

‘Adam Smith Hates Your Guts’: Horror, Survival and the In-Game Economy in *Pathologic*

Julian Novitz

Swinburne University of Technology
PO Box 218 Hawthorn
Victoria 3122 Australia
jnovitz@swin.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the narrative and ludic functions of trade between players and merchant bots in single-player adventure/rpg games, which usually offer a player-centric or ‘narrativised’ representation of an economy which is calibrated to the player’s progress within the game. Games within the ‘survival horror’ category, by contrast, usually lack this kind of reassuring in-game economy, as a scarcity of in-game resources is often a key element of survival horror gameplay. Ice Pick Lodge’s *Pathologic* (2005) offers a rare example of a survival horror game that utilizes its in-game economy to create an atmosphere of terror and uncertainty for the player.

Keywords

Survival horror, role-playing games, in-game economies

INTRODUCTION

The study of in-game economies in video games has generally been focused on the dynamic, player-driven economies found in various kinds of massively multiplayer games, following Edward Castronova’s initial working paper on player trading in *Everquest* (2001) and the publication of his influential book-length study *Synthetic Worlds: the Business and Culture of Online Games* in 2005. Castronova does not consider single-player games in his study as while he argues that all games can be understood as an economy, in that they require players to make choices under conditions of scarcity, he understands real economic activity within them as being only the trades that are made between players. Trades between players and merchant bots are understood by Castronova as being essentially a mechanic for converting one in-game resource into another and therefore add nothing to the game’s economy. Vili Lehdonvirta (2005) briefly considers the ways in which the mechanics of single-player games can be understood as a ‘virtual economy’, in that players expend their labour to produce or acquire various types of in-game resources, but concludes that this analysis ‘does not bring any added value on top of what is already known about the game mechanics’.

While single-player games may lack meaningful economic activity of the type that is of interest to Castronova and Lehdonvirta as economic theorists, it is worth considering the ways in which the types of

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia Queensland Symposium 2016: Wayfinding

conversion mechanics identified by Castronova are used in single-player games to represent the presence or operation of an economy within the game's fiction, particularly within those that fall within the adventure/rpg genre. While many strategy games often simulate the presence of a more dynamic economy, which the player must normally expend some time and effort to understand and master, the representations of economies in adventure/rpg games are often static, or tend to develop in ways that reflect the player's progress in the game rather than the logic of the game's fiction (e.g. the merchant NPC in a rural village visited by the player in the game's later stages having a more expensive and diverse set of merchandise than that offered by shops in the cosmopolitan capital city where the game begins). The ways in which these player-centric, or as defined by Laurie N. Taylor (2004), 'narrativised' representations of economies either remain reliably consistent or adapt to the player's progress, mean that they operate as a safe and reassuring element of gameplay, a diversion from the more demanding activities of combat, exploration or puzzle-solving. Furthermore, as they are usually presented as one of a multitude of transactional systems and reward mechanisms within adventure/rpg games, engagement with them is more often optional than it is essential for the success of players. As a result, players who regularly engage with these systems (collecting and trading in game resources with merchant bots) usually find themselves in a position of abundance by the middle or later stages of the game.

In this regard, the way in which these conversion mechanics are used to represent economies within adventure/rpg games can be seen as supporting McKenzie Wark's (2007) contention that gameplay systems often work to present an idealised version of capitalist arrangements. The rewards of in-game 'work' and success are effortlessly and reliably converted into wealth and/or additional resources that can be 'reinvested' by the player, providing a 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost 2007) for this component of gameplay that reinforces both the capitalist arrangements that often mirrored in common gameplay structures (Taylor 2004) and the meritocratic norms that are conveyed through them (Schulzke 2012).

Taylor (2004) suggests that the usual absence of these representations of economies in games within games that fit within the survival horror genre and the emphasis they place on scarce resources can be read as subversion of this trend, but the fact that fear and uncertainty is constructed out of the removal of the abundance of resources that players can normally expect to find within adventure/rpgs outside of this genre can just as easily be read as an acceptance of capitalist arrangements as an undisputed norm of both gameplay and life ('horror' in these games results, in a large part, from their removal).

Ice Pick Lodge's *Pathologic* (2005) offers a rare example of a survival horror game where tension and unease is not created through the absence of these systems but through the ways in which the in-game economy is closely integrated into the game's plot, gameplay and environment, making engagement with it essential to the player's success. *Pathologic* succeeds in creating an atmosphere of terror at least in part through the unpredictable fluctuations in the in-game economy and the surprising ways in which it can impact upon the other transactional systems within the game.

BIO

Julian Novitz is a lecturer in writing at the Swinburne University of Technology. He is the author of *Little Sister* (Vintage, 2012), *Holocaust Tours* (Vintage, 2006) and *My Life and Other Stories* (Vintage, 2004) and his work has been published in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary New Zealand Stories*, *Best New Zealand Fiction*, *The Sydney Review of Books*, *Wet Ink*, *Landfall*, *The NZ Listener* and *Sport*. He has won the Hubert Church Award for Best First Book of Fiction, the Katherine Mansfield Award for Short Fiction, was a recipient of the Buddle Findlay Frank Sargeson Residential Writing Fellowship and was shortlisted for the 2014 Commonwealth Short Story Prize.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bogost, I. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, MIT Press Cambridge, MA, 2007.
- Castronova, E. "Virtual Worlds: A First-Hand Account of Market and Society on Cyberian Frontier," CESifo Working Paper no.618 (December 2001). Available at: <http://spartan.ac.brocku.ca/~tkennedy/COMM/Castranova2001.pdf> (Accessed Jan 2016).
- Castronova, E. *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2005.
- Ice Pick Lodge. *Pathologic* (PC Computer), Ice Pick Lodge, Moscow, Russia, 2005 (played Jan.2016)
- Lehdonvirta, V. "Virtual Economics: Applying Economics to the Study of Game Worlds," in *Proceedings of the 2005 Conference on Future Play* (Future Play 2005), Lansing, MI, October 13-15, 2005. Available at <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.95.6615> (Accessed Jan.2016)
- Schulzke, M. "Using Videogames to Think About Distributive Justice," in *The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy*, issue 2, (November 2007). Available at <http://jitp.commons.gc.cuny.edu/using-video-games-to-think-about-distributive-justice/> (Accessed Jan. 2016).
- Taylor, L.N. "Working the System: Economic Models for Video Game Narrative and Play," in *Works and Days* 43/44 Vol.22, Nos 1&2, 2004. Available at http://www.worksanddays.net/2004/File16.Taylor_File16.Taylor.pdf (Accessed Jan. 2016).
- Wark, M. *Gamer Theory*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007.