

Doctorow, Cory

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#4

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#4

1 Gold. It's all about gold.

But not regular gold, the sort of thing you dig out of the ground.

That stuff was for the last century. There's not enough of it,

for one thing: all the gold ever dug out of the ground in the history

5 of the world would only amount to a cube whose sides were the length

of a tennis court. And curiously, there's also too much of it: all

the certificates of gold ownership issued into the world add up

to a cube twice that size. Some of those certificates don't amount

to anything -- and no one knows which ones. No one has independently

10 audited Fort Knox since 1956 FCK. For all we know, it's empty,

the gold smuggled out and sold, put in a vault, sold as certificates,

then stolen again and put into another vault, used as the basis

for more certificates.

Not regular gold.

15 Virtual gold.

Call it what you want: in one game it's called "Credits," in another,

"Volcano Bucks." There are groats, Disney Dollars, cowries, moolah,

and Fool's Gold, and a million other kinds of gold out there. Unlike

real gold, there's no vault of reserves backing the certificates.

20 Unlike money, there's no government involved in their issue.

Virtual gold is issued by companies. Game companies. Game companies who declare, "So many gold pieces can buy this piece of armor," or "So many credits can buy this space ship" or "So much Jools can buy this zeppelin." And because they say it, it is true. Countries and their banks have to mess around with the ugly business of convincing citizens to believe what they say: the government may say, "This social security check will provide for all your needs in a month," but that doesn't mean that the merchants who supply those needs will agree.

30 Companies don't have this problem. When Coca Cola says that 76 goats will buy you one dwarvish axe in Svartalfaheim Warriors, that's it: the price of an axe is 76 goats. Don't like it? Go play somewhere else.

35 Virtual money isn't backed by gold or governments: it's backed by fun. So long as a game is fun, players somewhere will want to buy into it, because as fun as the game is, it's always more fun if you're one of the haves, with all the awesome armor and killer weapons, than if you're some lowly noob have-not with a dagger, fighting your way up to your first sword.

40 But where there's money to be spent, there's money to be made. For some players, the most fun game of all is the game that carves them out a slice of the pie. Not all the action belongs to the giant

companies up on their tall offices and the games they make. Plenty
of us can get in on the action from down below, where the grubby
45 little people are.

Of course, this makes the companies bonkers. They're big daddy,
they know what's best for their worlds. They are in control.
They design the levels and the difficulty to make it all perfectly
balanced. They design the puzzles. They decree that light elves can't
50 talk to dark elves, that players on Russian servers can't hop onto
the Chinese servers, that it would take the average player 32 hours
to attain the Von Clausewitz drive and 48 hours to earn the Order
of the Armored Penguin. If you don't like it, you're supposed
to leave: you're not supposed to just buy your way out of it. Or if
55 you do, you should have the decency to buy it from them.

And here's a little something they won't tell you, these Gods
of the Virtual: they can't control it. Kids, crooks, and weirdos
all over the world have riddled their safe little terrarium worlds
with tunnels leading to the great outdoors. There are multiple,
60 competing interworld exchanges: want to swap out your Zombie Mecha
wealth for a fully loaded spaceship and a crew of jolly space-pirates
to crew it? Ten different gangs want your business -- they'll fix
you right up with someone else's spaceship and take your mecha, arms

and ammo into inventory for the next person who wants to immigrate
65 to Zombie Mecha from some other magical world.

And the Gods are powerless to stop it. For every barrier they put
up, there are hundreds of smart, motivated players of the Big Game
who will knock it down.

You'd think it'd be impossible, wouldn't you? After all, these aren't
70 mere games of cops and robbers, played out in real cities filled
with real people. They don't need an all-points bulletin to find
a fugitive at large: every person in the world is in the database,
and they own the database. They don't need a search warrant to find
the contraband hiding under your floorboards: the floorboards,
75 the contraband, the house and you are all in the database -- and
they own the database.

It should be impossible, but it isn't, and here's why: the biggest
sellers of gold and treasure, levels and experience in the worlds are
the game companies themselves. Oh, they don't call it power-leveling
80 and gold-farming -- they package it with prettier, more palatable
names, like "accelerated progress bonus pack" and "All Together
Now(TM)" and lots of other redonkulous names that don't fool anyone.

But the Gods aren't happy with merely turning a buck on players
who are too lazy to work their way up through the game. They've
85 got a much, much weirder game in play. They sell gold to people

who don't even play the game. That's right: if you're a bigshot finance guy and you're looking for somewhere to stash a million bucks where it will do some good, you can buy a million dollars' worth of virtual gold, hang onto it as the game grows and becomes more and more fun, as the value of the gold rises and rises, and then you can sell it back for real money through the official in-game banks, pocketing a chunky profit for your trouble.

So while you're piloting your mecha, swinging your axe or commanding your space fleet, there's a group of weird old grownups in suits in fancy offices all over the world watching your play eagerly, trying to figure out if the value of in-game gold is going to go up or down. When a game starts to suck, everyone rushes to sell out their holdings, getting rid of the gold as fast as they can before its value is obliterated by bored gamers switching to a competing service. And when the game gets more fun, well, that's an even bigger frenzy, as the bidding wars kick up to high gear, every banker in the world trying to buy the same gold for the same world.

Is it any wonder that eight of the 20 largest economies in the world are in virtual countries? And is it any wonder that playing has become such a serious business?