

ENTERTAINMENT OR EXPLOITATION:
DISCOURSES ON IN-GAME MONETISATION AND GACHA
MECHANICS IN VIDEO GAMES

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Abstract [English]

Internal monetisation of video games has been widely researched in terms of psychology and the similarities to gambling, but very little research has been conducted on the discourses that surround the topic. This thesis utilises qualitative research to map out the nexus of discourses from the viewpoint of the players, developers, and the onlookers such as news outlets that report on the topic in the context of internally monetised games. Mediated discourse analysis and nexus analysis are used as a guide to analyse interviews of players who engage with internally monetised games. Different public materials such as discussion threads and news articles are used as additional material. Additionally, an in-game store is observed and analysed as a practical example how internal monetisation can be done. The analysis indicates that while the public is concerned about the similarities to gambling and children engaging with internal monetisation through video games, adult players see the monetisation as part of the experience in these games. However, some methods raise ethical concern even with players and there is an apparent demand for more transparency with the monetisation methods. Many wish game developers would consider ethical issues of internal monetisation in greater detail.

Abstract [Finnish]

Pelinsisäiset ostot videopeleissä ovat laajalti tutkittu aihe psykologiassa niiden uhkapelimäisten ominaisuuksien vuoksi, mutta aiheeseen liittyviä diskurssia on tutkittu hyvin paljon vähemmän. Tässä tutkielmassa käytetään kvalitatiivista tutkimusotetta, jotta saadaan parempi kuva laajemmasta diskurssien verkostosta pelinsisäisiin ostoihin liittyen. Tutkimuksessa kuullaan pelien pelaajia ja pelinkehittäjiä, sekä uutisartikkelien kautta myös sivullisia, kuten pelaavien lasten vanhempia. Tämän lisäksi tutkimuksessa analysoidaan pelinsisäistä kauppaamismetodia käyttämällä yhtä olemassa olevaa peliä esimerkkinä. Haastatteluiden ja muiden materiaalien analysoinnissa käytetään välitteistä diskurssianalyysiä sekä neksusanalyysiä. Tutkimuksen tulokset näyttävät, että vaikka julkinen huoli uhkapelaamisesta ja lasten vahinko-ostoista on vahvaa, pelaajat itse katsovat pelinsisäisten ostojen olevan osa pelikokemusta monella tapaa. Silti jotkin rahastusmenetelmät huolettavat myös pelaajia eettisyyskysymysten vuoksi. Pelaajat näyttävät toivovan enemmän läpinäkyvyyttä ja eettistä ajattelua pelitehtäjäiltä, kun pelissä on sisäisiä ostoja.

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1. Introduction

Some thirty years ago, video games first moved from arcades to home consoles. People no longer made leisure trips to their local arcade to spend coins on game machines, instead they could pick a game of their choosing from the store shelves and return home to play them on their own consoles. Once paid for, the game was theirs forever with no additional costs, as was as usual for most commodities. However, with the development of the games entertainment industry, so developed the monetisation methods of video games.

Nowadays many who are even vaguely familiar with player culture are also familiar with the methods of monetisation within the newest video games, and these methods are gaining more popularity with the developers year after year. With the popularity of different online games, so has risen in popularity the faster progression methods, options to stand out from the other players, and constant new explorable content. In turn, developers seek to have the online-playing scene of their game stay relevant for the years to come. Hence, the popularity of post-release content in form of internal monetisation has taken rise. Even some of the single-player titles (a game publication) are offering possibilities to internally purchase content to change the scene of their games even without the need to keep an active online community thriving. Especially mobile games have seen lucrative returns in offering internal purchases to speed up in-game processes and generally selling convenience to the avid mobile game players.

In this master's thesis, the purpose is to analyse the changing scene of internal monetisation in games from the point of view of the developers and the players alike. This research comes from the point of view of a player who has been within several gaming communities for well over a decade, and who has seen the rise of internal monetisation methods in real-time. As such, I am able to look at the discourses surrounding the issue with internal monetisation as someone who engages with these methods constantly as a player who feels the need to draw attention to the various benefits and drawbacks of the trends associated with the new internal monetisation methods.

The thesis starts from the outlining of the relevant theories and methods, namely mediated discourse analysis and nexus analysis. Previous research on internal video game monetisation has been gathered to form a basis for the thesis. Materials will be listed and introduced before the analysis, where both materials and previous research are considered. Finally, the findings are summarised in a form of conclusion which details how this thesis contributes to the research of internal game monetisation and what could be researched more in the future.

2. Theoretical framework

This section details theoretical paradigms that will be used in making the framework of analysis for the multifaceted discourse about internally monetised games and the content being monetised.

While looking for an effective theory to analyse the discourses surrounding the rising popularity of internally monetised games, critical discourse analysis had been considered as a suitable approach. However, when the focus is on people and the historical bodies detailing how they engage with an activity they are constantly participating in as a practice, focusing the analysis only on language in use with purpose of addressing problems of social change is somewhat limiting (Scollon, 2001b).

Because of this, mediated discourse analysis has been considered as one of the theories that help the researcher engage with this topic much more in depth. Mediated discourse analysis shares the goals with critical discourse analysis, but instead strategizes to reformulate the object of study from focus on the discourses of social issues to instead focus on the social actions through which social actors produce the histories and habitus of their daily lives (Scollon, 2001b). Therefore, mediated discourse analysis does not focus solely on the discourse and language, but rather on the social action the social actors perform in relation to the phenomenon that is in the centre of the study.

While both critical discourse analysis and mediated discourse analysis have social problems as their central focus, mediated discourse action takes the analysis, interpretation and explanation of social problems as its main activity; mediated discourse analysis sees that power relations in society are not only discursive or just discursive, but that they are instead grounded in practice (Scollon, 2001b).

This is a suitable approach for this topic, because the purpose of the thesis is not only to analyse the language that is used in relation to the social issue of internal monetisation in games, but also the actions and the circumstances of the people who engage with the issues; players, developers, and people who do not directly engage with the issue themselves but by proxy through relatives and friends who do.

Furthermore, the analysis is done by following principles of nexus analysis, which uses a lot of mediated discourse analysis as its basis, but it also offers the researcher a three-phase research plan to follow in practice.

2.1. Central concepts of mediated discourse analysis

When working with mediated discourse analysis, there are six central concepts that are important to understand. The main concept is mediated action, as it is the main unit of analysis in mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001a). It places the focus on social actor as they are acting, and the action itself is grounded in persons and objects involved. All social actions may be read as mediated actions, as it's definitional that "social" means socially mediated (Scollon, 2001b). Mediated action produces social identities and social structures, eventually forming the historical bodies or habitus of the social actors (Scollon, 2001a). This is important for the thesis, because the emphasis will be on social actions and social actors surrounding the internal monetisation of video games.

Mediated actions are always taken through mediational means, or cultural tools (Scollon, 2001a; 2001b). While language and discourse are recognised as mediational means, it also includes all material objects in the world and social actors with their bodies, dresses and movements (Scollon; 2001a; 2001b). The mediated means are in dialectical interaction with the structures of the social actors' historical bodies (Scollon, 2001a). Therefore, mediational means are not only what the people mentioned in this thesis say, it is also the objects they use in real or virtual world in order to perform a mediated action.

Site of engagement is where the mediated actions take place; a moment in real time which opens a window for a mediated action to occur (Scollon, 2001a; 2001b). It is convergence of social practices that make one whole, such as playing a match of battle royale in a voice call with a friend group or a moment of purchase in in-game store in the context of this thesis.

The term practice in the context of mediated discourse analysis is a count noun (practices) which refers to a historical accumulation within the historical body of the social actor of all mediated actions taken over the course of their life and which are therefore recognised by the other social actors as the "same" social action (Scollon, 2001b). Some examples include handing an object to another person and forming a queue. In the context of this thesis, some virtual actions will be considered practices as well depending on whether it can be considered that certain action has appropriate history behind it to be considered a practice.

The term *virtual* is going to be used throughout this thesis as a reference to actions that happen within video games. While it is true that the social actors physical form always exists in the real-world pushing buttons in order to act in the game, the actions manifesting on the screen are going to be

referenced as *virtual actions*. The spaces in the video games, such as the in-game stores is going to be referred to as *virtual spaces*.

Keeping this in mind, nexus of practice is a further term of importance. Practices linked to other practices eventually form a nexus of practice (Scollon, 2001a). Scollon (2001a) uses “early twenty-first century American designer coffee shop” as an example of nexus of practice, where practices such as high pricing, ordering practices and discursive practices. An example of what is meant by discursive practice could be knowing how to answer when the barista asks, “whole or skim?” (Scollon, 2001a).

Community of practice as a term is similar to nexus of practice, and it generally refers to a group of people who regularly interact with each other toward some common purpose or goal and thus become explicitly recognised as a group (Scollon, 2001b). The progress of nexus of practice becoming a community of practice is called technologization of nexus of practice (Scollon, 2001b). Whether *players* as a group or *game developers* as a group can be recognised as a community of practice is subjective. Players are generally brought together by common interest in a game title or a series, but these communities cannot necessarily be seen as working together for common purpose other than with smaller sub-groups, like guilds within massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG). Game developers working on the same game title are a community of practice as they can be recognised as “developers of [the title]”, but game developers as a group of people who specialise in developing video games in general are harder to classify as a community of practice.

2.2. Nexus analysis

Nexus analysis is a tool that can be utilised to unify two different levels of analysis: micro-analysis on unfolding moments of social interaction and much broader socio-political-cultural analysis of the relationships among social groups and power interests in the society (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). It is rooted in the belief that broader social issues are ultimately grounded in the micro-actions of social interaction that forms the nexus through which the largest semiotic cycles of social activity circulate (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This kind of unification between two levels of analysis, limited and broad offers a mapping tool for the analyst to draw conclusions between transitory, small moments of social interactions to eventually form a widescale conclusion of social groups and interests on societal level. The analysis begins from the individual accounts of people who play and are involved with

internally monetised games, and from there the analysis can be broadened to some examples of developers' actions and the wider discourse that is being reported on.

Nexus analysis is often linked with addressing a specific social injustice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), but within the context of this thesis, I will avoid taking a strictly negative perspective on the subject matter. The rising popularity of internally monetised games is not necessarily a social injustice; there are challenges, but the issue itself is presented as neutral matter in the beginning of the analysis. Only when the analysis is being done and conclusions are drawn there will be specific attention on the possible social injustices in the trajectory of the phenomenon, or the lack of thereof.

Nexus analysis is centred around three main tasks for the analyst. The first task is to engage the nexus of practice, where the analyst determines their zone of identification, where the place of the analyst is determined; whether they are themselves part of the nexus of practice that is being researched (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This opening task will be detailed in the section 2.3. The second task is navigating the nexus of practice, where the analyst works their way through the trajectories of participants and situations historically as well as in the present. The primary purpose is to identify the crucial semiotic cycles as well as the discourse cycles (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This task might take varying amount of time depending on the scope of the research, and in the case of this thesis this task lasted four to six months. The final task is to change the nexus of practice. This is somewhat ambiguous task that does not necessarily occur as an independent action in the end of nexus analysis, but instead the act of analysis itself is what changes the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Therefore, it might take place over the course of the other two other tasks.

2.3. Zone of identification

A nexus analysis generally begins with placing the discourse analyst within the *zone of identification*, where it is determined where and when the analyst are themselves part of the nexus of practice under study, and who they are engaging with (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 9). Within this thesis, I as the researcher may be considered a part of the nexus of practice as a player who takes mediated actions within the video gaming communities relating to the internal monetisation of the games and engages with other players with the mediational means available in virtual world.

I have been playing video games from a young age and seen their development over two decades. I first engaged with internally monetised video games as a teenager and continue to do so in adulthood, and the motivation to conduct this research and write this thesis arises from personal experience and

the drive to bring new, detailed information of the subject matter from the perspective of someone who is deeply familiar with it from more nuanced standpoint rather than just as a concerned or curious researcher who stands outside of the relevant communities.

Due to this position, some choices regarding this thesis have been made, for instance the choice to refer to the people who play video games as *players* rather than *gamers* throughout the thesis, due to the latter term becoming associated with people who take their identity very seriously to a somewhat ludicrous degree and therefore is often used in ironic context within the player communities.

In addition, a choice to refer to all participants with the gender-neutral pronoun *they/them* has been made to emphasise gender neutral nature of the research and to protect the participants' anonymity.

Moreover, I am previously familiar with some semiotic cycles frequently used within the video game playing communities of practice, so the usage and understanding of many relevant terms come more naturally to me than it might come for someone who is unfamiliar with the virtual spaces discussed in the thesis. Because of this, I have dedicated a section for the clarification of some of the more important terms (section 5. Terminology).

2.4. Discourse and technology

In their book, Scollon and Scollon (2004) detail their own research on native Alaskan populations, centred around the progress of how usage of new technologies become natural over time. They use this as a case nexus analytic study, which highlights the importance of new technologies in mediated discourse analysis.

Essentially, every instance where language is used to accomplish some action in social world is discourse (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 2) in both virtual and physical instances. Technology may support or enable that discourse to take place, even in its simplest forms, such as a printed text on a paper. However, because this technology is very old at this point, Scollon and Scollon (2004, p. 3) use the term *genesis amnesia* to explain why an individual might have forgotten having learned the practice relating to this technology. This can be compared to the process of learning to read, as many of us have little to no memory of how this learning took place once reading and writing has become natural practice. In words of the researchers, “we have so deeply naturalised the processes of using this technology that it is all but invisible to us” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 3).

Genesis amnesia can therefore be used as a shorthand term to define process by which we have collectively lost memory of when and how new technologies were first invented, implemented, and became embedded in the social matrix of our societies (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). This term becomes relevant when discussing how familiarised we have become with certain technologies and how some other technologies might remain alien, but how that technology, too, is fast moving towards having its introduction and origins forgotten as it becomes something usual and expected, and natural to use. This bridge between discourses and technology is important when the subject matter of this thesis is something so technologically new as internal monetisation of mostly freely playable multiplayer games; something that has gained popularity only within the last decade and shows no signs of becoming irrelevant due to its profitability to developers and the investment of the players.

Another important question to consider is how to classify a practice experiencing *genesis amnesia* in a manner that learning of the skills associated with the practice have been forgotten. Scollon and Scollon (2004) use the internet in their study as an example, but at this point their study is nearly two decades old. For example, can making online purchases be considered a practice where the associated skill is so widely used that people have collectively lost memory of its implementation? This is subjective; while most adult population might be expected to know how to make an online purchase, older generation might still struggle with the same task and are in progress of learning the associated skill rather than having forgotten learning it in the first place. Nuances like this will be considered in the analysis.

3. Previous research on player communities and internal monetisation

Despite the internal monetisation within video games being relatively new topic from the last decade, it has caught many researchers' attention. However, most of the research that has been done is within the field of psychology, as the concerns over the similarities some of the monetisation methods and gambling has been widely debated already. Research focused purely on the discourse aspect without extensive psychological analysis is challenging to find at this point in time.

Some research has been done in relation to user behaviour towards in-game purchases, with findings on how in-game purchase is more dependent on players engagement with the game and thus game developers will always want to facilitate loyalty (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018, p. 7). However, if they facilitate addiction, which is very similar dynamic behaviour to loyalty, it raises ethical questions that should be addressed as a part of corporate social responsibility strategy (Balakrishnan & Griffiths, 2018, p. 7).

This kind of research relates more to the field of business, even though it offers some insight on what might motivate game corporations and subsequently their mediated actions.

Other research delves more into the communities and the discourse within them, but a lot of this research does not go into detail on the discourses surrounding internal monetisation that might take place within the community. However, it can be noted from a study by Britt & Britt (2020) that internal monetisation is being discussed within the communities, sometimes as an integral part of the playing experience and sometimes as a critique towards the game developers behind the game title the community has formed around of.

Some previous interviews concerning internal monetisation of games have been conducted however, and they show significant information on what the players themselves discourse about the internal monetisation within games they play (Alha et al., 2018; Woods, 2022). The research by Alha et al. (2018) shows that the players do not see themselves as victims of manipulation like the media surrounding the topic might allude, but instead they feel like they are engaging with internally monetised games like any hobby and spend accordingly. There are varying reasons for the players to spend, but one notable reason seems to be creating a sense of identity within the virtual nexus of practice through a character the players identity with, or a character they like and want to show devotion towards it by spending money on virtual items for the said character (Woods, 2022).

3.1. Player culture and communities

In research where discourse analysis takes place within a community, it is crucial to identify defining characteristics of the community that is being researched. In practice, the gaming communities may be identified as communities of practice; these groups are explicitly devoted to learning and practice, which also makes them ideal spaces to forge interpersonal connections with other people who share similar goals and identities (Britt & Britt, 2020, p. 2). Understanding *player culture* as a single monolith is misleading and challenging to study as a whole because of the abundance of people who could qualify in belonging to this culture.

Therefore, it is much more realistic to approach player culture through the many smaller communities that make up the landscape of people who engage not only with video games in general, but the social communities formed around certain game titles or series. Hence, a community of practice might be an appropriate way to classify player communities for the broad definition of people who have come together to learn and practice a single game title or a series, given that they also have a strong identity tied to being player of the title or series.

An example of a place where people engaging with certain title or series may come together are Reddit discussion threads dedicated for certain titles where the players can come together to discuss, help each other, and uncover details of the title together.

In a study by Britt & Britt (2020, p. 2) that concerns discourse in a mobile-game based competitive community of practice, it was noted how competitive communities of practice have become common in recent years, particularly with the rise of mobile games that are uniquely conducive of cooperation-competition tension that drive competitive communities of practice. It is noted how games like *Fire Emblem Heroes* and *Tales of Link* reward individuals for forming casual partnerships, typically by providing players with additional in-game items, support during battles, and other benefits (Britt & Britt, 2020, p. 2). Those who play more extensively may be able to better leverage their connections with specific peers while also jockeying for a position relative to the player population (Britt & Britt, 2020, p. 2). Broadly speaking, such mobile games offer noticeable rewards and minimal penalties for co-operating with other players, and some also prioritize large-scale competition in which cooperating with specific peers yields a competitive advantage (Britt & Britt, 2020, p. 2). Britt & Britt (2020) provide a practical example how the communities could be formed around certain type of games, and how the developers may encourage the community forming by rewarding players for engaging with others who play. Of course, it is important to remember that communities form around all sorts of games, not only online games that have cooperative or competitive elements to them; a story-centred

video game with no online aspects might have similarly dedicated community around it, formed by people who like the game and are seeking likeminded people. This is often the beginning of any media-based community. Even board and card games may have communities despite the lack of virtual aspect.

A popular form of the internally monetised content are aesthetical customisation options to the playable character called cosmetics. It has been studied that whenever a game offers these cosmetics to be purchased internally, the players feel that there needs to be other players who they may show these cosmetics to (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8). This stresses the importance of community in relation to much of the internal monetisation methods game developers use.

3.2. In-game purchases in gaming communities

Previous research done on the discourse around in-game spending that takes place within gaming communities seem to be somewhat similar in nature. The research conducted on the competitive mobile-game communities mentions the role of microtransactions gacha mechanics (term discussed further in chapter 5) (Britt & Britt, 2020):

After all, mobile games such as those described above privilege cooperation for the sake of succeeding in larger-scale competitions. They also demand significant time and money, and the more a player spends, the more they grow committed to the game and are prepared to devote even more (p.6).

Attention is drawn to the effect that spending money has on the player; when they spend, they also become more devoted to the game, presumably because of the social weight the usage of money has.

There has been a similar conclusion in Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) where regular players were interviewed about in-game purchases. While there are players who have strong principles against using money in games acquired for free, most of the interviewees saw it as commonplace activity, parallel to using money on any other hobby (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8).

Furthermore, Britt & Britt (2020, p.18) draw attention to how the community discusses implemented gacha mechanics, namely how the community acclimated to the implemented gacha system after initial outrage. After the fact one of the usual discussion topics tended to be reactions to the players individual gacha pulls (the act of exchanging money for a set of randomised in-game items, usually in order to eventually get one specific item) and the regret associated with the habit of insisting on

making continuous pulls that end up costing a lot of money (Britt & Britt, 2020, p. 14). This observation demonstrates two things, first one being how quickly a community can acclimate to an implemented mechanic that might not have been present earlier in the game, tying back to the term *genesis amnesia* introduced in the section 2. 2. The second is demonstrative of the way discussion around gacha is realised once it becomes a staple mechanic. Failing to properly regulate in-game spending can be a notable talking point in community spaces, where people find others who might have similar problems regulating their in-game spending.

In interviews by Alha et al. (2018, p. 18), some players did confess being spontaneous with their purchases on occasion, but more often reported considering the worth of the purchase beforehand. Nevertheless, it was also recognised that the purchasing process has become easier than before, which has led to in-app purchases becoming more spontaneous and that after the very first purchase the subsequent purchases will be much easier (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8). However, general opinion between the interviewees was that each player is always responsible for their own purchases, given that the player is properly informed about the in-app purchases, viral marketing, real costs of any items and possibility to play without paying (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8).

However, this does not mean that implementations of gacha mechanics and other similar monetisation methods are always ultimately inconsequential in terms of community backlash for the developers who implement them. A previous study reports on controversy over loot boxes that has surrounded a major publisher Electronic Arts (EA), noting that EA is one of the companies that has relied heavily on microtransaction models and has thus received a monumental backlash on various social media sites from the player community (McCaffrey, 2019, p. 484). An example is made of November 2017 beta test of the game title *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, which allegedly placed major emphasis on loot boxes. Despite the system being scrapped before the final release, a major controversy followed among gamers and policymakers (McCaffrey, 2019, p. 484). EA issued a public response to the fan complaints on the discussion site Reddit, where the company defends its use of microtransactions. This response has since earned the distinction of being the most downvoted comment in the website's history, and EA reportedly lost 3.1 billion dollars in stock value following the consumer protests (McCaffrey, 2019, p. 484). Considering this, the collective opinions of the community do have an impact on the games the communities form around of, given that the monetisation methods of the *Star Wars: Battlefront II* beta were scrapped before the final release for the exhibit reason of how negatively it was received by fans. It can be assumed that many communities are aware of the weight of their collective feedback and giving constructive criticism and forming suggestions to the developers is one of the staple activities of a player community.

Alha et al. (2018, p. 1) stresses the importance of community feedback as well. Competition between the companies who produce free-to-play games (term discussed further in chapter 5) is fierce, and therefore there is constant need to create better games that use the model. The online environment makes monitoring, tracking, and recording possible, and the data generated from this is often used to further develop the game further after initial launch (Alha et al., 2018, p. 1). This is important, because while free-to-play games have smaller threshold to get players to try them than single purchase games, they also have higher probability in losing players very quickly in the beginning (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8). This can be seen from the case study of *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, where the game was deemed to be in danger prior to the full launch because of the community backlash on the internal monetisation methods. Therefore, it can be concluded that the community discourse is important for the developers of the games as well.

3.3. Positive discourses on in-game monetisation

Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) study notes the important distinction between a player who is experienced in free-to-play model game and a non-playing audience that has preconceptions about it. The preconceptions most often come from media, often in the form of articles on children using their parents' money and the publishers targeting the high-spending players for maximum profit (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8). Because of these preconceptions, it is often assumed that games with internal purchases are generally perceived negatively. However, Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) shows that players tend to see the spending opportunities in generally positive light, even going as far as saying the addicting qualities of the game are exciting to them.

While much research is being done on addictive qualities of video game monetisation, it has not been studied much why players might be drawn to purchase internally monetised content when the game can also be played for no cost. Often the games that offer internally monetised cosmetics are online and place importance on the socialisation aspect, which was also mentioned to be important in the Alha et al. (2018) research. Another study by Woods (2020) suggests that the importance of self-realisation within virtual space of the online video game is one of the reason cosmetics are lucrative monetisation method in online F2P games.

A study by Woods (2020) on young Singaporean people who play a popular Japanese free-to-play game *Genshin impact* has revealed a possibility that motivation to spend on internal microtransaction within a game might not be purely based on addiction. Woods (2020) established that the compulsion to gamble is rooted in the potential of recouping and maximizing initial monetary investment, and digital media has caused gambling to become a more expansive construct that remains rooted in its traditional forms but is now being engaged with through new channels of delivery (Woods, 2022, p. 4).

Because of this, the distinction between high involvement and problematic use becomes blurred (Woods, 2022, p. 4). When gambling mechanics are brought into the widely accessible world of video games, it becomes harder to define when a hobby becomes a problem. As Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) studied, many people who play games and spend within them treat it as any other hobby one would spend on. Thus, it can be concluded that the definition of gambling within a video game might not be as easily defined as previously when gambling was happening in age-restricted casinos.

Hence, addiction is loosely defined in the context of internally monetised video games. This raises the question what might compel players to spend other than the outdated goal of “maximizing initial monetary investment” like in the case of gambling.

Woods (2022, p. 6) argues that socio-cultural lives of the players have become intertwined with digital worlds of avatars, aesthetics, and narratives. This results in players investing in characters and character specific cosmetic items despite their virtuality, because they increase immersion into the game (Woods, 2022, p. 6). It implies that characters that can be bought and aesthetically modified with real world currency have become a crucial modality in human integration into the nonhuman circuitry of a new technology (Woods, 2022, p. 6). *Genesis amnesia* is relevant in this distinction as well, as the humans integrate new technology in their lives, it becomes something familiar and conventional considerably fast. Most important point to understand is the implication that game characters and the possibility to modify them are the mediated means of interacting with other social actors in a digital environment; humans adapting to the social technology.

A virtual item that alters the playable characters’ outlook (commonly referred to as skin or cosmetic as a discursive practice, term explained in the section 5) does not just change the colour or clothing of a character, but it deepens the immersion and pulls the player further into the game (Woods, 2022, p. 7) and causes the players’ engagement and relationship with their characters to become extensions of their mediated self (Woods, 2022, p. 10). Mediated self is an abstract term which describes a self that transcends the real, mundane, and material and can be projected onto the screen (Woods, 2022,

p. 11). In context of this thesis, this could be interpreted that the mediated actions players take to reflect themselves into the anonymous virtual world, such as by personalising a playable character, they use as mediated means to make one whole, a mediated self, which communicates certain ideas about the person to the other players in the virtual world.

One of the people interviewed in Woods (2021) expressed that the “fantasy” of living through a character is an expression of mediated self. Strong emotional pull is triggered through the affective resonance of gacha games, and which is then monetised through the profound personal relationships that players are encouraged to develop with their characters (Woods, 2022, p. 11). There is a gradual process of players embedding themselves in the game and in order to realise their mediated self and make a character aesthetically “theirs” through customisation (Woods, 2022, p. 11). Some people interviewed feel that they show devotion and love towards the character by completing their skin collection, some feel like that they are taking care of these characters and adventuring with them, while others might identify with a character and see themselves through that character (Woods, 2022).

Therefore, the social fulfilment of purchasing randomised in-game content for a chance to get a character or a skin for a character causes gambling-like behaviours, but it is rooted in social satisfaction and devotion (Woods, 2022, p. 11) The costs going into a game to acquire virtual items becomes affectively validating because of the satisfaction gained because of the purchase (Woods, 2022, p. 12).

In other words, the possibility of players being compelled, manipulated, or otherwise encouraged to invest money into a game becomes secondary to players investing money in a game in order to get an emotional payoff that satisfies their need for social interaction and self-realisation (Woods, 2022, p. 13).

The results of Wood’s study (2022) show several possible motivations behind continuous investment into in-game content, even when that content is acquired through gacha mechanics and might thus be mixed up with gambling addiction. The devotion shown towards a character, or several characters might result in a behaviour which seems addictive but is not for achieving “winning” conditions like in traditional gambling, but in fact to reach emotional fulfilment and enhancing their mediated self that is realised through the virtual character.

However, it has also been shown that while the players might view the monetisation mostly positively, they still recognise the liability of having these same spending opportunities available for children. The interviewees in Alha et al. (2018) brought up children’s accidental purchases as an ethical problem and how it has also been discussed on professional levels. The possibility of monitoring tools

was mentioned, with the acknowledgement that it might be counter-intuitive for free-to-play game developer to offer and use tools that limit spending. However, this could be a good PR for the company that would implement these tools, given the general negativity the free-to-pay model has gathered in media (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8).

4. Methods and materials

The main material for this research is interviews conducted by the researcher with three participants in order to collect qualitative data on internal monetisation of video games discourse. All three participants are familiar with the issue of monetisation in video games and have themselves played internally monetised games, as well as made internal purchases. These interviews provide significant individual insights on what kind of mediated actions social actors have taken in the virtual nexus of practice and what they think about actions others have taken. These interviews have been transcribed for further analysis.

The interviewees are all Finnish-speaking people, so for their convenience the interviews were held in Finnish, but the relevant sections of the transcripts have been translated into English as faithfully as possible, and the translation has been written in cursive to distinguish it from the original transcript. The interviewees are referred to with made-up names to protect their privacy and they have all consented having their interviews used in the research and writing of this thesis by signing consent forms.

In addition to these three interviews, the analysis is being supplemented with additional discourse sourced from publicly available material. One of the notable sources is a recorded lecture held by a game developer concerning methods of in-game monetisation which is targeted towards other game developers. This recording has been downloaded to video-hosting site after the fact. While the recording is public, the lecturer's privacy will be protected to similar degree as the three participants. They will be referred to with they/them pronouns like the interviewees and they will generally go by the title *game developer* within this thesis. This source is insightful source of discourse for this thesis because it gives some developer perspective on in-game monetisation.

Another notable source of materials will be discussion threads on the social news site Reddit concerning the appeal of cosmetics. The thread is publicly accessible to non-registered visitors and the users on the site are anonymous, as they generally write on the site though their usernames. The specific usernames will not be revealed in this thesis, instead the comments made by the users will be called anonymous Reddit thread comments in the analysis and specific comments are numbered in order to distinguish them from one another.

In addition, public news reports on the topic will be used as supplemental material. Many of the discourses reported on news articles have to do with the general concept of children spending increasingly large amounts of money within video games, either by accident or by addiction.

Common trend appears to be that this heavily affects their respective families' finances and has subsequently created a significant problem that the family has come forward to share with the news outlets. For a demonstrative example, there is an article discoursing a class action lawsuit filed towards a large game company on the grounds of a child spending within a game without the approval of their parent.

This article is also being discussed by a radio host and the chief executive officer (CEO) of the company that owns a site that reports on class action lawsuits. The discussion attached to the article in video format. This discussion will be used as additional material and the people discussing on the video will be spoken about in anonymised manner where the participants will be referred to as *radio host* and *CEO*.

Opinions readable in news articles are important for this thesis, because this material gives an idea what kind of discourse there is about the topic of in-game purchases outside of developer and player communities. They offer “a public view” into the topic.

Some discourse will be observed in real time, for instance analysing the in-game stores of some games to make significant conclusions of different ways game developers may use to engage with the players through their monetisation methods. An example that I will use in this thesis is an online multiplayer game called *Elder Scrolls Online*. Specifically, I will analyse the user interface of a screen where player opens loot boxes after purchase, and the point of interest is a voice acted character that is dedicated to selling loot boxes to players.

Triangulation in mediated discourse analysis and nexus analysis is done by seeking four types of data (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon, 2001b)

First type of data is finding the members generalisations, which shows what participants say they do normatively. This is often at variance both with objective observation and with that member's own individual experience (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon, 2001b). Materials that present this type of data are the three interviews as well as the recording of a game developer lecture.

Second type of data is doing objective observations: This seeks to answer the question what a neutral observer sees. Often at variance with the generalizations made about the group or the self (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon, 2001b). The materials with this type of data are the video recording of a game developer lecture and observations within the games and their monetisation methods in real time.

Third type is seeking the individual experience, where the purpose is to find out what does an individual describe as their experience. Often characterized as being different from one's own group

(Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon, 2001b). This type of data is sourced from the three interviews as well as the news reports on the topic of video game monetisation.

Final type of data is interactions with members, which seeks to answer how participants account for the analysis. This will mostly focus on the resolution of contradictions among the first three types of data (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon, 2001b). While this data type could not be covered fully due to the limitations of the research, some interviewees were interviewed twice about the same topic for more elaboration on what was discussed on the first interviews.

While a single analysis might not be able to fully cover all of these four areas, it is important to consider all of them on at least some level to reach the most complete interpretation of the available data.

5. Terminology

There are several terms that are important regarding the discursive practices within the nexus of practice. Most players are familiar with these semiotic cycles at least on practical level. Some of these terms have been mentioned already and will be described in greater detail here.

5.1. Free-to-play model

Games that follow free-to-play model, (also known as F2P), can be downloaded onto computers or mobile devices and played with no initial cost for the player. Instead, the game is monetised through in-game purchases where some areas, activities, or content may be inaccessible without microtransactions (Tham & Perreault, 2021 p. 64).

5.2. Microtransactions and cosmetics

Microtransaction is an umbrella term that refers real-world money being used to purchase certain perks within a video game in various ways. Some popular perks are aesthetical in their nature and do not directly affect the gameplay itself. For instance, many games offer different appearances and costumes for the playable character (commonly referred to as “skins” or “cosmetics”) that do not affect the way the game or how the character is played. On the contrary, some games offer perks that do affect the gameplay, such as offering an in-game ability to be unlocked by spending a sum of real-world currency. This is referred to as pay-to-win mechanic (Zendle, et al., 2020, p.3).

In addition, mobile games in particular tend to offer microtransactions to speed up in-game processes, or to let the player continue a failed challenge without having them lose progress. Sometimes watching an in-game ad is also an option, as this generates ad-revenue for the developer. Some games also feature a stamina component, wherein players can attempt only a certain number of activities before having to wait minutes or hours before they can play again (Tham & Perreault, 2021, p. 64).

5.3. Gacha mechanics

The word *gacha* refers to Japanese toy vending machines, which operate the following way: buyer inserts a coin into the machine that contains various prizes, usually small toys encased in plastic capsules. After insertion of the coin, the machine dispenses one of the prizes by random (Toto, 2012). Therefore, when a video game implements *gacha mechanics*, this means that the player may pay a sum of real-world currency to obtain one or more randomised virtual items. These virtual items usually come in a box model of some kind and are thus commonly referred to by the umbrella term *loot box*.

5.4. Loot boxes

Loot boxes are defined as items in video games that may be bought for real-world money, but which provide players with a randomised reward of uncertain value (Zendle et al, 2020 p. 3). Most often this comes in a form of paying a sum of real-world money to receive an in-game box-like item that can be opened, often revealing one, three or four pieces of randomised loot from the games loot pool. Loot boxes are deemed to be extraordinarily lucrative for the video games industry, with one source estimating that they may have generated as much as \$30 billion in revenue in 2018 alone (Zedle et al, 2020, p. 3). However, Zendle et al. (2020, p. 3) recognises the concerns about this monetisation strategy, as loot boxes share distinct similarities with gambling, but notes that it is uncertain whether loot boxes perpetuate gambling issues or whether people with pre-existing gambling issues spend more money on loot boxes. Nevertheless, concerns over loot boxes have grown distinct enough that loot boxes have been declared illegal in Belgium in violation of gambling legislation, which has led to a law declaring that loot boxes bought for real money must now be removed from video games in Belgium and failing to do so could lead to a fine of €800,000 (£697,000) and up to five years in prison for the publishers (Gerken, 2018).

5.5. Whales, dolphins, and minnows

In context of games with internally monetised content the spending players are often grouped following a fishing analogy: Whales are players who spend a significant amount of money in the game (Tham & Perreault, 2021, p. 64). These players typically spend what they can to achieve their desired outcome in the game. This analogy is extended in gaming parlance, so that those who have decreased spending habits use self-ascribed group terms such as dolphins, referring to those who also

spend money but significantly less than whales do. Finally, minnows are players who spend almost nothing (Tham & Perreault, 2021, p. 65). Whale as a gaming related term is going to be important, as looking for and targeting the people who will spend large sums of money on a game is presumed to be lucrative for game developers. In addition, recognising certain people as whales in a nexus of practice by their spending habits makes an important distinction.

6. Analysis

In this section, the available materials are considered and analysed from the perspective of what is being talked about in relation to in-game monetisation. Various personal opinions by the interviewees are compared to what has been researched before and new conclusions are drawn. Looking at the materials, it can be observed that the possible ethical issues regarding in-game monetisation methods are generally not talked about in game developer education. Even the possibility that children purchase in-game content without the approval of their parent does not seem to be topic of particular importance, even though linking and using a credit card within the virtual spaces is easier than ever before and companies have gotten in legal trouble for not addressing that.

However, it also seems that the people who play regularly generally regard in-game monetisation as a positive part of the playing experience and do not think that they are being manipulated or coerced into purchase. The interviewees experience the search of a rare virtual items via gacha systems as an exciting and sometimes social activity, and that the acquired rare item may gain them social respect from the other players. Some interviewees also like the aspect of being able to customise their favourite character to reflect themselves and express devotion towards the characters through their vast collections of virtual items for those specific characters. They also recognise that monetised in-game content is necessary if the game follows free-to-play model.

However, there is also consensus that some monetisation methods have negative effect on the playing experience. Game developers that allow players to purchase competitive advantage to the extent of removing the skill aspect of the game might inadvertently drive players away. Similarly, if the progression in the game is heavily tied into being able to purchase upgrades, that might break the players' immersion and subsequently cause them to quit playing.

It is also apparent that in some games, the lack of social interaction in the in-game store has driven the innovation of game developers, such as in the case of the game *Elder Scrolls Online*. In this game, a virtual character has been created to engage with the player and encourage purchase of loot boxes as an intermediary between developer and players.

6.1. Game developers and silence of development ethics discussion

Most prominent material on how game developers discuss the issue of internal monetisation among themselves comes from a lecture by a game developer held during an event that was recorded and uploaded onto a video hosting site after the fact, and the interview of a game developer student. Both the lecturing game developer and the interviewee are social actors in the nexus of practice in relation to game development, and thus significant for the research, providing an individual window of social action regarding in-game monetisation.

Analysing these two materials, it is noticeable how the discussion seems to be profit driven. Both materials show that the social actors are aware of possible ethical issues regarding some in-game monetisation methods, but that it does not seem to be extensively discussed topic in game-development learning environments.

In the beginning of their lecture, the game developer mentions that a lot of the lecture is going to be about *behavioural psychology*.

(1) Lecture on whales, 00:25

Game developer: It is a summary of huge bunch of behavioural psychology

This sentence shows that the game developer is aware that majority of their monetisation methods are going to be about psychologically motivating the players to make purchases. This level of awareness makes it clear that these models of monetisation they are showcasing are not accidentally manipulative or addicting, but that it is purposefully premeditated and very intentional.

Furthermore, it is apparent that this is not a matter of naivety or ignorance regarding the ethical concerns of the psychological monetisation methods. The game developer brings up the matter of ethics by stating the following:

(2) Lecture on whales, 00:33

Game developer: Some of you will probably be slightly shocked by all the tricks I have listed here, but I'll leave the morality of it out of the talk, we can discuss it, - if we have time-, later

This statement is accompanied by the game developer visibly smirking and some of the audience members laughing audibly out of frame. It seems that the game developer's facial expression is mediated means of communicating their awareness about the ethical issue. Given that audience

responds to this mediated action by laughing, it can be assumed that there might be semiotic cycles relating to the topic of ethics that has humorous connotations, similar to an inside joke.

Keeping what the game developer says about leaving the ethics out of their lecture in mind, analysing the choice of name for the lecture reveals a lot about the nexus of practice at hand.

The name of the lecture involves the use of the term *whale* which is confusing out of context. However, from the context of video games, we know that using the term whale pertains to high spending video game players. Therefore, by using the term in the title, the game developer tells other game developers to come and learn how to catch “the big fish” with them. In other words, the lecture is about how to best appeal to the high paying players, perhaps in a form of a fun game of sorts. The choice of titling was most likely to give the lecture a creative name which speaks to the target audience with discursive practices shared by the game developer and the attendees. Furthermore, it appeals to the attendees’ historical bodies and identities as game developers which has been build up by the nexus of mediated actions that comes with game developing.

So, the lecture is a game developer telling other game developers about the ways in which they may monetise their games. Whether or not this is a topic which should cover the ethics of the monetisation methods is subjective, but by mentioning the issue the game developer recognises that there is an ethics discussion to be had, but they are not there to have it with the audience. This dismissal of the topic of ethics in relation to in-game monetisation methods could be indicative how the topic is managed within game developer education as a whole.

Firstly, the game developer tells their audience that they can discuss the issue of ethics in the end of the lecture if there is time to do so. However, ethics are never mentioned again in the lecture, not even in the end when the game developer asks the audience of other game developers for questions in the 18:31 mark, as there is still some time left.

Secondly, when the issue was first brought up in the beginning of the lecture, the game developer’s facial expression and light-hearted tone of voice indicate that the issue of ethics might be humorous to some degree. This is strengthened by the audible laughing of the audience members, showcasing that this is a joke that the audience of other game developers were able to resonate with.

However, it is possible that the laughter is also a mediated means to show that the audience is aware of the insensitive manner the ethics are discoursed, and laughter is the recognition audience shows in turn to recognise the game developer’s awareness of the topic.

These subtle actions become most notable when it can be noted that the subtle actions and practices form the larger nexus of practice. This instance gives the impression that game developers do not necessarily discuss ethics in relation to monetisation in games, and when they do, it might be discoursed as a humorous matter that may be joked and laughed about.

Similar dismissal comes apparent in a personal interview with a game developer student, who has previously experienced learning of mobile game development under the supervision of an official development studio. The interviewee has been given the name Suvi in this thesis.

They mention that the topic of internal monetisation was lectured about extensively, highlighting the importance of never having an ad-free game and that there should be in-game currency available from small sums up to hundreds of euros.

(3) Interview, 05:41

Suvi: Ei ollu suositeltavaa summaa. Siellä sanottiin, että on hyvä tarjota esimerkiksi niinku euron summaa, ja siitä sitten isompiin summiin. Monissa mobiilipeleissä on silleen, että pieni määrä eurolla ja siitä mennee jopa sataseen ne bulkkimahollisuudet ja siinä tulee ne kaikkee muutakin sälää mukana

Suvi: There were no recommended sums. They said that it's good to offer for example a purchase of one euro, and from there you can continue to ask for bigger sums. Many mobile games have it so that you can get small amount of in-game currency for one euro, and it can go up to hundred after that -- the bundle possibilities, I mean, and they usually also have more items included with the biggest bundle

This is Suvi recalling an anecdote about in-game monetisation lecture; that is the nexus of practice that Suvi is detailing in retrospect. In the example they give details about learning about possible options of of internal monetisation, including in-game *bundles* (sets of virtual items or packs of in-game currency available for a fixed sum of real-world currency).

When asked whether the issue of ethical monetisation was brought up, Suvi mentions that they rarely talked about it during the development period, if at all.

(4) Interview, 08:12

Suvi: Itessään niinku sain siitä kuvan, että se pyöri justinsa sen rahan ympärillä, että se oli se tärkein juttu siinä -- Eli me siinä hirveesti puhuttu käyttäjän mukavuuksista tai siitä eettisyydestä

Suvi: I got the idea that everything there revolved around profit. That it was the most important aspect -- so we did not really talk about the user experience or ethics

It is apparent that Suvi recalls that there was considerable lack of ethics discussion, or even user experience related discussion. The profit centred nature of the in-game monetisation teaching seems apparent from the anecdote.

Keeping in mind that those who attended of the recorded lecture on whales did not ask questions relating to ethical issues when prompted to ask, Suvi is asked in the interview whether they or any of their peers had ethics related questions. When being asked this in the interview situation, Suvi goes silent and seems to struggle to remember, until concluding that nobody else asked about the issue of ethics, but that they themselves criticised it.

(5) Interview, 09:29

Suvi: Öh -- ei hirveesti, enimmäkseen ihmiset kuunteli. Mä en oo nyt ihan varma, mitä mieltä ne muut oli tästä monetisaatiopuolesta muutenkaan, että minkälainen homma tuo itessään oli. Itte kritisoin tota aika paljon

Suvi: Eh -- Not really, most of the time people just listened. I'm not completely sure what the other guys thought about the monetisation stuff, like what it was like. I criticised it a lot myself

This is an important answer given the previously established data type of members' generalisation and individual experience. Suvi establishes that the social group of the students that they were part of generally only listened to the lecturer instead of taking the initiative to ask questions but goes to note that they themselves criticised the issue, unlike their peers. Here, Suvi establishes their own experience of being different from the other social actors.

When asked to elaborate on how they criticised the issue, Suvi goes on to explain that they usually talked about this criticism to their friends rather than the developers who were teaching them, but they detail an anecdote how they had gone to one of the game developers at least once.

(6) Interview, 10:16

Suvi: Mä yritin yhdessä välissä [puhua opettajalle], mutta ainaki tää yks opettaja ei näihin niiku vaikuttanu silleen huolestuneelta siitä

Suvi: At one point I tried to [talk to a teacher], but this one teacher did not really seem very concerned over the issue

In this anecdote, Suvi recalls that they tried to take an initiative to talk to a teacher once, but when they did, said teacher was very dismissive of their critique. Notably, Suvi does not mention the subject of their critique here, but the interviewer might think from the context of the discussion that the subject is ethics related to in-game monetisation methods.

When asked to further elaborate about the issue they talked to the developer about in the example 6, Suvi details how their friend had been told that not arriving to the workplace during statutory autumn break would mean that the students were not showing dedication towards the game project and harshly criticised how little the teacher had cared for their concern.

(7) Interview, 19:33

Suvi: No yks oli se mejän opiskelijoitten työeettisyydestä siellä ite paikassa missä me oltiin, koska siellä oli sellanen tilanne, että meillä oli koko ajan kova kiire sen mejän projektin kanssa. Mä huolestuin, kun kaverille sanottiin lakisääntöisestä syyslomasta, että jos me opiskelijoina pidetään se, niin me ei näytettäs omistautumista sitä peliä kohtaan, joka oli suoraansanottuna hevonpaskaa. Siitä mä puhuin yhdelle opettajalle, mutta silloin hän ei vaikuttanut huolestuneelta koko hommasta

Suvi: The issue was about us students and our work ethics over there. Because we were constantly very busy with our project, I got concerned when my friend was told that if we didn't come to work during the statutory autumn break, we wouldn't be showing dedication towards our game project. Which was literally bullshit. That was what I talked about to the teacher, but he didn't seem concerned at all

It is notable that this is a separate issue from the one discussed with Suvi in the context of the interview which was whether any of the students had asked about monetisation related ethics. As a neutral observer, the interviewer notices that this is an unrelated issue to the one that was discussed.

Despite this, Suvi mentions having criticised monetisation related issue before talking about a separate work ethics related issue when asked to elaborate. This shows variance within Suvi's individual experience in the nexus of practice, where they highlight being divergent from the other people in the nexus despite their further explanation detailing a different issue.

It is possible this has something to do with what kind of nexus of practice a classroom is. A classroom is very particular nexus of practice with very clear divide between social actors (teacher and the students). The practices in a classroom are also very particular; raising your hand, answering teachers question and most importantly, listening to the teacher. The teacher is recognised by their authority through practice and has the right to talk the most, while students are expected to listen for the most part. It is possible that the nature of the nexus of practice detailed here encourages the students to be silent; they recognise themselves as students and the teacher as someone who has knowledge and authority and asking questions might not be expected or welcomed in every classroom.

Nevertheless, both sources discussed in this section imply that ethics are not necessarily taught about in relation to how game developers should monetise their games, and whenever an issue of ethics comes up, it might be dismissed as less important aspect than the profit.

Suvi's answers also show that there might be a degree of shame relating to dismissal of the ethics related issues in retrospect. Social actors often describe their experience being at variance with others in the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Scollon 2001b); Suvi singled themselves out as the only one who criticised the lack of ethics discussion. However, upon elaboration, it was apparent that Suvi did not criticise in-game monetisation related ethical problems, but rather a separate work-related problem. The unrelated anecdote might have been given in order to compensate for the lack of a relevant anecdote. It is also possible that this was a simple error of thought, as Suvi expressed when asked about this after the interview.

6.2. Social factor and self-expression in the appeal of cosmetics

The appeal of microtransaction is a topic that might be challenging to understand for people outside of the player communities. Especially the drive to purchase cosmetic items that do not affect the gameplay in any way might seem like a strange concept, given that these virtual items are often limited to the specific game and cannot be traded with other players or resold. In addition to not affecting in-game processes or opening new explorable areas, cosmetics are often defined as solely aesthetical. Therefore, they may be seen as waste of currency from purely rational point of view. However, within the nexus of practice, many reasons to spend on cosmetic items have emerged in the discourses.

The game developer of the lecture on whales mentions cosmetics and puts them in a context with players who wish to socialise in the game. They tell the other game developers that cosmetics are primarily targeted towards players who play the game in order to socialise.

(8) Lecture on whales, 02:47

Game developer: You sell convenience to the achievers, which really means faster progress. Customisation to socialisers. Hats and stuff

Grouping cosmetics together with players who place importance on socialising makes sense when considering past research. Interviews by Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) reveal that when purchasing cosmetics, players felt that it is important that there are other people to show them to. It has also been noted by Woods (2022, p. 11) how cosmetics help to communicate one's identity in the form of mediated self within the virtual world. They make the player feel that the character that is being customised is aesthetically "theirs" (Woods, 2022).

Interview with Mikko, a person who has history of playing the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (*CS:GO*), displays that social factor is the main component in the appeal of cosmetics, but it might not be conscious on the players' part, or the social factor might not be immediately obvious when player is asked about the appeal directly.

When asked about appeal of cosmetics upfront, Mikko does not seem to have an answer, but comments that it is better that the game has cosmetics, but they do not think that spending big sums on cosmetics is a rational idea.

(9) Interview, 10:46

Teija: Onko pelinsisäisellä kosmetiikalla viehätystä itsellesi? Jos on, niin mikä siinä viehättää?

Mikko: Sillä ei ole suurta merkitystä, mutta en oo ihan varma, miten vastaisin. Kyllähän ne, mieluummin niitä on kuin ei ole, mutta ei niihin kannata oikeasti törsätä

Teija: Do the internally monetised cosmetics have an appeal to you? If so, why are the cosmetics appealing?

Mikko: They don't matter that much to me, but I am not sure how to answer. Yeah, I prefer they are in the game over that there wouldn't be any, but one shouldn't overspend on those

Despite having trouble answering the question, Mikko expresses that the game is better for having internally monetised cosmetics but says that they are not so valuable as to be worth spending over a certain threshold.

In addition, Mikko elaborates their answer by saying that the cosmetics do not mean much for them, which displays variance between the generalisation of players as people who are invested into cosmetics (Takahashi, 2020) and their own experience. Generally, the popularity of internally monetised cosmetic items within a game has communicated to the public outside of the player nexus of practice that majority of players spend some amount of money on cosmetics (Takahashi, 2020). Mikko sets themselves apart from this generalisation by expressing that cosmetic items do not have a great appeal for them personally.

However, later on when discussing loot boxes, Mikko tells an anecdote how opening loot boxes in *CS:GO* used to be a social event for them and their friends, as they would open the loot boxes together in search of a special cosmetic melee weapon.

(10) Interview, 19:34

Mikko: Sillon niitä availtiin niitä laatikoita kavereitten kanssa ja näineespäin

Teija: Oliko se semmosta ajanvietettä, että avataan laatikoita kavereiden kanssa?

Mikko: Hmm. Siis, oli se silloin kun sitä teki, että siinä haettiin sitä *moraa* tai jotain vastaavaa

Teija: Onks mora puukko?

Mikko: Joo

Mikko: I used to open loot boxes with friends and so forth

Teija: Was it like a pastime for you guys when you opened loot boxes together?

Mikko: Hmm. Well, yeah, back when I used to do that. We opened them in hopes of getting mora or something similar

Teija: Is mora a knife?

Mikko: Yes

Opening loot boxes being a social event for Mikko and their friends is significant considering what has been studied about the relation of cosmetics and the social factors. Not only can skins be used to build self-image within a social game, but opening loot boxes can also be exciting pastime for groups of friends who play the same game.

Later during the interview Mikko also reveals that the appeal a special cosmetic melee weapon for them is that it works as a kind of a status symbol. Therefore, it can be concluded that Mikko sees the appeal of cosmetics in the social context as well despite not being able to give an answer when asked about the issue directly.

(11) Interview, 20:56

Teija: Onks se mora sitten joku kosmetiikkajuttu vai?

Mikko: Kosmetiikka vaan. Ei auta pelissä. Sitä voi sitten heilutella siellä serverillä ja tietysti se on sellanen vähän... voi kuvitella sen status symbolina, sitten se on itellekin hauska, kun ei tarvi kattoo sitä rumaa leipäveittä

Teija: Is mora some cosmetic thing then?

Mikko: Yeah, just a cosmetic. Does not help in the game. You can wave it around in the sever and of course it can be seen as... One could imagine it as a status symbol. And it's nice when you don't need to look at that ugly bread knife

By calling the cosmetic melee weapon a status symbol, Mikko alludes to the social respect gained by having it and showing it around within the social game environment, but also adds that it is generally more aesthetically pleasing than the default knife every player has without cost. Again, this shows variance between what Mikko stated before (example 9) and what they state here (example 11), because the appeal cosmetic items have for Mikko is evident from their statement about the item being both a status symbol and nicer to look at than the default.

Mikko also adds that they are aware how the developers intended to give the default weapon an unattractive design in order to motivate players to purchase loot boxes in hopes of acquiring the cosmetic. However, Mikko notes that they know that is how the game developer profits are maximised and they accept it.

(12) Interview, 21:24

Mikko: Se on varmastikin tarkoituksella vähän ruma se normaali puukko siinä, että ihmiset saadaan käyttämään rahaa. Mutta tällasta se on

Mikko: The knife surely intended to be little ugly by default, to get people to spend money. But that's just how it is

This exchange with Mikko alludes to a specific social interaction within the nexus of practice in games that offer loot boxes as a form of internal monetisation. The study by Woods (2022) shows that purchasing internally monetised cosmetics is primarily a way to build identity in virtual worlds, but now it looks like that in addition to this, acquiring a rare item from the loot boxes can also gain the player social respect. Therefore, it can be assumed that one of the motivations to seek rare cosmetics is for the purpose of gaining respect within the virtual nexus of practice. Owning a rare item sets the player visually apart from the other social actors through the game character that reflects the players' a mediated self in the otherwise anonymous environment.

Similar observations can be made from the interview with Suvi. Suvi expresses in their interview that they have spent the most amount of money on a video game *Apex Legends* in order to acquire cosmetics for a specific character they define as their favourite.

(13) Interview, 01:54

Teija: Kuinka usein itse ostat loot boxeja ja pelinsisäistä kontenttia näin arviolta?

Suvi: No siis aiemmin kun olin tosi into *Apex* niin ostin omalle suosikkiahmolle juttuja, mutta en hirveästi muille

Teija: How often do you think you buy loot boxes and other internally monetised content by rough estimate?

Suvi: Well before when I was super into Apex I used to buy stuff for my favourite character, not much for any other character though

Suvi highlights their favourite character as main motivation to purchase cosmetic in-game content. We did not go into further detail about the character in the interview, but the character seems to be Suvi's favourite by the virtue of being an interesting character with fun playstyle rather than a character Suvi relates to on personal level and who they see themselves in. This alludes to a similarity with earlier research by Woods (2022) where an interviewee expressed that their motivation to use money on customisation of a certain character comes from love towards the character more than imagining themselves as the character. However, in both of these cases the character is still a reflection of mediated self, because it mediates every action of the social actor in the virtual world.

Furthermore, Suvi recalls using the highest amount of money on a cosmetic when buying a special cosmetic melee weapon for their favourite character. By acting this way socially, it can be assumed that Suvi wishes to show their devotion towards the character for other people within the virtual nexus of practice.

(14) Interview, 03:30

Teija: Käytätkö sä sitten tosi paljon rahaa näihin kertaostoksiin?

Suvi: Se vähän riippuu. [hahmon nimi] heirloomiin mä käytin eniten (160€) mutta muihin en käyttäis nii paljon

Teija: Eli tää yks asia oli special tapaus sulle?

Suvi: Niin

Teija: Do you use a lot of money on these purchases then?

Suvi: That depends. I have used the most at once (160€) on [character name]'s heirloom, but I would not use that much on anything else

Teija: So, this one thing was a special occasion?

Suvi: Right

This is a similar motive as one shown in previous study by Woods (2022, p. 11) where an interviewee revealed that they had spent at least 400 dollars in order to acquire a cosmetic item for a character. In Suvi's case (example 14), it is easy to see the cosmetic weapon could also be seen as a status symbol in the game, similarly to Mikko's case (example 11), but the motive behind the purchase is mostly out of devotion to a character though which person may achieve self-realisation and self-expression, which Suvi also mentions to be important for them.

(15) Interview: 02:16

Teija: Tuleeks sulle esimerkiksi tietty itseluottamus siinä (kosmetiikkaa omistaessa)?

Suvi: Joo ja itelle on tosi tärkeetä se, että kuinka kuvaan itseäni niin se tulee kans siihen.

Teija: Eli se on vähän kuin self expression?

Suvi: Niin

Teija: Do you get a feeling of confidence when you have personalised cosmetics?

Suvi: Yes, and for me it is very important how I present myself, so that's also a factor

Teija: So, it is like a form of self-expression?

Suvi: Yes

It should be noted how Suvi emphasises the importance of presenting themselves. This too shows similar devotion as in prior research by Woods (2022, p. 12), where interviewees expressed that they want to complete the cosmetics collection for a character in order to show their love to the said character. This alludes to somewhat special relationship the social actor can have with the virtual character they are playing as; even though the character is virtual, the players want their attachment

and connection with the character to be visible within the virtual nexus of practice, and this can be achieved by investing in internally monetised cosmetics.

In addition to these interviews, there is a Reddit discussion thread on the appeal of cosmetics. The various replies by the Redditors show similar reasonings, where noticeable majority mention the social factor of standing out from other players and that spending on cosmetics virtually is comparable to buying clothes in real world.

(16) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

If I like the game, and I have the money, why not? Might as well look cool in game in which I constantly meet people, and which I spend considerable hours a week on

This user highlights the social factor of cosmetics by mentioning that looking cool matters most in a game where one constantly engages in social interaction. This ties back to the reasoning discussed in Alha et al. (2018, p. 8) where the importance of having people to show the cosmetics to was highlighted. Mediated sense of self matters most when there is a social space where social actors can establish their identities to each other through mediated actions.

Another user draws clear comparison between buying clothing from known brands and buying cosmetics within a video game.

(17) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

People like to look cool and unique in things they do. Why do people spend so much on Gucci or supreme?

This comparison between a real-life space and virtual space displays a measure of *genesis amnesia*, as users have gotten used to being mediated actors in the virtual space in same measure as in real life spaces. Multiplayer F2P video game may be seen as another social place and the cosmetics are the clothes one could buy to express themselves.

This also brings an interesting point of comparison between a real-world clothing store nexus of practice and an in-game store nexus of practice. A real-world clothing store is usually a social place in that customers are often not alone and present themselves with their own faces, and usually have at least one social interaction of checking out with a cashier.

In-game stores are not social places, because even though same store can be viewed by thousands of people on their own devices, the customers do not see each other or have social interactions when making a purchase. The progress is therefore comparable to shopping in an online store, as the act of

shopping and purchasing itself is not a social experience, but the purchase is often made for social purposes, nevertheless.

Another user gives a reasoning that being able to customise the character grants the players individuality in otherwise anonymous video game world.

(18) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

Because we want to be able to show some level of individuality and personal flair in this faceless, anonymous hellscape

The user seems to refer to online spaces as whole by the phrase *anonymous hellscape*, which might be some sort of humorous exaggeration. However, because of the limitations of online discussion threads, tone of voice or facial expressions are not present. Therefore, it can also be presumed that this is a sincere expression of how this user feels about online spaces, including virtual worlds of online video games. Calling the spaces *faceless* and *anonymous* is objectively true; in multiplayer F2P games, most people do not go by their own names and very often any personal information about the players is not available to the other players outside of what players might willingly share about themselves. Therefore, the need to self-express might be stronger, because when people cannot represent themselves with their faces and bodies, it can be assumed that they will use what is available to do so instead. In the context of multiplayer games, the primary way that is available is to customise the playable character to stand out as individual instead. As for the user using the word *hellscape* to define the online spaces, this can be presumed to indicate their experience of these spaces might be negative in some way.

Another user brings immersion as a reason why one might want to buy in-game cosmetics to stand out.

(19) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

Enclothed cognition. If you dress up as what you want to be, you are more immersed in that thought.

The user also mentions psychological term *enclothed cognition*, a term coined by Adam & Galinsky (2012), which means the way clothing impacts human cognition. An example of this is how people tend to associate long white coats with doctors (Adam & Galinsky, 2012). Therefore, it may be assumed this user might refer specifically to cosmetics in roleplay context, where dressing up your character might bring you more immersion in the role that character plays. In other words, when a player wants to roleplay as something, customising the character according to the role immerses them.

Overall, it seems apparent that most, if not all of the reasons behind the appeal of in-game cosmetics purchasable with real money are social in some manner. Most of the time people want to stand out in the nexus of practice to the other social actors as individuals, and individuality is often expressed by customising the character to express oneself. Some see themselves in their playable characters and their mediated self within the virtual nexus of practice is expressed by personalising the player character in a way that reflects the player themselves. Other players might be big fans of a certain character in the game and want to show other social actors their devotion by having a lot of collectibles for this one character. In this case, the collection itself might be the social actor's mediated self as an abstract reflection of themselves and what they like. Finally, acquiring rare cosmetics seems to be a way to gain respect from other players. This is especially prevalent in games that have rare cosmetic items within their loot pool and these cosmetics may only be accessed through loot boxes, where the odds of acquiring the rare cosmetic are significantly lower than acquiring any other cosmetic. Having acquired the rare item by investing a lot of money in the loot box system pays off as the rare item becomes something comparable to a status symbol within the virtual nexus of practice.

6.3. Charity towards the developers of F2P

Free-to-play is a relatively new form of a video game. It can be assumed that people are still rather unfamiliar with the concept that large-scale quality games can be played free of charge, whereas before most games like this have been released with considerable price tags before the popularity of the new model. Being able to download a game and play it limitlessly without paying is a new concept.

Keeping this in mind, it should be noted that few comments in the Reddit thread discoursing the appeal of cosmetics highlight charity as a motivation behind the actions of purchasing cosmetics and presumably other internally monetised content within games. In these comments, a willingness to help the game developers monetarily are notable, as well as rewarding them for making a quality game that is also available to be played for free. In other words, the purchase might be the mediated means of communicating appreciation to the game developers.

(20) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

I don't spend much if anything at all. But if the game if the game is good and free, I might spend about what I feel like I could have bought the game for if it wasn't free. They gotta make money somehow and if no one did, good games would not be free

This user notes that if they deem the game to be of a good quality while also being free to play, they will consider spending an amount of money they would normally spend as a single payment for the ownership of the game and identifies themselves as a small spender overall. Any spending seems to be motivated by goodwill towards the developers for making a quality game be available for free and noting that F2P might not exist if people did not buy cosmetics.

This indicated that the historical body of the user has included practices of paying for video games upfront, which most likely contributes to their statement that if nobody spent on F2P games, there would not be F2P games. In other words, because players have long history of taking actions of paying for entertainment products, such as games, this practice might continue within F2P's as well and the mediated action of paying for the product is done within the game instead of upfront.

In another comment similar motivation is shown, where the commentor explains they could spend money in form of gratitude towards the developers for the entertainment provided.

(21) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

It's a bit of extra fun to change outfits and play around with different items. And if the game is free then I'm happy to give a little cash to the devs in exchange for the entertainment. Yeah the company might be raking in money now but they don't all start out or end up that way, so if you like something that someone made you should show that by throwing a couple of pennies their way

By suggesting other players to show they like something by paying the developers, the user indicates that the purchases are mediated means of communicating their satisfaction with the game. The user notes that they are aware that the company might be rich and that it would not need such charity but adds that it may not always be the case, so it is always worth it to show visible support through purchasing in-game content. Again, internal purchases are mediated means of showing gratitude towards the game company in addition to providing additional entertainment for the player in a form of virtual outfits and items.

Similarly, another Redditor also explains that their motivation is to show the developers that they like their game and wish for more content. Purchase would be mediated means of communicating that the player enjoys the content and wants more of it.

(22) Anonymous Reddit thread comment

For other indie games it's also to support the developers and to let them know that you like their game and want more content

This motivation is not directly connected to any one type of content that can be purchased within the game, such as cosmetics. Rather, this is somewhat more applicable umbrella reason to spend money in any given way within F2P game, because the act of buying something within the game is considered a mediated action that shows support to the developers, as well as gratitude for keeping a good game accessible through free download.

The interviewee Suvi also mentions that the charity towards game developers motivates them to make purchases.

(23) Interview, 12:29

Teija: Eli jos on tällane free-to-play modelin peli, niin onko pelinsisäinen monetisaatio tarpeellinen?

Suvi: Sehän tekee hyvää pelintekijöille, että on sen hyvä olla siellä, ihan vain sen vuoksi että ihmisillä olisi mahdollisuus tukea peliä, josta tykkää.

Teija: Mutta onko nää mikrotransaktiot ja loot boxit hyvä vaihtoehto?

Suvi: Sanosin että joo, siinäki on kuitenkin mahdollisuus tukea kehittäjiä. Kun puhutaan AAA studioiden tekemistä peleistä, niin ei niitä niin innokkaasti lähde ostamaan, kun ne maksavat sen kuusikymppiä tai kahdeksankymppiä, vaikka et tiedä, että tykkäätkö pelistä loppujen lopuksi. Sen rinnalla loot boksit free-to-play modelissa on ihan hyvä. Se ei kuitenkaan pakota ketään ostamaan näitä

Teija: So, if the game is F2P, is internal monetisation within the game necessary?

Suvi: It's charitable towards the game developers, so it's good to have it in there, if just for giving the players a chance to support a game they like

Teija. But are the microtransactions and loot boxes a good option?

Suvi: I would say yes, they still offer a way to support the developers. I'm not that eager to buy triple A games because they cost sixty or eighty upfront, even though I can't be sure if I'm even going to like the game yet. Compared to that, loot boxes in free-to-play model are just fine. Nobody is forced to buy them

Suvi highlights that the act of purchasing in-game content is completely optional for the players and therefore buying them shows goodwill towards the game developers in the context of F2P. They also highlight the optional nature of loot boxes, which is also an argument that has been used a lot, especially in the discussion whether loot boxes are comparable to gambling. There will be additional discussion about this in the section 6.4. Nevertheless, Suvi displays extensive sympathy towards the game developers and stresses that the internal monetisation is in place to offer players a chance to support the game. This is quite natural for someone like Suvi who is working towards becoming a member of game developer community.

In contrast, another interviewee seems to be motivated by the act of “surviving” in a F2P game without having to make purchases. They allude that it feels good for them to restrain from spending money and acquire cosmetics through other means. In example, they find opening loot boxes only enjoyable when the box has been acquired for free.

(24) Interview, 10:36

Teija: Niin, ja et kuitenkaa oo ikin kokenu sitä (loot boxies ostamista) niin viehättäväksi, että haluisit ostaa lisää kokeaksesi sen uudelleen?

Taru: Niin. Tai onhan se aina kiva niitä availla, ilmaseks

Teija: Eli onks täs sellane additional pleasure siitä, että se lootboxi on ilmanen ja siitä tulleet tavarat on kans ilmasia?

Taru: Joo ja onhan sielt tullu ihan kivoja juttuja

Teija: You've never felt that the experience (of opening loot boxes) is so attractive, that you'd want to buy more to experience it again?

Taru: Yeah. Or they are nice to open if they come free

Teija: So, is there some additional pleasure there, that the loot box is free and therefore the items in it have also come free to you?

Taru: Yes, and of course there has been good stuff in there

It should be noted that Taru only talks about loot boxes when they allude that they acquire additional enjoyment if the box has been granted free of charge, and not that the developers do not deserve money. In another interview, Taru said that they buy primarily DLC's (downloadable content), which expand the games world and story.

(25) Interview, 01:51

Teija: Kuinka usein itse ostat arviolta lootbokseja tai muuta pelinsisäistä kontenttia?

Taru: Aika vähän. Itse noita lootbokseja en oo ostanu. Tai jos oon ostanu niin ehkä vaan kerran, en ees muista. Mut sitten jos on vaikka jotain, kuten ESOssa pitää ostaa pelin sisällä kaikki nää DLCT. Niin sellasia oon ostanu

Teija: How often do you buy loot boxes and internally monetised content?

Taru: Quite little. I personally haven't bought any loot boxes. Or if I have, it was one time, I don't even remember. But then if there is something, like in ESO (Elder Scrolls Online) you have to buy DLC's internally. I have been buying those

According to Taru, the only internally monetised content they buy are game expansions that often add more explorable areas and stories to the game. The game developer lecturing about whales identifies players like Taru as *explorers*. However, the game developer does not think that selling content to players like Taru is as financially worthwhile than some other available monetisation methods.

(26) Lecture on whales, 02:37

Game developer: ... And the explorers are the guys who are after stories and experiences

Lecture on whales, 03:02

Game developer: You sell.... Content for the explorers

Lecture on whales, 03:33

Game developer: And content... it takes a lot of resources and time to do that, selling content is very expensive. Hardly any team can keep up producing content at the pace needed

The game developer notes producing content for the explorers is expensive and time consuming for the game developer, and the *pace needed* most likely refers to the short time frames that new content should be provided to keep players interested. It is important to note the emphasis on how this particular monetisation method puts strain on the developer.

When asked about the topic of charity in a second interview, Taru admits that the developers need income from something, but does not think loot boxes are a fair way to acquire this income, and expresses that they would demand more transparency, even in a case of free-to-play game.

(27) Interview, 07:30

Teija: Aivan. Sitten vielä, että tää free-to-play model, missä pelin voi ladata ilmaiseksi fair trade siitä, että pelissä on sitten myös pelinsisäisiä mikrotransaktioita?

Taru: No joo, mutta sitten etenkin mobiilipeleissä, missä tiettyyn rajaan asti voit pelata ilmaiseksi ilman mitään hidasteita, mutta sitten jos vaikka jatkat pelaamista niin siinä on joku ajastin, että sun pitää odottaa, että se menee pohjalle ja siitä on tehty tosi hidas. Ja sitten siitä pitäisi maksaa niin se on mun mielestä tosi kämästä. Ymmärrän, että ihmisten pitää saada rahaa ja niiden tekijöiden pitää saada rahaa ja tehdä voittoa siinä, mutta senkin vois tehdä reilummaksi, että sanotaan selkeästi, että maksat tämän määrän niin saat selkeästi nämä asiat, ettei mitään loot boks asioita. Tai ihan vain sellanen mainos, että "if you enjoy the game consider donating"

Teija: Eli haluaisit enemmän läpinäkyvyyttä näihin asioihin?

Taru: Joo

Teija: Right. About this free-to-play model, do you think the existence of in-game microtransaction is a fair trade for being able to play without upfront cost?

Taru: Well yeah, but then again when you have mobile games where you can play free without any slowing factors and then suddenly you must wait for a timer to run out before being able to continue, I think that's stupid. I understand that people must make money and the developers have to make money and profit, but they could do it in some more fair way. They should tell you straight up that if you spend this amount, you get these items, and no loot box stuff. Or just an advert that says, "If you enjoy the game, consider donating"

Teija: So, you'd like more transparency in these things?

Taru: Yes

In contrast to other discourse that sees purchasing microtransactions as charitable act, Taru seems to think that especially loot boxes are predatory way of profiting from the game, because the player receives items of uncertain value for fixed amount of real-world money, and wishes the developers had more transparency considering how they execute in-game monetisation. They say that communicating clearly how much money player has to spend in order to acquire an item is crucial in terms of transparency and making profit from F2P ethically. Taru also suggests that asking players to donate directly would be equally valid way to profit from the game. These are similar opinions as in Alha et al. (2018, p. 8), where participants were supportive of in-game monetisation if the process and rewards of using money would be clearly communicated by the game developers.

F2P game is a relatively new type of a game, and these discourses show that the initial free nature of the game affects the thinking process of the social actors within the game; to be able to play for free, many seem willing to make internal purchases at least partly for the merit of showing support to the developers in addition to gratefulness about making a quality game free.

6.4. Mobile games and selling convenience

Many mobile games that utilise internal monetisation have *stamina component* in them, where the player's playing is being paced out by the game by putting timers on certain activities and then offering a chance to spend in order to speed up the progress (Tham & Perreault, 2021, p. 64).

In their interview (see example 27), Taru mentions that they dislike this particular monetisation method, where F2P mobile games require the player to pay in order to make in-game progress faster. This is common way to monetise F2P especially on the mobile market, and the game developer lecturing about monetisation methods mentions in lecture on whales (see example 8) that it is lucrative to sell convenience to players that are *achievers*, or in other words, players who want to progress in the game as fast as possible. Later during the lecture, they bring up that out of all the features that can be monetised within F2P, faster progress generates the most profit.

(28) Lecture on whales, 03:05

Game developer: Now, the reason I highlighted convenience up there is that most of your sales will be here

This is accompanied by the game developer pointing towards a lecture slide on the projector screen where “Convenience (achievers)” is written to demonstrate what kind of monetisation works on different players.

This underlines game developers’ motivation to keep selling convenience in a way that can be seen negatively by players like Taru: If most of the sales will be related to selling faster progress, there is a profit driven motivation to keep monetisation methods like that featured in games.

However, even players like Suvi who think that supporting developers is important (see example 23) have admitted that if the game is too insistent on offering chances to spend, they will stop playing. In their interview, Suvi explains their preferred visual direction in the games they play.

(29) Interview, 05:37

Teija: Tuntuuko susta, että pelinsisäiset kaupat saa nämä rahankäyttömahdollisuudet näyttämään hyviltä ja houkuttelevilta? Onko ne esimerkiksi manipuloivia sun mielestä?

Suvi: En oo varma manipuloinnista, mutta kun oon mobiilipelien kanssa toiminu niin mun mielestä tällaiset neutraalit visuaalit on parhaat, ettei oo nokalle hyppiviä nää ostokehotukset. Mutta sitten toiset mobiilipelit tekevät niistä tosi rasittavia, ja jos se on tarpeeks rasittava niin lakkaan pelaamasta.

Teija: Eli jos näyttää, että peli tyrkyttää ostoja niin et kuitenkaan jää katsomaan näitä?

Suvi: En

Teija: Do you feel like that the in-game stores make the spending opportunities attractive? Do you think they are manipulative?

Suvi: I am not certain about manipulativeness, but what I have experienced with mobile games I can say that I think neutral visuals are the best, so the spending offers are not too over the top. Some mobile games make them very annoying, and if it's annoying enough I'll stop playing.

Teija: So, if it looks like that the game is imposing purchases on you, you will not stick around to look at that?

Suvi: No, I won't

While Suvi expresses that they do not think that the purchase opportunities are manipulative, they explain that they prefer neutral visuals and limited number of suggestions to purchase. Notably, Suvi does not say that there should not be any opportunities to purchase progress, only that the spending offers should not appear “too over the top”. If they consider the spending offer to be “too over the top”, they will remove themselves from the game’s virtual nexus of practice. This displays that even the players who sympathise with the developers can be put off by game mechanics that are overly insistent on showcasing spending opportunities.

This has also been mentioned in previous research by Davidovici-Nora (2014); it is very easy to damage retention (player's loyalty to the product, in this case a video game) of F2P players with intrusive monetisation pressure that breaks the players' immersion.

However, given that the game developer in lecture on whales still underlines how lucrative selling convenience is, it can be concluded that this method can be executed in a way that does not drive players away, and the result can be very profitable for the game developer. However, the mobile market is mostly well known with issues concerning children's accidental spending, perhaps partly due to these ample opportunities to spend in the games (more on this in the section 6.5).

6.5. Financial responsibility in internal video game monetisation

Much discussed topic concerning internal purchases within video games is that whether the responsibility over making sensible purchases should be placed on the player or the developer. This is talked about especially in relation to gacha mechanics, which many feel are purposefully targeting vulnerable players who are susceptible to impulse purchases and gambling issues.

In their interview (see example 23), Suvi mentions an argument in favour of loot boxes that has been widely used, where they highlight that the players are not forced to purchase loot boxes in order to play. When asked to elaborate this issue with follow-up questions, Suvi argues that loot boxes are not comparable to gambling systems such as lottery, because they feel that the player always gets something when purchasing loot boxes, whereas people doing lottery might turn out empty handed after their investment.

(30) Interview, 14:01

Teija: Entä onko sun mielestä loot boksit lottomekanismeja?

Suvi: Ei mun mielestä. Sä kuitenkin aina saat jotain, lotossa et.

Teija: Vaikka se mitä saat saattaa olla arvottomampaa kuin se mitä sijoitit?

Suvi: Onhan se ikävää, mut tiedät kuitenkin, että mihin lähit mukaan, kun ostat niitä.

Teija: Eli esimerkiksi riippuvuuteen taipuvaiset on tässä omillaan?

Suvi: Aika lailla. En oo tätä tutkinut niin en pysty parempaa kommenttia antamaan

Teija: So, do you think that loot boxes are gambling mechanics akin to lottery?

Suvi: I don't think so. You are always guaranteed something with loot boxes, whereas with lotter you aren't.

Teija: Even though what you end up getting might be less valuable than your initial investment?

Suvi: That's unfortunate, but you know what you sign up for when you buy loot boxes

Teija: So, for example people susceptible to gambling addiction are on their own in this?
Suvi: Pretty much. I haven't read up on this so I can't give a better comment

When drawing comparison like this between a purchase of loot box and doing lottery, the systematic differences between these two actions should be noted. Lottery is money-based gamble where the social actor purchases a ticket in hope to win a large sum of money by chance. Calling the action of purchasing a loot box a gamble is generalisation; only if the social actor purchases the box in hopes of getting one or several specific items, the comparison is fair. The social actor is making a monetary purchase in order to achieve “winning” condition, which is the acquisition of this specific item or items. An example of this is an interview Mikko gave (see example 10) when they detailed an anecdote of them and their friends opening loot boxes in hopes of acquiring a specific rare cosmetic item.

However, when the social actor makes the mediated action of purchasing a box with no pre-emptive intent to acquire any item in particular, the act of purchase is not comparable to gambling, as there is no winning condition the player is gambling for, rather than them knowingly purchasing a bundle of random virtual items with no intention to acquire any specific item.

It is apparent that Suvi refers to the latter action of purchase when highlighting that the player always gets something when purchasing a loot box. While this is objectively true, they do not touch upon the existence of players who might purchase loot boxes motivated by an intent to acquire a specific and often rare item by random. This could be comparable to a gamble, where acquiring the specific item by chance is the winning condition.

It is notable that when Suvi is asked if the people who tend to be susceptible to gambling addiction are on their own regarding the widespread implementation of these mechanics, they agree that they are, but they still note that they have not researched the topic and are unable to make more elaborate comment on the issue. This indicates that while the subject does not bother them as is, they are aware that there might be issues they are not aware of.

Another interviewee Mikko also shares this view on whether internal monetisation in the form of gacha should be treated as an issue that needs to be solved. They empathise that there should be restrictions what comes to children playing, but stresses that adults should be given the choice to indulge, even when the way they are indulging might be harmful.

(31) Interview, 05:51

Teija: Siitä päästäänkin tähän, että onko sun mielestä pelinsisäinen monetisaatio ongelma?

Mikko: Se vähän riippuu, että miten sen tekee. Se ei välttämättä ole ongelma, jos se on free-to-play peli ja ne ovat enimmäkseen kosmeettisia juttuja, mutta siinäkin pitäisi varmaan olla jotain rajoituksia, että miten paljon rahaa saa käyttää vai saako käyttää rahaa, jos on esimerkiksi alaikäinen.

Teija: Eli ongelmia alkaa tulla siinä kohtaa, kun lapset alkaa pelaamaan?

Mikko: Niin, ei minun mielestä aikuisten rahankäyttöä tällaisiin tarvitse rajoittaa, se ei ole ongelma. Toki pay-to-win mekaniikat ovat eettisesti hämääriä, pilaa pelikokemuksenkin monesti.

Teija: Entä tämmöset gacha systeemit, onko ne sun mielestä vaarallisia tällaisille riippuvaisuuteen taipuville?

Mikko: Eiköhän nää kaikki gamblin mekaniikat ole, mutta uhkapelaaminenkin on sellanen asia minkä aikuisen ihmisen täytyy saada tehdä omasta valinnastaan, vaikka se olisikin haitallista

Teija: From that we can continue by asking if you think that internal monetisation in video games is an issue?

Mikko: That depends how it's done. It's not necessarily an issue, if it's free-to-play game and there are mostly cosmetic things being sold, but there should still probably be some restrictions, how much money you can spend or if you can spend at all, if you are underage for example

Teija: So, problems begin to arise when children play?

Mikko: Yes, I don't think that you should restrict adults spending, that's not the issue. I admit that pay-to-win mechanics are ethically shady and usually ruin the gaming experience

Teija: What about these gacha systems, do you think they are dangerous to people who might be susceptible to gambling addiction?

Mikko: I think I can safely say that all gambling mechanics are, but gambling is something that adult person must be able to do by their own choice, as harmful as it could be

Mikko saying “[internal monetisation of video games] is not necessarily an issue” shows that they acknowledge that monetisation can be done in a way that might be problematic, but that the concept is not negative to them by default. Mikko has shown similar awareness in example 12, where they state that they know rare items are being sold to players by purposefully making default items visually displeasing, but that they accept this. This shows Mikko is fundamentally fine with both gacha mechanics and the methods game developers might use to make users engage with those mechanics.

In the example 31, Mikko is very adamant that what comes to cosmetics and gacha, adults should not need to be protected by the game developers, because responsibility over whether to indulge should be within the individual and not the provider of the potentially harmful activity. Mediated action cannot happen without a social actor in the end.

Notably, Mikko singles out pay-to-win as something that can pose an issue, unlike cosmetics and gacha. They use the phrase *ethically shady* about the pay-to-win method and note that it often ruins

the playing experience. Pay-to-win is a discursive name given to an internal monetisation system where the player may purchase perks that boost their performance, often against other players. When done to a certain extent, people who pay the most are going to have the biggest advantage, and the advancement within the game is no longer dependent on the players skill rather than how much they are willing or able to spend. Considering this, ethical issues linked to pay-to-win mechanics are clear.

However, it should be noted that game developers are not ignorant of the problems of pay-to-win. As a demonstrative example, pay-to-win is mentioned as a potential monetisation method by the lecturer on in-game monetisation.

(32) Lecture on whales, 03:20

Game developer: Competitive advantage is good, but you can go overboard with it and have an unbalanced game. If it's too clearly pay-to-win, people will stop playing

It should be noted that the game developer on lecture on whales does not advice against including pay-to-win mechanics in internally monetised games, but instead gives a cautionary warning to not “overdo” it to a degree that the game is unbalanced which results in players quitting. Unbalanced game refers to a state of game where players skills no longer have merit within the virtual nexus of practice when purchase can be used as mediated action to gain advantage over other competitors without having to improve in the game gradually. A real-world action comparable to purchasing competitive advantage could be bribing a work provider or a learning institution in order to be granted entry over other people who did not pay. Giving the controversy over bribing in general, it is given that this is not a liked mechanic in the virtual nexus of practice either. Thus, a developer who implements pay-to-win in their game can be held accountable for providing chances to gain competitive advantage for money, similarly how person who holds power can be held accountable for accepting bribes.

In contrary to what Suvi says in example 30 about loot boxes not being comparable to lottery, the game developer of the lecture on whales directly compares loot boxes and gacha to lottery and declares that players find it exciting specifically because of that.

(33) Lecture on whales, 06:27

Game developer: These [gachas] are great for both monetisation and retention, because people like the lottery part of it

Here the game developer does not mention gambling addiction in relation to the popularity of gacha as has been discussed prior, but instead, they highlight that gacha is good because the players like it

for its similarity to lottery. They use the business term retention, which in this context means players loyalty to the game, or their willingness to keep playing. This is an important choice of wording; it implies that not only is gacha a great option to internally monetise a game, but it also helps to keep the players invested. It indirectly alludes to the addictive qualities of the loot boxes but omits the ethical implications, because the game developer mentioned earlier that they are going to omit them (see example 2).

This is similar to EA's response over *Star Wars* controversy on Reddit where the company explains their implemented gacha to be something that would "provide players with a sense of pride and accomplishment" (McCaffrey, 2019, p. 484). The discussion thread shows many Reddit users calling the company out for dishonesty. Many players seem to have gotten the idea that the company is masking their attempt to get people to spend by reassuring the player base that the gacha has been implemented for their enjoyment instead of the benefit of the developers.

In addition, this controversy seems to be aggravated by the controversial game *Star Wars: Battle Front II* having a base price of eighty dollars on top of the internally monetised content. Because of this, the company is not monetising the content in order to cover the development expenses, and therefore cannot expect many players to spend out of wanting to be charitable towards the developers, a motivation which was discussed in the section 6.3.

6.6. Children and internally monetised video games

Within the discourses concerning in-game monetisation, children come up very often as a discussion point. While it can be argued that adults should be able to control their own spending habits in any context, most people agree that children cannot be put into similar position of financial responsibility. The main concern tends to be the increasing amount of internalised monetisation in games that have a large child player base in combination to digital payments becoming increasingly straightforward and simple actions for consumer convenience.

Most people seem to agree that parents have the responsibility of monitoring their children's video game playing and presence in the virtual nexus of practice, but many also think that companies need to implement better safeguards in their games so that the monitoring process would be easier for the parent, which would mean making the purchase process have more steps instead of promoting fast and efficient payments.

Many parents seem to be unaware why their children place so much value on monetised in-game content to the point of asking to make these purchases repeatedly. It can be assumed that the reasons are often similar as with any other player.

A person interviewed for a web article talks about their daughter's reasons to ask for money to spend in game: "My daughter shaved her head by choice. She gave it to a cancer wig charity, and she wanted her character to have that look. But in real money, it cost \$15 for the pack that had that as an option. Then she wanted an outfit like that, and that was even more. Then she wanted to keep up with her friends" (Symon, 2018). This is similar to what other players have explained about the appeal of cosmetics when asked, such as wanting to customise a character for it to best reflect the social actors mediated self.

Another article highlights that most online games are highly social places, and children who grow up online see the virtual world just as important as the real world, and that makes them desire internally monetised content as much as they desire something physical, such toys or a piece of clothing (Wright, 2019). This is another display of how important the virtual socialising has become alongside the socialising happening within the real world and gives a reason why internal purchases might be attractive to anyone who engages with people within the virtual nexus of practice; it is a reflection of real-world nexus of practice.

The hobby of collecting items is also mentioned; technology commentator Seamus Byrne compares loot boxes to giving children old-fashioned football cards. One pack of cards is not as exciting as buying many packs in attempt to complete a set, and the same logic can be applied to virtual items obtained via internally monetised loot boxes (Wright, 2019).

In an interview, when asked about whether they would personally change some of the monetisation methods if given the choice, Suvi says that they would make it mandatory that game companies install a password system when the player is making a purchase within the game. This is due to their past experiences where they would have made accidental purchases if there had not been a password confirmation connected to the purchases.

(34) Interview, 08:08

Suvi: Ostojen pitäisi kanssa olla aina salasanavarmistuksen takana, ettei vahinko-ostoja tule. Ite oon pari kertaa melkein ostanut vahingossa, jos ei olisi ollut salasanavarmistusta. Tosi useassa pelissä voi ostaa vaan napauttamalla

Suvi: The purchases should also always be password confirmed, so you won't make accidental purchases. I have almost purchased something a few times on accident if there hadn't been password confirmation. In many games you can buy by just one click

It should be noted that Suvi is an adult but has still experienced almost making accidental purchases while playing mobile games, which is quite a clear display how easy it is to make a purchase by a mere miss click in some games.

Mikko also mentions children separately when discussing whether the loot boxes are an issue, as seen from an interview extract (31). While they do not feel that loot boxes are a problem within adult player base, they do think that there could be some restrictions on how much the player is allowed to spend and how if the player is underage. This is an important distinction.

Notably, previous research also shows players being aware of what kind of issues internal monetisation causes when children play, such as in the case where interviewees recognise children's accidental purchases as an ethical issue in Alha et al. (2018, p. 8). They also suggest that there should be more steps in the payment progress to prevent this, even when it would be counter-intuitive for the company to make the purchasing progress slower (Alha et al., 2018, p. 8).

In some cases, parent may permit their child to make one purchase, but the payment information stays registered and after the first purchase, the child may keep spending without having to input the information again. This is an anecdote from a parent interviewed for a news report: "I approved the first charge. It was for the game,"..."But then he kept buying ... It didn't even ask for that security number on the back. All you had to do was click, and it went through" (Symon, 2018).

The article also discusses the different landscape of making purchases within the last few decades (Symon, 2018).

It's in the aftermath where you see the real difference between now and similar shenanigans, say, 30 years ago. If a kid stole a credit card and bought \$1,000 worth of clothes, they could presumably be returned. If a kid stole a credit card and tried to buy, say, a thousand comic books, the cashier would probably put a stop to it before they even finished piling them into the shopping cart. There were human safeguards, and for the kids, higher elements of risk.

The comparison that is being made here alludes to the phenomenon of *genesis amnesia* where we have collectively learned to safeguard children from making large physical purchases without their parents' knowledge, but such safeguard system does not yet exist in much of the virtual nexus of practice, at least not to the same degree as with physical purchases; as mentioned before, digital purchases are often made in non-social environment where no interaction with other social actors is

required in relation to the purchase. However, there are games that do have these safeguards in place, as seen in Suvi's (34) anecdote where their purchase via miss-click was prevented by password confirmation. Nevertheless, the amount of ongoing discourse show that these safeguards do not seem to be implemented on satisfactory level at this point.

Safeguards are also discussed in a video relating to an article on Class Action Lawsuits website. The radio host discussing the article makes a statement about companies being responsible for placing safeguards to prevent accidental purchases

(35) Fortnite Makers Sued After Child Spent \$1,000 On In-Game Purchases, 03:18

Radio host: I mean, at the very least, they are going to have to put some safeguards in there. I know for example with Apple and with Amazon, any kind of microtransaction like that, if you're wanting to buy a movie from Apple TV or Amazon fire, you can make it to where you have to put in a pass code, put in your actual Amazon or Apple ID... And those are there because, yes, you know, when these things first came out, we saw kids would go in there. Even my dad with *Angry birds* didn't realise he was buying these golden eagles to beat these very hard levels, spent over hundred dollars. So now they've put safeguards in place for these other things, but it's time for Sony to step up

This comparison alludes to how some applications do have safeguards designed to prevent children from doing accidental or unsupervised purchases as well as elderly from doing uninformed purchases, but that this does not apply on wider scale where these safeguards would be expected or even required from all applications and games. The lack of these safeguards in many games shows that there might be a conflict of interest between the customer and the developer; it might be profitable for the company to make the purchases as easy as possible without special regard to underage users.

Some parents have filed lawsuits against game companies due to feeling like their children have been coerced into making purchases within games that are being marketed towards children. Top Class actions site details a lawsuit mother has filed against Sony Interactive Entertainment due to her son allegedly using over 1000 dollar within *Fortnite*, a popular game playable on Sony PlayStation consoles. She claims that the game encourages young players to make purchases and that the game does not warn parents that in-game purchases exist within the game (Sortor, 2020).

A video embedded into the article on the site shows a radio host and the CEO of the firm that owns the news outlet discussing this article. The CEO recalls an anecdote of their daughter making accidental purchase within mobile game.

(36) Fortnite Makers Sued After Child Spent \$1,000 On In-Game Purchases, 01:30

CEO: I got lucky when my daughter was playing Harry Potter themed game, and all of a sudden, I saw a couple of charges. I'm like what? Because every charge that goes through, I

get a notice of it and then my daughter comes back five minutes later; “Daddy daddy daddy, I’m so sorry, I thought it was free”. And you know, she spent fifteen bucks

The anecdote of the Top Class actions CEO shows a case where the child did not intend to make a purchase but was led to believe that the action that they were doing within the game is not monetised. While this can be attributed to child’s poor judgement or media reading capability, it is not unrealistic to believe that the game the child was playing might be marketed towards the younger player base. This would warrant that the developers make sure their game communicates spending opportunities clearly, so that these accidental purchases are less likely to happen. It cannot be proven if an attempt like this has been made, but it should be kept in mind that developers might be reluctant to communicate clearly on whether something costs real money or not due to the profit driven nature of the product.

(37) Fortnite Makers Sued After Child Spent \$1,000 On In-Game Purchases, 02:08

CEO: She (the mother) had no idea, she gets the charge statement of that, more than a thousand dollars in charges that she never approved, and her kid was like “well you know, I didn’t think it was that much because these are microtransactions”

Here the CEO underlines the idea how the small sums the internal content might be bought for could create an illusion that not much money is being spent at all. It can be presumed that offering considerably cheap internally monetised content is still lucrative to the developers because it makes repeated purchases a realistic option.

Later on in the video, the Top Class action lawsuits CEO makes a prediction that the company being sued will most likely use a sum of money to alleviate the bad publicity without adding many extra steps to the purchase process.

(38) Fortnite Makers Sued After Child Spent \$1,000 On In-Game Purchases, 05:08

CEO: I would not be surprised that they kind of go meet halfway and say, “here’s twenty million dollars, go away” and make some updates to make (in-app purchases) slightly more difficult. But they don’t want to make it too difficult because they’re generating nine figures of revenue a year off of that

This is an assumption about how a company like Sony would approach an issue where parent demands return of the money their child spent in their game without cardholder approval. Being a profit driven company, it could be expected of Sony to settle a case with a sum of money and make some surface level updates to the purchase system, but still being primarily motivated by the profit margin, which would mean never making the purchase even remotely inconvenient for the player.

While I had no possibilities to discuss the issue of children and internal monetisation with an established game developer, Suvi's commentary on their experiences as a game developer student in example (4) support the idea that at least in their experience, educating aspiring developers about customer satisfaction was not prioritised. In addition, the game developer lecturing on whales never mentions safeguards regarding children who might play the game. It can be assumed that in many regards, developer strives to make profit in the nexus of practice first and foremost and are likely to experience that easing parents' concerns over their children is counter-intuitive to their business model.

6.7. Site of engagement: in-game store

When considering in-game purchases, it is also worth to consider the virtual environment where the purchases are often made. While in-game spending opportunities may be found anywhere in the game, the visual discursive appearance of in-game stores are the mediated means for the developers to sell virtual content for the players.

The shop designs are usually simple and follow the same basic structure; items on sale are listed and showcased visually with preview images and their prices are listed in the in-game currency (often purchasable in bundles for real world currency). Often the items are colour-coded to show their *tier*, or relative worth to the other items on sale.

As a case study, I will be looking at how *Elder Scrolls Online* uses discursive practices in their in-game store, especially in regard to how the game sells loot boxes.

The page where the purchase options are available is fairly simple, with three bundle options for the loot boxes listed with their cost in in-game currency. However, it should be noted how the boxes are opened; the user interface (UI) for the opening screen shows a character sitting on one of the loot boxes in a relaxed manner, holding a stack of playing cards. The body language of the character is discursively telling, as it conjures mental images of a gambler. Players who are familiar with this game are also familiar with the race of the character which has its own histories within the in-game world. The character used here is a *khajit*, which is a race of cat-looking people within the world of the game. Members of this race are often regarded as thieves and smugglers by other races of the game's world. Thus, players who are versed in the game are likely to get even stronger sense of the character's nature.



Image 1. Loot box UI of Elder Scrolls Online. Copyright owner ZeniMax media

The character is also fully voice acted. They greet the player in a familiar manner when they open the loot box UI; the character addresses the player as their friend and has various lines of greeting the player, some notable lines being "Fortune favor you, my friend" and "Pacrooti welcomes you! Are you interested in excitement and valuable rewards? This one can help". These voice-lines can be seen to suggest a character who offers gambling opportunities. This is apparent from the way the character wishes good fortune to the player and promises them "excitement".

In addition to greeting the player, the character also has voice-lines where they comment the amount of loot boxes the player has opened and the value of the items that the box yields among others. For example, the character congratulates and commemorates the player for acquiring a rare item or opening a large number of loot boxes.

When player clicks on a box to open it, the character shuffles their card deck and “deals” four cards to the player backside up, where the player can then choose to lift the cards one at the time or all at once to reveal the virtual items acquired.

After the player has no boxes left to open, the character also encourages the player to purchase more with dialogue such as "Ah, you've come to the right place for fun and excitement! But you need to purchase a crate first.", "Sadly, you have no more crates. But you can always purchase more" and "Do not be sad, my friend. There are always additional crates available for purchase".

For someone outside of the community of the game, the concept of this character might be outrageous; as gacha is a controversial in-game monetisation method in the political atmosphere, seeing a game where the game developers use a voice-acted gambler character as mediated means of encouraging purchase of loot boxes might be concerning. However, this most likely demonstrates the difference of discourse within the community of the game and discourse outside of it. Players who are within the community of the game are familiar with the fiction the developers have created for this character, and thus can understand that having a gambler sell loot boxes might be purposefully on the nose and therefore see the humour in the decision. The character’s existence might not feel like manipulation rather than a purposeful jab at the similarities between gacha and gambling.

However, it cannot be confirmed if this is indeed a decisively communicated self-awareness by the developer. In addition, whereas some players might be able to see the humour in developers making a gambler sell loot boxes to the players, other players might feel that the existence of the character is invasive and purposefully manipulative. The character is factually the mediated means of the game developers to persuade the player into engaging with the gacha system. This might be in place to compensate for the fact that online store is not a social place and there is no interaction with another person, such as barista or cashier. Instead, a character has been created to engage with the player in a manner that reminds of social interaction even though there is only one social actor.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the discourses surrounding in-game monetisation methods in video games through the lens of mediated discourse analysis. One of the main points of interest was to compare what is the “public opinion” regarding the phenomenon of the rising popularity of the monetisation methods with the opinion of the people who play and engage with the in-game purchases.

Overall, the results seem to indicate that while gacha mechanics are one of the more controversial ways to internally monetise a video game, it also seems to be liked by the people who play. While much psychological research is done to determine the addictive qualities of gacha, and legislations are made to limit engagement with gacha, the players who do engage with gacha express that the mechanic is entertaining to them. One of the interviewees explained that the event of opening loot boxes can be social (example 10) and that the games they play are better for having the in-game monetisation in place. Another interviewee argued that gacha cannot be compared to gambling and that it is still a way to give back to the game developers for making a quality game, and they share this sentiment with other players (examples 20, 21, 22, 23). This supports previous knowledge about the topic, as in the past research players have expressed liking gacha and feeling like they engage with it responsibly (Alha et al. 2018; Woods, 2020). Similar trend can be seen here. Even when player recognises that getting exposed to gacha is risky for people subjectable to gambling addiction, they might think that the person in question is still responsible for their own spending in the end (examples 30 and 31).

On the other hand, there seems to be some in-game monetisation mechanics that the players seem to dislike. This is apparent from the interviewee that used the phrase *ethically shady* when describing pay-to-win type of monetisation and said they would not engage with a game that utilised that (example 31). Another somewhat disliked monetisation mechanic is the stamina component, where the game requires the player to pay if they wish to make a faster progress in the game. One of the interviewees spoke up against this in their interview (see example 27) and thus let the interviewer understand they would not play a game that featured the stamina component. Similar answer was given by another interviewee who seems to generally feel positive about in-game monetisation but would not play a game that is designed to be too insistent on making the player purchase faster progress (example 29). Overall, players do not seem to think that internal monetisation in video games are a problem by default, but it has to be executed in a manner where it is not invasive. Some players like Taru wish that the existing methods could be made better by adding transparency to the purchase

progress (example 27). This could be executed by listing a price of a virtual item in real life currency and make sure the player know they are not obligated to make purchases within the game.

While game developer perspective could not be acquired to a detailed extent in this thesis, analysing the existing materials seem to indicate that internal monetisation is talked about mostly in profit-driven manner. The lecture on whales is mostly on what kind of monetisation methods exist and what kind of monetisation methods appeal to different player groups (examples 8, 26 and 32). The game developer lecturing on whales purposefully omits ethical discussion from the lecture despite acknowledging that there might be ethical issues relating to the methods they lecture about (example 2). However, the game developer did acknowledge that some monetisation methods, such as pay-to-win, might be overdone to an extent that player may stop playing (example 32).

Similarly, game developer student Suvi expressed that they were not taught about ethical concerns while they underwent internship in a development studio and felt that the discussion about the topic was mostly profit driven (see example 4). These two sources indicate that discourses in game development related nexuses of practice might favour the profit driven discussion rather than the ethical discussion.

However, public news outlets have reported extensively about children's engagement with internally monetised games. Children's reason to spend are similar to any other players, but they cannot be expected to be financially responsible. Due to the convenient nature of many digital payment methods (mostly because the devices tend to save the payment information after the first payment), children's unapproved purchases are seemingly frequent. General opinion seems to be that game companies should install more safeguards into the payment processes in order to make it easier for the parents to monitor their children spending, and additionally prevent accidental purchases by adult players as well (examples 34 and 35). However, many believe that game companies are more motivated to keep the payment process simple, because their objective is to encourage purchase (example 38).

One of the innovative ways to encourage purchase can also be coding a character that engages with the player in otherwise non-social virtual nexus of practice of in-game stores. A game named *Elder Scrolls Online* has done this and the game currently has a character that converses with the player and encourages engagement with the gacha system in absence of direct social interaction between the player and the developer. This artificial social actor is present as the mediated means of the developer to influence the player to make a purchase in the in-game store.

The results of this thesis have the strengths of qualitative research; due to limited scope of the thesis, not many people could be interviewed, and a lot of the materials can only be used to make surface

level deductions about what is written and discussed in articles and videos. However, there is value in the viewpoints of the limited participants and all available material has been used to the extent that the thesis is able to expand on what has already been studied. While it is important to research the psychology of in-game purchases, it is also important to consider the discourses that frame the phenomenon. It is important to listen to the players and what they have to say about what they feel like is harmful and what they find acceptable and enjoyable in their hobbies. Contrasting this what game developers teach each other and how the public addresses in-game monetisation creates wider nexus through which the largest semiotic cycles of social activity circulate. Every observed motivation regarding in-game monetisation is valid; game developers need to make profit and players want to self-express in their hobbies and not be needlessly regulated but they also do not want to be treated unfairly by the game developers. Finally, parents want the games to implement stronger safeguards so their children could not so easily misuse their guardians' finances while engaging with video games marketed towards children.

Considering all of this, the thesis could give an understanding how the in-game monetisation could be improved without needlessly considering an average video game player as a hapless victim of game developer exploitation. Truthfully, internally monetised games have in all probability come to stay, and players find fulfilment from engaging with some of the methods monetised and feel that in example cosmetics enrich their experience and give them a chance to express themselves to other players in the virtual nexus of practice. Many players are also willing to make internal purchases just to express gratitude towards the developers of the game they like. Players also exercise their ability to stop playing when they feel some aspect of internal monetisation in a video game makes their experience not worth continuing engagement. Ensuring that there are enough steps to make sure that the purchase is approved by the cardholder while not needlessly restricting adult players engagement with monetisation should be prioritised by the game companies to promote more positive publicity for the internally monetised games. In addition, discussing ethical problems of some of the monetisation methods in game developer education could help game companies develop improved in-game monetisation that takes the player experience into account. While it is true that two out of three players interviewed for this thesis are fundamentally fine with methods like gacha, the method may still cause gambling-like behaviour.

Perhaps in the future, there could be more research on the game developers to get definitive idea how the challenges and the reward of the internally monetised game is discussed and handled inside the companies in general and how ethical discourses could benefit the future development of internally monetised games.

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