier, it's the way people have gotten used to the virtual Skinner boxes that they come to accept them so well, and even become compelled by them enough to protect their existence. People don't mind having to kill the same type of monster over and over again on the off chance of a rare drop from one of them.

When WoW first came out there hadn't been anything like it before. Not to the same extent. This gave the game developers more leeway when injecting time sinks into the game. Since it was the first major success of its kind it could basically get away with compelling almost addicting content. And because the term *pathological gaming* doesn't exist yet as an accepted psychiatric term, there isn't a body of legislation checking games for overly absorbing content either.

To this date there are a total of 30 348 topics on WoW's official European forums relating to the matter of farming and grinding (data retrieved 14.4.2012). Although this is a drop in the ocean amongst the 1,7 million or so threads on the forums, the voices of these gamers cannot be ignored. The dominant game model as described within the subject of this thesis is without a doubt questioned on a moral basis.

## **4.2 Revolutionising game models: Guild wars 2**

There are ways of going about creating new and innovative massive multiplayer online games without having to rely on unethical virtual Skinner boxes to make the games last longer. For this thesis ArenaNet's upcoming title *Guild Wars 2* will be used to describe just how, comparing it to World of Warcraft.

### **4.2.1 Presenting an ethical option**

ArenaNet's new massively multiplayer online role-playing game *Guild Wars 2* or GW2 was first announced in march 2007 and has since then been in rapid production. The developers have tested the game in rough alpha stages for months prior to giving the press access to beta testing on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February 2012. Tons of information and screenshots have been made public over the course of time the game's been developed. There are numerous videos with official panels from gaming conventions where the developers have told the gaming community about it. They themselves are convinced their title is

going to be all about enjoyment, rather than about grinding. Mike O'Brien stated in the ArenaNet's official manifesto for the game in 2010:

If you love MMORPGs, you should check out *Guild Wars 2*. But if you hate traditional MMORPGs, then you should *really* check out *Guild Wars 2*. Because, like *Guild Wars* before it, *GW2* doesn't fall into the traps of traditional MMORPGs. It doesn't suck your life away and force you onto a grinding treadmill; it doesn't make you spend hours preparing to have fun rather than just having fun; and of course, it doesn't have a monthly fee.

A general concern that's been clamoured on different forums around the Internet is just how is the *GW2* team going to generate enough money to keep updating the game once released if there is no subscription fee? This is essential for this thesis topic: games don't need subscriptions to create revenue for months at end. Give a gamer a good game and he will buy it. Give him a game that won't cost him it's own price several times over in upkeep costs and he'll be even happier buying it.

#### **4.2.2 What will make Guild Wars 2 different?**

*Guild Wars 2* is going to be a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Players control customizable characters to explore their online world of Tyria.

What will make *GW2* different to most MMORPGs is that even though it has all the same elements in it, the way of going on about them is entirely new. There is no waiting before the real action happens. You won't start the game having to kill weak and simple monsters like rats or pigs like in *WoW*, but rather you get thrown into a fascinating story where you have to fight off monsters of grander scale.

The first thing that will strike the player is the graphics of the game. It is highly rich in texture and colour, offering better graphics than any other game of the genre so far. Art director Daniel Dociu said they wanted to make all areas in the game feel alive and living, much like a painting.

Ree Soesbee, game designer for ArenaNet said that the player should feel like they make an impact on the game. In *GW2* the areas change depending on what's been going

on in them. There might have been monsters attacking a village with a certain vendor in it and if no one stops the monsters that vendor is not going to be accessible any longer. This will make the game feel a lot more alive; like your character means something to the in-game world.

This isn't true for WoW. Every day each place looks the same, and all vendors are there regardless if someone killed them last night or not. This leads to everything feeling like the same thing's being recycled over and over again.



*Image 14. Here a screenshot from Guild Wars 2. A Female human elementalist fighting against a monster.*

### **Of the character**

Also, like in WoW the characters can be further specialized by choosing different classes, or professions as they're called in GW2: Mesmer, engineer, thief, guardian, necromancer, ranger, warrior and elementalist.

There are five different races the player can choose from: charr, human, norn, sylvari and azura. Other than looking different and starting at different areas in the world, the

racers have unique elite skills, which can be helpful in different ways in combat. Each profession can further specialize just like in wow.

Each character is unique in that the customizing options feature-wise are a lot more dynamic than in WoW.

In order to make the game feel like it has a story as well each character comes with their own story line. When you begin the game you have a part of your home city, which is only accessible to, and those you invite to visit. In that area, your experience a story original to your character. Each story is affected by the choices you make in game and the areas you visit. Depending on if you decided to help the old farmer fend off the rabid wolves attacking his cows or not, your home area story changes. Perhaps the citizens of the area won't want to talk to you as friendly any more – or someone comes up and congratulates you on not helping the farmer who turns out to be a criminal.

To make the game more interesting its developers decided to add the fact that depending on what sort of weapon you wield, your skills also become different. They didn't think it made sense that you use the same sorts of attacks with for instance an axe as you do with a dagger.

These elements add to a whole new experience previously not available in generic MMORPGs.



*Image 15. Here seen a screenshot from Guild Wars 2. A female human is being selected from the character creation screen.*

## **Levelling**

Like in World of Warcraft there is a levelling system implemented in Guild Wars 2. A character can reach up to level 80 and the levels come at a linear experience cost, rather than an exponential one like in WoW. ArenaNet decided early on that they did not want to make people have to play for longer each time they levelled every time they hit the next level.

## **The gear**

Guild wars 2 does not have a gear treadmill. This means that it will be fairly quick obtaining the best attribute gear. The end game gear is all equal in attributes with minor differences to suit different characters needs. As such the end content gear will be more about aesthetics than trying to compete over who's better geared or not.

## **Dynamic events**

In GW2 raids as such don't exist. Instead there are *dynamic events* that trigger at unknown intervals and places around Tyria. In one of the dynamic events ArenaNet's developers spoke about – a large dragon surfaces from a nearby sea. Depending on how many characters choose to attack the dragon it grows stronger, rather than bosses always being the same difficulty like in WoW. This gives everyone an equal chance of trying the dragon out rather than having to be in a specific raiding guild let alone level to do so. Characters who choose to participate in killing it will all be rewarded with gold, karma and experience depending on how much they contributed to the killing.

This will truly give the players awards equal to how much work they're done, rather than one player being rewarded and the rest go home empty-handed regardless of how much effort they put in. In GW2 players won't have to wait till next week in order to get another chance at rewards, like they do in WoW.

## **Dungeons**

Now while in WoW each class could fulfill only so many roles, in GW2 every profession can fulfill whichever role – or rather the lack of it. In Guild Wars 2 there will be no holy trinity that forces the players to have certain classes present in order to complete a dungeon. If they so wanted players could enter 5 man dungeons with just elementalists present. This is thanks to the fact that the combat system is made a lot more vivid than in WoW, with players having to dodge attacks and think about where they actually stand.

## **The social aspect**

The game's main focus is on the social, without making the social aspects essential in order to progress in areas or levels. In WoW one has to join guilds in order to do end game content such as raids. In Guild Wars 2 one can be part of as many guilds as one



likes. The developers said they don't want anyone to be locked into one guild, as online games should be all about having fun with your friends.

Because the social aspect is going to be such a big thing in Guild Wars 2, there is a possibility of this turning into a compulsion like it has with World of Warcraft. How this actually turns out only time will tell.

## **PvP**

In GW2 there are two types of player versus player combats. Now, in WoW it is impossible for someone who hasn't been playing the game for say 6 months to go back into PvPing with the same ease as when he was playing the game before. He would have to spend days getting gear in order to get strong enough to compete with others equally in the battlegrounds.

In Guild Wars 2 all characters that enter a battleground are scaled up to maximum level. In one type of PvP the character still uses whatever gear he or she has picked up along the way, and in the other everyone uses the same gear. It gives players the option of choice without making them have to spend days getting as strong as everyone else.

## **Travel**

In Guild Wars 2 there will be no travel for 10 minutes before reaching your destination. Instead, each area contains several teleport stones between which one can instantly travel. Like the WoW developers that said they wanted travel to feel like part of the exploration of the game the GW2 developers want the same. However; instead of being forced to ride through areas you've already explored this features enables you to travel places within the matter of seconds rather than minutes. It is a very clever way of dimin-

ishing an unnecessary time sink while still making sure the characters get to explore the areas the first time around in them.

## **Quests**

Unlike WoW in Guild Wars 2 the quests aren't static. The character doesn't go to a quest giver to get tasks, but rather tasks pop up on the window as you pass an area with one in it. If you want to take on the quest you just start doing it rather than having to accept it someone first. This will give characters freedom when playing through the content, never being bound to go backwards and forwards for certain quest givers.

## **Dailies**

Now in WoW one has to complete achievements in order to get certain items. In Guild Wars 2 daily quests don't exist as such, but rather each day a character can get awards for having done simple tasks. The achievements are easy to do and come as you are completing other quests in the game.

### **4.3 The new model**

Although Guild Wars 2 hasn't been released yet it looks promising. Within the scope of this thesis the business model and game design can be seen as ethical. The developers at ArenaNet are promising a game that shies away from grinding which too often infiltrates massively multiplayer online role-playing games. It bodes well for the gaming industry that game developers themselves are actively trying to get away from the time-sinks.

But games don't just have to be fun in order to be ethical – they can be ethical in the sense that they do good. In section 3.6.2 there were examples on just how games can be truly ethical in the word's full meaning.

Game designer Jane McGonigal thinks by playing more video games mankind can actually solve real world problems such as famine and poverty. She explains that we feel more motivated to collaborate and become the “best version of ourselves” when we play online games. *Super-empowered hopeful people*, who are willing to help each other out trying to solve problems together. She believes if we present gamers with problems relating to the real world inside virtual worlds they can come up with good suggestions as to how to solve them.

On TED talks in 2010 McGonigal mentioned three games as an example of how games can change the way people behave in real life. For instance, in the online game World Without Oil which she made in 2007, 1 700 people were given news feeds on how the oil shortage was affecting their neighbourhood. The players were encouraged to post videos, blogs and photos from living their lives as if what was happening in the game was happening to them for real. She said:

Nobody wants to change how they live, just because it's good for the world or because you're supposed to... But if you immerse them in an epic adventure, and tell them: 'We've run out of oil. This an amazing story, an adventure to go on. Challenge yourself to see how you'd survive...!'” Most of our players have kept up their habits since playing this game.

McGonigal thinks that since people were affronted with challenges related to the real world in games they would find these problems easier to deal with in real life too. This is something she thinks we should take advantage of. It's a lot easier to come up with solutions to oil shortage or famine in real life when it's to the result of having fun while playing an online game.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The countless hours gamers put into compelling games such as World of Warcraft can never be returned to the player. One might ask whether or not it's the gamers own fault they waste so much time on tasks they didn't want to do. The harsh reality of the matter is that in the end, it's the gamers own choices that lead them to use this excess time. But the truth of the matter is that we as humans are very receptive to operant conditioning.

So much that even its father B.F. Skinner wondered whether or not we have a free will as such at all – maybe we all behave in a certain way just because we were trained to do it since childhood? When it's come to popular online titles such as WoW the player base has certainly been trained to find it enjoying.

So can the intelligence of the gamer be questioned? Certainly to some degree. Important to remember, though, is that these games have compulsive elements in them found in gambling as well. People can argue that those compelled by gambling are unintelligent: why even start doing something you know can become compelling to the extent that it ruins your economy or social network entirely? Note, that gamblers are warned. Here's a key difference: gamers are not. In fact, most gamers hooked on online games seem to be adamant they're not "addicted", they just "like the game".

*It is much rarer for gamers to think of themselves as addicted, although, looking back, they may feel they spent too much time playing games ... Most gamers are relaxed about the time they spend playing; to be 'addicted' is clearly a badge of honour for some. (Cragg & al. 2010. P. 67)*

Because humans are easily manipulated the game developers have a moral obligation to do what can be seen as ethical to most. Just because they want to do certain things in the game for fun doesn't mean they should have to endure constant manipulation.

### **5.1.1 Subscription fee not the only villain**

The subscription fee is the main cause to unethical game development. The more time someone is willing to put into a game, the more likely they will renew their subscription at the end of the month. However, in free to plays like the applications found on Facebook there are compulsions as well.

It might be a bit drastic to say that gamers fall prey to the compulsion of wanting to collect items too. But people do certainly want to buy the whole set of game updates such as downloadable content found for the ever so popular online first person shooter Call

of Duty. It's highly unlikely that people would be willing to pay for the games with "extra" items in them upon release if it came to the added cost. The newest Call of Duty game would've come out costing over a hundred euros was that the case – who out of the normal population would've paid that much for a game in one go, no matter how fun it were?

The industry of today revolves around playing on human nature and taking advantage of our psychology. Although this seems like a clever business idea, it is by no means an ethical one.

### **5.1.2 The future**

Numbers should never be underestimated. If more people were aware of the on-going problems in the gaming industry some things might change quicker. A few people already realise what's going on and have acted accordingly. The WoW forums did have over 30 000 topics related to grinding or farming, and many of them involved unhappy voices of customers not understanding why they have to suffer certain things in a game "just because" that's the way to go before you can enjoy the other aspects of the game.

Free to play games can prove tremendously successful. In fact – many of them do extremely well. A prime example of this is *Runescape* (Jagex Games Studio, 2001). Runescape is the MMORPG with most users of all time, with over 175 million users registered.

Considering how many people online games reach it's all too important to make sure the content of the games are kept ethical and that the developers act in the best interest of their customers.

While it's easy for games to enlighten and enliven the human experience, they are still a form of media and expression, and thus possessed of the ability to influence those that play them. (Takashi, Dean. 2004).

Jeff Strain, one of ArenaNet's co-founder said in a games convention in 2007 as a message to fellow game developers:

As a general rule, be nice to your players! With each generation of MMOs, players become less tolerant of being forced to spend time resting after battles to restore health, onerous consequences for dying, the length of time required to level up and reach the mid-game, and high failure rates for activities such as crafting. Early MMOs could be "meaner" because there were fewer choices, but today players have options, so be nice to them.

Ethical gaming models can exist without a doubt, and with upcoming games like Guild Wars 2 and others they already do. Games can be fun and generate a lot of profit for the developers too.

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