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# The Presence of Stigma Among Users of the MMORPG RMT

## A Hypothetical Case Approach

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In those massive multiplayer online role-play games in which the real money trade (RMT) is specifically prohibited by the end user license agreement and terms of service, researchers should be aware of the impact of their work into potentially sensitive topic areas. If these users of the RMT secondary market feel they are a stigmatized community, this will potentially directly affect access to data, data integrity, data bias, and the ability to disclose and disseminate back to the research community. A hypothetical qualitative case study approach is applied using three separate research elements to aid in the understanding of why prospective research candidates could potentially feel stigmatized.

**Keywords:** *stigma; real money trade; qualitative research; ethics; MMORPG*

Researchers in the fields of nursing care (James & Platzer, 1999), prostitution (Sanders, 2006), and drug use and HIV/AIDS (Gonzalez-Rivera & Bauermeister, 2007), to use but a few examples, often find great difficulties in both acquiring information from possibly stigmatized individuals and dealing with the complex ethical issues of presentation of that resulting data. Similarly, in the area of real money trade (RMT) emerging evidence from investigations by Y. H. Lee and Lin (2005) is that of not only a developing subculture against the workers in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) RMT market but also a recognizable community distaste, as described by Steinkuehler (2006), of the buyers from this market in games that specifically, through the end user license agreement (EULA) and terms of service (TOS), prohibit such trading. Thus, although the research potential of large games is of “incredible power and value” (Castronova, 2006b, p. 183), an active and ethical researcher in this field, applying any kind of primary data collection method, needs to consider the impact of these possible stigma effects on both participants and results.

In many ways, researching the individuals who participate in the RMT market is potentially research which “poses an ‘intrusive threat,’ dealing with areas which are private, stressful or sacred” (R. Lee, 1993, p. 4). Researchers should be aware of the impact on their results of any “threat of sanction” (English, 1997, p. 51) about which participants may be concerned. In MMO games that prohibit RMT in their EULA and TOS, these concerns may manifest as fears over the safety of players’ accounts if their “deviant activities” (R. Lee, 1993, p. 6) are revealed. Moreover, as found by Payne,

Dingwall, Payne, and Carter (1980), participants could manifest a “fear of scrutiny” if they identify or judge the researcher and the investigations outcomes to be “explicitly seeking discreditable information” (R. Lee, 1993, p. 6). In the RMT context, with the view being that “MMORPGs are in essence reputation games” (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006, p. 407), these concerns could create fears that the research may decrease their reputation, perhaps considerably, by identifying them, or their social groupings (guilds, corporations, etc.), as users of a perhaps stigmatized RMT market.

There are issues though in claiming unilaterally that a stigma exists and has a direct impact on research quality, even when dealing with subject matters where stigma is an acknowledged issue. For example, Cochran (2001) described how research into gay and lesbian mental health is usually a difficult and problematic area because of stigmatization. Use by researchers of settings in which homosexuality is more accepted such as “gay pride events, music festivals, gay social clubs, gay bookstores, or gay bars” (p. 933) can provide greater access but, potentially, research bias. Researching the effect of “sexual stigma” (Herek, 2004, p. 14) in a gay bar in San Francisco will inevitably give rather different results than researching the same issue with a conservative church group in the American Midwest. In much the same way, there exists within the users of the RMT market the potential for social groupings in which the trade is either accepted or even encouraged. Indeed, as discussed in Taylor (2006, p. 4), some individuals can be quite open about their sales of characters, whereas in the same game, Everquest, “Ebayers” (Taylor, 2006, p. 130) can also find themselves marked out as players who have “no real games skills and have not ‘paid any dues’” (Taylor, 2006, p. 130). Potentially, perhaps among virtual world users who conform to Bartle’s (2004) “Killer” (p. 128) player archetype, these types of activities could be the norm or even be celebrated, and perhaps there is no stigma attached at all, though questions should perhaps be raised as to the academic use of this model. The status of stigma in MMO games that specifically prohibit RMT is hence ambiguous, and consequently investigation of this status is of interest to any researcher in this area.

## Method of Analysis

Emergent evidence by researchers into such MMO games as World of Warcraft (Taylor, 2006) and Lineage (Steinkuehler, 2006) has already shown distinctive elements of stigmatization of users by other users. These stigmas can include age, race, and playing ability. Thus, this article examines, in a hypothetical qualitative case study, the current literature for evidence of stigma effects in synthetic worlds regarding the RMT market, using Link and Phelan’s (2001) “stigma components” (based on Goffman’s [1963] seminal work) as a framework for identifying stigma in the RMT literature and explaining the types of stigma that appear within communities. The results of three pilot studies are presented, each of which has attempted to gather data on RMT and each of which has methodological issues when the effect of stigma

is considered. To add rigor and reliability to these findings, field evidence, published theoretical literature, and results of previous studies in this area are triangulated to find convergent themes. Emerging issues are then discussed, with suggestions made as to guidelines to be considered for future researchers in this area.

This study draws on the evidence of three separate field investigations into the RMT market, each of which used a different method and sample population. The first method of analysis used was a survey of 162 final-year university students at Newcastle Business School, who as part of their dissertation preparation sessions were asked to review and critique Y. H. Lee and Lin's (2005) paper on stigmatization of RMT workers. Class discussions then occurred on both general analysis of academic papers and the RMT and the students' feelings toward it. A questionnaire was then given to the students to survey their overall responses; the data collected were both qualitative (feelings and opinions) and quantitative (age, sex, etc.) in nature. Figure 1 summarizes some of the attributes of the participants, with the majority (98%) of students surveyed being in the 20 to 23 age range. A wide mix of nationalities was present in the sample, with Russian, Thai, Malay, Chinese, Vietnamese, German, and British students, all of whom were studying an assortment of business studies, international business, finance, and investment management.

Of the replies, only 46% of students had played an online game before, the majority of the participants having never played one, with the subject of the RMT being completely new to them. Even some of those students who had never played an online game before were still able to identify specific names of games or keywords (i.e., *Warcraft*, *Everquest*, *Second Life*, *MMORPG*, etc.), with 33% of the sample population being able to do so.

Though in itself this investigation conveys a number of interesting quantitative results, it quickly became apparent during the data collection period that the qualitative information coming out of both the classroom discussions and the discussion parts of the questionnaire were of great value too. For example, in the classroom discussions, it emerged that, for the majority of female participants who had heard of an MMO game, it was mainly because their partner played one. Indeed, a significant discussion occurred among a number of the women who termed themselves "Warcraft Widows" or "WoW Widows," and on discussion tables that were made up of mainly women, negative discussions regarding the impact of game playtime (of any computer game or console type) on relationships were the norm. In contrast, the male participants mainly discussed their own experiences of playing these computer games and the functionality and/or perceived superiority of one game over another. Certainly, these discussions produced such a wide variety of exchanges that future investigations of a similar nature will be conducted using tape recorders for each discussion table to avoid further "data slippage" (Oppenheim, 2003, p. 262).

Inherent biases are apparent within this single investigation, however. Though the age ranges of the participants are similar to those found in other investigations of MMORPG players, most notably Yee (2006), the students themselves, with their

**Figure 1**  
**Attributes of Questionnaire Respondents**

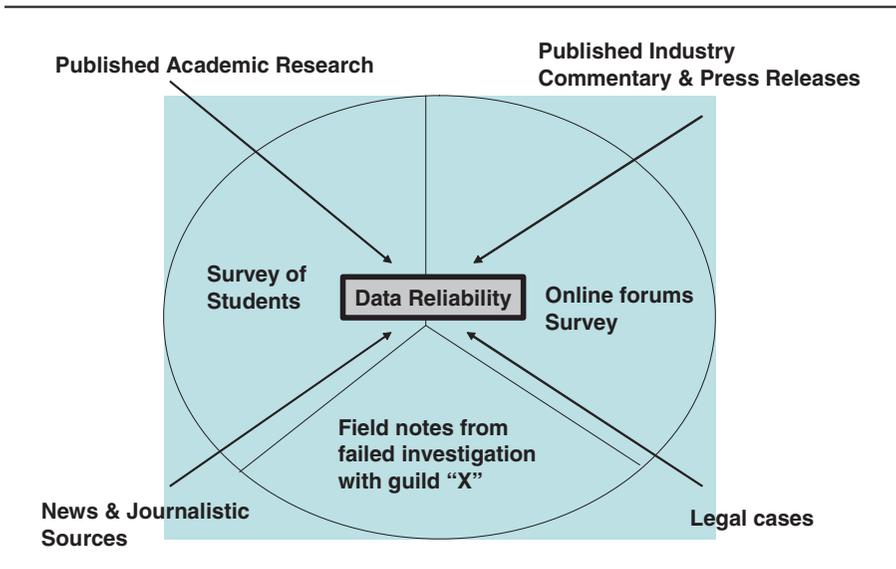
|                                    |             |               |             |               |              |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| <b>Male</b>                        | 98          |               |             |               |              |
| <b>Female</b>                      | 64          |               |             |               |              |
| <b>Age range</b>                   | 20-34       |               |             |               |              |
|                                    |             |               |             |               |              |
|                                    | <b>Yes</b>  |               | <b>No</b>   |               | <b>Total</b> |
|                                    | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> | <b>Male</b> | <b>Female</b> |              |
| <i>Ever played an</i>              | 54          | 22            | 44          | 42            | 162          |
| <i>Online Computer Game</i>        |             |               |             |               |              |
| <i>Specifically identified an</i>  | 30          | 6             | 12          | 6             | 54           |
| <i>Online Game by Name/Keyword</i> |             |               |             |               |              |

business-oriented background, could plausibly be more willing to accept RMT as business entrepreneurship than would be another group of participants. Broadly, the participants’ responses indicated a bias toward an economic standpoint on the issue; “demand creates supply,” one student succinctly concluded on his or her questionnaire. Thus, applying Yin’s (2003) principles of data collection has value; most significantly, “use multiple sources of evidence” (p. 97) to provide a convergence of data was of utmost importance. This planned convergence also assisted in addressing validity and reliability issues within the presented case itself, with Figure 2 adapting Stake’s (2004, p. 446) and Yin’s (2003, p. 100) frameworks to display how this case study addresses these issues, displaying both the internal and external data sources that are incorporated in this case.

The second method of investigation applied a netnographic (Kozinets, 2002) approach to data collection. Unfortunately, the formal “virtual community” (i.e., the game companies’ own online forums; Kozinets, 2002, p. 61) for games that prohibit in-game asset sales are usually inaccessible to open research on virtual currency because of the nature of the discussions contravening the terms and conditions of the forum usage. Thus, this research applied the principles of Catterall and Maclaren (2001, p. 231) in attempting to find an appropriate online community to which to gain “cultural entrée” (p. 231). This involved a long stage (May 2006 to October 2006) of “lurking” (Catterall & Maclaren, 2001, p. 231) on a number of online message boards to find one that best fit Kozinets’s (2002) general guidelines on suitable researchable communities:

In general, online communities should be preferred that have (1) a more focused and research question-relevant segment, topic, or group; (2) higher “traffic” of postings; (3) larger numbers of discrete message posters; (4) more detailed or descriptively rich data; and (5) more between-member interactions of the type required by the research question. (Kozinets, 2002, p. 63)

**Figure 2**  
**Planned Convergence of Data**



The lurking activity served a specific purpose in this selection process: "Lurking is important to learn the rules or norms of the community" (Catterall & Maclaren, 2001, p. 231) Hence, in this investigation, it was imperative to identify an open forum in which these potentially controversial discussion threads would not be instantly locked or deleted (and thus valuable data instantly lost) and to which the online community would be willing to contribute. This investigative phase finally led to the choice of the Video Games Open forum of RPG.net, a well-traveled online community site with a specific video games board and more than 37,500 members (see [www.rpg.net](http://www.rpg.net)), as a suitable venue.

It should also be specifically noted that, despite the name of the board, field notes from the lurking investigative phase showed that Video Games Open forum participants displayed a very limited interest in role-play aspects of the variety of video games they played, a predilection that was noted at this phase as possibly having, if present, a potentially significant bias on participants' feedback.

In November 2006, a forum post was made with a five open-ended questions, clearly identifying the researcher, the ethical guidelines under which the researcher was operating, the researcher's credentials, and the researcher's private e-mail address (if the participants wished to anonymously reply). These processes are crucial in netnography for "building trust" (Catterall & Maclaren, 2001, p. 231) with the researched online community. The post elicited 25 responses from individuals on the forum boards and

6 private e-mails during a period of 3 days. Discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1990; Hine, 2000; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) was then used to dissect and analyze the responses.

An e-mail received during the RPG.net investigation led to the final unit of field analysis used by this case. One of the respondents was very interested in further participation in research into virtual currency and offered to talk to his or her guild (a social construct or grouping in the World of Warcraft computer game) about it. After a number of e-mails with the appointed leader of this guild, access was granted to the guild's private (i.e., not usually accessible on the Internet) forums. There then proceeded to be a protracted discussion regarding the methods of dissemination of the results of this investigation by the guild members by e-mail, followed by a number of limits being set on the data usable by the study (most notably no use of nationality, end-game progression, number of character class types, etc.).

Given the degree and scope of the limitations, and considering the consequent impact on reliability and external validity, the researcher at this point requested that, to confirm existence and legitimacy, his PhD supervisors and his external supervisor have access to the data. This request led to an immediate withdrawal of consent to use discussions that had occurred and subsequently contact. Hence, this "failed" investigation is based on the researcher's field notes of the initial contact only and not the subsequent (and rather fascinating) discussions that occurred regarding the RMT market and limits itself to outlining the rigorous lengths the guild and its members were willing to go to protect their anonymity and reputations.

## Case

Hypothetical case studies are used in a number of fields, including drug research (Soller, 2004) construction (Wolford, 1996), economics (White, Abboud, & Holt, 2003), and law (Crutchfield, 1996), to give but a few examples. They are used to aid in objectivity and are from the orientation of "getting to why" (Soller, 2004, p. 159) without overt over-reliance by the researcher on single incidents or cases. Consequentially, in an examination of stigma effects, with the ethical consequences and impacts to be considered, this more objective approach was applied.

In essence, then, John Doe is our case study. John Doe (though potentially Jane too) is the hypothetical research participant who an active researcher in the RMT area can interview, survey, or use any of a wide range of methodologies (qualitative or quantitative in nature) with to gain a better understanding of why John uses the RMT market. Indeed, researchers would be interested in not only John but also the other Johns too. Unfortunately, there are potentially good, self-interested reasons why John may have no interest at all in participating and contributing.

Of interest, studies into stigma and the effects of stigma have thus far, despite a "profusion of research" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 363) into the area, been rather

vague on the definition of the concept (Stafford & Scott, 1986). Goffman (1963) described stigma as an “attribute which is deeply discrediting” that affects the perception of a person “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (p. 3). Some later studies have focused less on the attribute and more on the social norms themselves, with stigma being “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to the norm of the social unit” (Stafford & Scott, 1986, p. 80). Conversely, some conceptualizations have examined not the norm but the act of stigmatization itself as being core to the definition of stigma, with it being a “social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998, p. 505).

These definitions share the assumption that people who are stigmatized have (or are believed to have) an attribute that marks them as different and leads them to be devalued in the eyes of others. Stigmatizing marks may be visible or invisible, controllable or uncontrollable, and linked to appearance (e.g., a physical deformity), behavior (e.g., child abuser), or group membership (e.g., African American). Importantly, stigma is relationship- and context-specific; it does not reside in the person but in a social context. (Major & O'Brien, 2005, p. 395)

In contrast, such is the overlap between the concept of stigma and the act of stigmatization, discrimination, that efforts have been made to academically differentiate what is seen as the cause from the effect (Sayce, 1998). Fundamentally, “discrimination focuses the attention of the research on the producers of rejection and exclusion” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 366), whereas stigma research is more concerned with the resultant effects. However, it would be difficult to understand John Doe, our participant, without understanding the external pressures that may affect him.

Following from Goffman's (1963) observations that stigma is a relationship between an “attribute and a stereotype” (p. 3), this study examines John Doe through the lenses of Link and Phelan's (2001) subsequent conceptualization. Their theoretical framework identifies four main interrelated components that are subsequently dependent and indeed “entirely contingent” (p. 367) on the ability or power to stigmatize. To contextualize these concepts for the setting of John Doe and his use of the RMT market, this study focuses on whether or not, first, distinguishing and labeling differences that could separate John from the rest of the player population occur. Furthermore, do these labels then link with either stereotypes or negative attributes that socially devalue John, leading to a social separation of “us” (who do not use the RMT market) and “them” (who do)? The final component is, does this separation process lead to an experience of status loss and discrimination within the social in-game context and possibly beyond? Last, as this potential stigmatization is entirely dependent on the ability of other players to exercise a type of social power, do they have that power?

Finally, stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social . . . power that allows for the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labeled persons into distinct categories, and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination. (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367)

In the computer game context, with the ability to change identity (with potential costs) and reemerge as a “new” individual, does this social power exist? Indeed, consideration should be given to the issue that it is possible that all of the potential cognitive components of stigma are present in John’s situation, but, with a lack of social consequences and costs, a stigma may not exist (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 376).

### **Component 1: Distinguishing and labeling differences**

Identity in online virtual worlds is a complex issue if you consider the separation of the attributes of the online avatar that everyone sees from the important anonymity that “separates the real you from the virtual you” (Bartle, 2003, p. 174). As Castronova (2005) outlined, online avatar attributes, “skin color, facial hair and clothing” (p. 32), can be fully player determined at character creation and possibly changed later on. Indeed, one of the very design premises of most MMORPG games is that all players have equality of choice at character generation (Bartle, 2003).

If then the distinguishing differences that you dislike can be completely avoided and the typical differences that might create labeling, “skin color, gender” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 367), are choices, not predetermined, then easy stereotyping through observation by players is extremely problematic. John Doe’s online avatar may in fact be female, as “cross-gendering is incredibly common” (Castronova, 2005, p. 109); thus, gender sexual discrimination in an MMORPG environment can lead to a multitude of unexpected consequences. It is clear then that in such an environment being able to identify a player as a RMT market user is much more difficult than simply looking at him or her, although emergent evidence from Steinkuehler (2006) indicated that the RMT market producers are a completely different story altogether in games such as Lineage, with players such as John Doe potentially getting caught in the community cross-fire.

Girl dwarves are now assumed to be adena farmers because fewer and fewer leisure gamers opt to play that class anymore . . . leaving an increasing percentage of those remaining as adena farmers. In essence, there is now an unfortunate feedback loop such that, because other players assume all girl dwarves to be farmers, only the farmers care to play them. Girl dwarfs are now reviled by many players, systematically harassed, and unable to find anyone that will allow them to hunt in their groups, unless of course someone already knows the “person” beneath the “pigtails.” In a way, it seems as if a whole new form of virtual racism has emerged, with an in-game character class unreflectively substituted for unacknowledged (and largely unexamined) real-world differences between China and America, such as economic disparity, cultural difference, language barriers, and discrepant play styles. (Steinkuehler, 2006, p. 208)

Similarly, “Hunters” are the class of choice in the World of Warcraft MMO, and certain combinations are easily identified by players for stereotyping and labeling.

The macros for World of Warcraft, for example, control a high-level hunter and cleric. The hunter kills while the cleric automatically heals. Once they are fully loaded with gold and items, the farmer who’s monitoring their progress manually controls them out of the dungeon to go sell their goods. (J. Lee, 2005)<sup>1</sup>

Conversely, although the active RMT market creators are distinguishable, the market users are not. Indeed, as the following World of Warcraft players are described, positive benefits, not negative ones, can potentially come as a direct result of the purchase.

My guild were doing a lot of PvP and I only had a normal mount not an epic one so I was always too slow. They bitched at me for letting the guild team down, but I didn’t want to spend a week or so not PvP-ing and just grinding for my mount. One day I bought a load of gold from a website and with 20 minutes of hitting in my \$40 on the credit card I had my epic. . . . My friends stopped bitching! . . . They’ve never asked me how I got the cash. (Participant 22, Online Forums Survey, private e-mail reply)

We use consumables—like a LOT when raiding. I don’t wanna have to farm for hours to get the mats so I just bought the gold to get the stuff off the AH. My guild didn’t ever ask me how I always had my pots, but they would have screamed at me if I hadn’t. Farming 3-4 hours a week for consumable mats is just stupid. (Participant 24, Online Forums Survey, private e-mail reply)

Thus, John Doe as a user of the market can enjoy great anonymity in his purchase and may indeed gain immediate in-game advantages in his cash expenditure, with little risk of exposure. Indeed, of the six private e-mail replies to the online forums survey, all of them cited immediate or lasting benefits that they received in exchange for their expenditure, with little to no questions asked as to how they gained these benefits, and there was no obvious indicator that they had participated in the RMT market.

However, many human differences are similarly not so obvious and are indeed the “product of a social process” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 368) rather than a specific attribute such as color or gender. Habitual gamblers, users of prostitutes, and drug takers, to give but a few examples, are all stigmatized groups to one degree or another (Pheterson, 1993; Preston, Bernhard, Hunter, & Bybee, 1998; Skinner, Feather, Freeman, & Roche, 2007), yet their stigma is also not obvious. It is consequentially the “social identity” (Major & O’Brien, 2005, p. 393) that players create and interact with that creates the potential for interactions, and for John Doe these MMORPG games are all about social interaction, status, and, of importance, personal reputation.

To begin, it is important to mention that MMORPGs are in essence reputation games—an avatar wearing powerful items, for instance, is essential to the construction of a player’s identity. It broadcasts the player’s status to others and rewards him or her with a sense of achievement. (Ducheneaut et al., 2006, p. 407)

It is thus usually John's choice to enter into a process of self disclosure that determines if his participation in the RMT market is noticed or not, an act very similar to other nonobvious stigmatized groups (Herek, 1996). This self-disclosure is often not an "all or nothing" deal, in a very similar way to that seen in the "coming out" literature regarding sexual identity (Mosher, 2001). As one respondent commented,

I've chatted to a couple of my close friends in the guild about it. We've even talked about prices and the best place to buy. I'd never tell anyone else in the guild though. (Participant 25, Online Forums Survey, private e-mail reply)

Thus, if John Doe wishes to self-disclose, with all of the possible stigmatization issues this could entail to his personal status and reputation in the game and with the possibility of actions by the game operators, this is usually to a very specific "audience" (Mosher, 2001). Alternatively, it could also be that John simply does not feel that the status of his online identity or the reputation it holds is that important at all.

At the end of the day it's a computer game, what do I care what someone else thinks of me? It's hardly the end of the world! (Participant 22, Online Forums Survey, private e-mail reply)

As Mosher (2001, p. 168) described, these "audiences" can have a number of levels. In John's case, he may see his close guild friends as a completely different "audience" than his real-life friends or his guild member friends or the acquaintances he has and so forth. Certainly, in the process of attempting to investigate a guild for this case study, it became clear in the initial groundwork phase that their audiences were both wide and varied but were mostly concentrated on their server, and possible negative impressions from other players on their server toward their achievements were of great concern. This is perhaps an indication that those with the most invested in the creation of an online identity, and reputation, in this achievement and image focused virtual environment (Ducheneaut et al., 2006) have the most to be concerned about, as one respondent replied:

The communities of these games looks down on people who didn't put the same effort they did into getting the stuff they have, and gold is no different. (Participant 6, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

To summarize then, John Doe's avatar is "born" into a virtual world where all players have equal choices at creation (Bartle, 2003) and the very essence of the game is to provide John Doe with a social, achievement-based, virtual world for him to interact with and enjoy (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). John seems quite able to transgress the rules of this achievement culture, and indeed the rules of the games designers, by using the RMT market and to remain anonymous in doing so. Indeed, the most likely route by which John Doe will be found to be using the RMT market is if he "outs"

himself to an “audience” (Mosher, 2001, p. 168). It is seemingly only through this self-disclosure that Link and Phelan’s (2001) labeling and distinguishing could start to occur. However, as with a number of other similar stigmatized groups, there is the potential that John Doe might feel safe in this self-disclosure to one audience, and this information could spread to audiences to which he had not wished to disclose, or John Doe could have misjudged his audience, and people he previously thought would be accepting of this practice in actuality could have different reactions than expected (Mosher, 2001). However, there does seem to be differences in attitudes toward the types of RMT that is occurring as well:

Tends to be more stigma attached to buying a high level character than to purchasing in game gold, as the former can often result in a high level character who’s utterly clueless on how to play. (Participant 19, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

## **Component 2: On Associating Human Differences With Negative Attributes**

Once John has been separated from the rest of the players, he then needs to contend with the next component of stigma: the linking of his actions with negative stereotypes or attributes, an association “central to the conceptualization of stigma” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 368). Interesting in the more generic survey of university students, only 22% overall of students gave negative statements regarding their acceptance of the RMT, with some comments of “unhonest” within the replies but also evidence of more vehement opposition to the RMT trade: One respondent inquired, “Isn’t it fraud?”

These data (Table 1) display, however, that within this particular grouping, participating in the RMT is overwhelmingly acceptable, a stark contrast to the data from the online forums survey. Of students, 64% gave a number of reasons as to why the RMT market was acceptable:

Yes, if someone wants it, why not? It is bad to sell cigarettes as well but it as a good business. So why not sell in-game assets. (Survey respondent)

It’s a personal thing, doesn’t affect anyone else—its just a virtual game—not life and death. If people want to pay—let them. (Survey respondent)

I don’t believe that there is anything morally or ethically wrong. (Survey respondent)

However, of interest, it was the 12 male participants who had played online games before from whom the most negative comments and connotations came. Some constructed coherent arguments about the trade “downplaying the sense of achievement,” and others, at the other extreme, made responses regarding “sick people.” Males also seemed to be the most decided on the issue, with the vast majority of the undecided respondents on the issue being women. What is interesting is that there is a clear differentiation between online and offline activities by some respondents. Clearly,

**Table 1**  
**Analysis of Qualitative Replies in Discussion Question of Whether**  
**Real Money Trade Was an Acceptable Practice to Them**

|                      | Played Online Game Before |        | Never Played Online Game |        | Total | %  |
|----------------------|---------------------------|--------|--------------------------|--------|-------|----|
|                      | Male                      | Female | Male                     | Female |       |    |
| Acceptable Practice? |                           |        |                          |        |       |    |
| Positive statements  | 42                        | 8      | 34                       | 20     | 104   | 64 |
| Negative statements  | 12                        | 4      | 8                        | 12     | 36    | 22 |
| Undecided            | 0                         | 8      | 2                        | 8      | 18    | 11 |
| Blank                | 0                         | 2      | 0                        | 2      | 4     | 2  |
| Total                | 54                        | 22     | 44                       | 42     | 162   |    |

John Doe has engaged in the capitalist transaction of services for money in the past without stigma in offline environments, yet this online transaction is seen very differently by some students, students for the most part who are engaged in capitalist activity themselves: the expenditure of cash for the service of receiving an education. This disconnect between normal capitalist behavior and a stigmatized activity is far from universal though, and it would seem that if John Doe were a university student in this research group and wanted to talk about his online RMT dealings, he would, on average, find a great deal of acceptance.

The online forums survey painted a very different picture, though. Of the 25 respondents on the publicly available forums, all but 1 was certain that a stigma existed in buying virtual currency and that it had negative labels attached to it. of interest, the private e-mails also acknowledged a stigma, but mainly among the “general population,” with one respondent replying,

People feel that since they are working 40-50 hours a week instead of sitting at a computer for that long, that they should be able to exchange one for the other to keep things fair between themselves and the college students. (Participant 9, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

From the majority of the online forums respondents though, sometimes quite blunt labels were attached to those who used the market:

Impatient lowlife. (Participant 1, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)  
 Tacky, and at least bordering on unsportsmanlike. (Participant 7, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)  
 Despicable cheating. (Participant 15, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

It is clear from this rather ambiguous evidence so far that easy categorization and labeling of John Doe by other people are selective in nature, not the “automatic”

(Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 369) responses that can occur with some other stigmas. Many stigmatized groups though exhibit the same issues as these. Just to pick one, homosexuality can have a wide range of responses in various different audiences (Mosher, 2001).

Perhaps then, Crocker et al.'s (1998) definition of a stigma as an "attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular context" (p. 504) is of the most interest here, with the context in particular being the in-game response to John Doe and his actions. However, this context, which the Internet and online experience the average gamer is exposed to create, is possibly a contributory factor to RMT market usage, despite stringent EULAs and TOS by companies still in place. As Castronova (2006a) explained,

In most games today, for example, one cannot visit a fan site related to the game without seeing multiple banner ads for gold sales, and all casual conversation about the game, both inside and out, presumes that gold sales are a way of life. It has become normal within the culture of most games that there is a subgame involving commercial transactions with third parties. At such levels of presence, it may seem normal to most new players that one uses RMT in order to advance in the game. Rather than appearing to be a violation of the rules of the game—which it is, under the terms of service—RMT appears to be a normal part of game play. (p. 57)

Conversely though, although the online RMT market attitude John Doe and other players may be exposed to is increasingly becoming hazy in nature, the companies that prohibit in-game asset trading are still blunt with their message.

In our continued efforts to combat cheating in World of Warcraft, more than 105,000 accounts were closed and over 12 million gold was removed from the game economies in Europe, Korea, and the US in the month of November. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006)

Players are strongly encouraged to turn in those they suspect of using this trade.

Many account closures come as the direct result of tips reported to our GMs in game or emailed to our Hacks Team by legitimate World of Warcraft players. If you suspect that a World of Warcraft player is using an illegal third-party program to farm gold or items, or is otherwise violating our Terms of Use, please report the suspected infraction via one of the means listed above. All reports will be investigated. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006)

This type of authoritative directive would seem to be an attempt to create a situation in which RMT intolerance is indeed prized by the company and encouraged; in much the same way as someone breaking a law might be categorized as a "wrong-doer," John Doe, our theoretical buyer of virtual currency, is quickly fully cognizant of the error of his ways. Indeed, academic evidence from previous studies and investigations into the main criticisms leveled against the RMT market (see Lehdonvirta,

2005a, p. 2) has indicated that some players have a wide variety of concerns. These include claims of breaking the “magic circle” (Bartle, 2004, pp. 13-16; Castronova, 2004, pp. 192-196) of the immersion element of the game or similarly breaking the game achievement culture (Bartle, 2004, p. 16; Burke, 2002, p. 31) by bringing out-of-game advantages a player may have (in this case, excess real-world cash) to bear and devaluing other players’ perceived time-spent value by doing so. As one survey respondent replied,

I’m certain there exists a ton of rationalizations: they will also all boil down to “I’m more important than the other people.” (Participant 15, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

The purchases are also perceived as outright cheating (Bartle, 2004, p. 7; Burke, 2002, p. 31; Taylor, 2002, p. 231), with it “common for opponents of buying practices to make analogies to sports and board games: e.g., that nobody would play Monopoly if you could buy Boardwalk with real money” (Lehdonvirta, 2005a, p. 2).

I would NEVER buy virtual cash for a game. It’s cheating, and it ruins the game for everyone, not just me. You are ruining the game for other people. (Participant 4, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

Furthermore, as discussed by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), some users simply see the “rules of the game” as critically important, and breaking those rules, such as the EULA and TOS, is something that simply should not be done.

Rules are clearly presented, and people who break them forfeit their access to the game. (Participant 7, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

Returning to John Doe then, the outcome of him being distinguished from the rest of players for his RMT activities would seem to be completely dependent on the nature of the cognitions other players employ and the contexts they are in, as with a wide range of stigmas (Crocker et al., 1998). Certainly there seems to be overwhelming evidence from both the research conducted and from previous studies that some people would immediately find John’s actions to be something they would automatically label negatively, and indeed they are strongly encouraged to do so by the game companies themselves. Who those “some people” precisely are, why they are so adamant in their beliefs, and what are the factors that may affect those beliefs are under-researched areas in the contemporary literature. Exploring these areas in a longitudinal study of any potential changes in attitudes to which John Doe may be exposed as his time in the game progresses would be interesting, considering Castronova’s (2006a) description of how the users are increasingly exposed to the advertising of RMT marketers.

### Component 3: On Separating “Us” From “Them”

The third component of Link and Phelan's (2001, p. 370) conceptualization is when negative social labels directly separate the discriminator from the discriminated. Many examples through history have shown us time and time again how immigrants have been negatively socially labeled, and “them” and “us” situations start to occur (Morone, 1997). Even in less obvious areas, such as mental health, separations of “them” and “us” can be stark.

A person *has* cancer, heart disease, or the flu—such a person is one of “us,” a person who just happens to be beset by a serious illness. But a person *is* a “schizophrenic.” (Estroff, 1989, p. 189)

Has John Doe, by his perceived actions, been separated by his labelers into another category? Indeed, does this separation, like with a number of stereotypes and categorizations, then lead to the possibility of “all manner of bad characteristics” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 370) being attached to John? Is he also now seen as a bad player, a useless player, a person who you cannot trust in-game? A potential “ninja”?

When I'm in an in-game situation in which goldselling services are offered and I can hear the reactions of others, the general attitude seems to be one of mild contempt towards people who buy in-game money. (Participant 9, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

In the questionnaire of university students, there seemed clear evidence from the discourse analysis that those who expressed negative statements (22%) also seemed to attach strong negative labels to the users of the RMT, with the majority (61%) of the negative respondents using possibly devaluing statements such as “what a useless waste of life and money: idiots!” and “sad guys who should get a REAL life.”

This is reinforced by analysis of the respondents to the online forums survey. Of the 25 forums survey respondents, 12 were overwhelmingly negative regarding the RMT, with these 12 displaying a great deal of labeling and separation contexts. Clearly for those respondents, there was “them” who used the RMT market and “us” who revile it. These respondents, when asked if they had ever considered buying virtual cash, were also the most vehement in their distinctions between themselves and those who did buy.

It is despicable and I hate it with a passion. (Participant 1, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

Tentatively then, we can logically suggest that this differentiation is intimately connected to those who have strong feelings toward this market. For our RMT user, John

Doe, reactions from those not connected to online games would seem to be less pronounced than reactions from those who are associated. Furthermore, from the admittedly limited evidence available, it would seem that those who already have negative feelings toward the RMT market have a much more pronounced negative view of the users of this market and a clearer distinction between their “normal” activities and those of people such as John Doe.

This logical line of reasoning is not without similarities in many other stigmatized groupings. As Gomez and Trierweiler (1999) discussed, “Similar themes across the reported experiences of historically stigmatized groups” (p. 1900) exist, with many times those closely involved in the specific context being the most fervently opinionated on the subject. For example Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, and Straight (2005) described how in disability discrimination “individuals with disabilities may also be their own harshest critics” (p. 207). Indeed, as a classic study by Strong (1946) suggested, in color discrimination the intimate nature of the knowledge of the situation by people directly concerned and affected in the context can create some of the most profound social separations and labeling (though, perhaps, the study’s wording of that finding is best left to a past time and era).

#### **Component 4: Status Loss and Discrimination**

Largely because of the anonymity of virtual worlds and the separation of avatar identity from real-world persona, the context of any potential status loss or discrimination that could occur because of in-game actions would generally be presumed to remain in-game. However, as Taylor (2006) related, the social relationships that players build and develop can often lead to out-of-game meetings, friendships, and, potentially, relationships.

Indeed, as found by Kolo and Baur (2004), many players also cross the divide by playing with online and offline friends, their findings showing that up to one third of Ultima Online players also know one fourth of their total online friends in the real world. This creates a multiple “audience” (Mosher, 2001, p. 168) issue with any RMT activities in which John Doe partakes, possibly leading to disconnects between the reactions of different “audiences” and John’s attitude toward them, with perhaps a completely different attitude toward status loss with “online friends” and that with “real-world friends.” Thus, consideration should be given by the researcher to whether John Doe is affected in an internal game environment or externally and the impact this could have on participation within the research.

In the online forums survey, it was clear that player reaction does occur, as one player commented:

I know of people who’ve been booted out of guilds in WoW for it. (Participant 17, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

In addition, there is the institutionalized response from the games company that prohibits in-game asset trading and that can enforce sanctions, though it is generally the RMT sellers and farmers and not the players (i.e., paying customers) who games companies penalize:

Please understand that if you do purchase in-game property from sellers on eBay and personal sites, we may temporarily suspend your account, and at the very least, delete the offending items. (Blizzard Entertainment, 2006)

Potential status loss or discrimination because of stigma presumes that status value exists, or indeed the player is concerned regarding this status value. This in and of itself is a large presumption. As Malaby (2006) discussed, value in an MMORPG is made up of a number of attributes, including the market, social, and cultural capital that a player creates as he or she progresses within the game. Of these factors that could be affected by external parties, it is mainly the social "connections" (p. 154) and cultural "credentials" (p. 157) John Doe develops that would seem to be at the most risk of exposure, although potentially if players refuse to trade with John because of his actions, his market capital could also be exposed.

The risk to which these various types of capital are exposed is logically linked to the investment (in both time and efforts) that John Doe has actually placed into achieving and creating this capital and the importance he places on retaining it. This importance, this personal attachment, to the value we would deduce would be causally connected to his attitude toward the game. It is quite possible, if we take Bartle's (2003) player types, "achiever," "killer," "explorer," and "socialiser," that each may examine this risk in a different way. However, Bartle's descriptions of the typologies (p. 130) could be interpreted in a number of ways. For example, a player who is a "killer" type could possibly not care at all what others think; alternatively, another "killer" type player may set great stock about bragging about his achievements to other players. Perhaps more important, however, the typology itself has issues in its academic reliability with "the model's lack of empirical grounding" (Yee, 2004), leading to issues regarding meaningful interpretation. As Yee (2004) described, "Bartle's Test (not created by Bartle) might simply be creating the appearance of types instead of measuring them because the test bases categories on false dichotomies and associations." Thus, use of this simplistic model to measure or model the degree of "personal attachment" is fraught with difficulties. Consequentially, this investigation does not attempt to identify which player type may put a greater importance on in-game value; indeed, if Lehdonvirta's (2005b) RMT perception analysis of Yee's (2004, p. 6) more finely graded topology were used as a starting point, such an identification would be a substantial work in itself.

This study thus limits itself to the logical progression that those players who have purposefully developed and fostered in-game social or cultural value (Malaby, 2006) are

those with the most to risk from status loss and discrimination through association with the RMT, whatever their in-game playing motivations. Thus, if these players are exposed to value-damaging effects such as the loss of contacts, social group membership loss, or damage to their credentials, then “devaluing” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 371) could be taking place to create a stigma. For our John Doe, this leads to the possibility that there could be a stigma, despite many respondents to the survey espousing,

There is officially a stigma. (Participant 11, Online Forums Survey, forum respondent)

There is possibly a stigma only if John Doe has immersed himself into the game he is playing to such an extent that the in-game values he has constructed are meaningful and perceived to be at risk. If he has not, then discussion of his RMT experiences and any subsequent exposure may have little threat or meaning to him, and he may be quite open to researchers.

### **The Dependence on Power**

John Doe’s chances of being stigmatized and discriminated against are in many ways fully dependent on the power he lets other people have over him, a situation that a number of stigmatized groups share, in which the stigma is seen as an identity threat (Major & O’Brien, 2005). This identity threat stigma is based on the “extent to which stigma’s effects are mediated through targets’ understanding of how others view them” (p. 397)

If John Doe has “bought into” the MMORPG achievement culture, if he has invested in creating value in the world (in its number of forms), then he is potentially handing self-relevant, emotional, and social power to those other players who have also similarly committed to this process. However, the extent to which this power can be wielded is questionable.

Certainly institutional power, that of the computer game company to affect the players who break the EULA and TOS, is present and, as Terdiman (2007) related, can be used to dramatic effect. Few players who have invested in creating value in a virtual game environment would want to receive an e-mail like this:

Access to this account has been permanently disabled for exploitation of the World of Warcraft economy or for being associated to accounts which have been closed for intended exploitation. (Terdiman, 2007)

This institutional mechanism thus serves as an overarching environment that can be applied against John Doe, with potentially other players identifying John Doe to the operators of this mechanism for investigation. This “structural” (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 372) mechanism provides a setting in which even if John Doe has little interest in how other players view him, any RMT activities that he discloses could lead to

immediate and damaging consequences to his ability to enjoy his virtual online experiences. In the forums survey, the overwhelming response from players, 22 out of 25, even those who were otherwise accepting of RMT practices, was that of accepting the game company's responses in banning or suspending player accounts.

To use an analogy, John Doe's situation in fact bears many resemblances to the situation in which male homosexuals found themselves in the 1950s United Kingdom, when laws were in place prohibiting their sexuality (Lent, 2001). In the 1950s, many male homosexuals lived in fear of being accused of their sexuality and facing the structural mechanisms of the state (Bristow, 2007). Their activities thus needed to be covert and secretive, leading to even further stereotyping of them and their actions (McLaren, 2002). In this situation, many male homosexuals disguised their sexuality and attempted to meld in with the rest of the population, certainly constraining the knowledge of their sexuality to very limited "audiences" who they were sure they could trust. The fallout from them being "outed" by either themselves or another had the potential to considerably damage their social value (McLaren, 2002).

Although this analogy can be picked apart on a number of levels, what it does describe is a similar dual-level identity threat that is similar to the one John Doe has. On one level, John Doe's RMT activities can affect his in-game formed social and cultural values if disclosed to other players. However, potentially this could progress to the overriding structural mechanism level if he is reported by another player for this activity, which has the potential for the complete closure of his ability to access the virtual world. The identity threat potentially leads to effective and permanent exile for the avatar in which John has invested, indeed from his chosen virtual world.

## Conclusions

Analysis of Link and Phelan's (2001) stigma components in the RMT context has led to an ambiguous conclusion to the investigation. Is a research participant who buys in-game assets in a virtual environment in which such a trade is prohibited a potentially stigmatized person by other players? This potential stigma is logically power dependent on the player's view of his or her in-game values. Researchers though should not lose sight of the issue that the overarching institutional mechanisms are still in place, whatever the players' views are; this itself may be a powerful perceived threat for nonparticipation in research.

Moreover, it also leads us to the tentative deduction that those players who have invested considerably in creating value in these virtual worlds, and who are users of the RMT, may be the most unwilling to participate in research, which they view as a potential threat. For active researchers, this poses a number of both ethical and practical questions that should be considered at the beginning of the research process.

In many ways, the forums survey used in this investigation displays many issues within it to do with possible stigma effects. First, considering the replies (25 on the

forum board and 6 by private e-mail), not one of the forum board replies was positive, and all of the private e-mails were either positive or neutral. Though a larger survey size would be preferred, this may be indicative of the overarching problem of using such discussion boards for research. Although the qualitative responses acquired were of great value, bias in the types of responses can be seen to be evident, with each respondent having to log into his or her forum account to respond and with each respondent's username visible next to his or her post. Certainly, a lack of privacy of views was evident.

Quantitative methods in which identity is concealed perhaps thus have a perceived threat advantage in RMT research. Nick Yee's (2007) frequent research surveys, The Daedalus Project, perhaps provides a good example of best practice in this area, with ethical guidelines clear from the outset and the researchers' credentials outlined.

For future qualitative research of the players who participate in the RMT, considerable consideration (R. Lee, 1993) should be given to the method of access to the population, the limits this method of access places on the scope of the inquiry, the handling of potentially sensitive data, and the method of disclosure and dissemination of this data. Researchers must assess the impact of anti-RMT stigma and build research protocols that anticipate and minimize the threat to data accuracy that such stigma poses.

## Note

1. As a matter of clarification, World of Warcraft's clerical healing class is actually named "Priest" in game.

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