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Player concerns about MMORPG monetization

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Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgaven handler om inntektsgenerering i videospill, med fokus på to spill fra MMORPG-sjangeren, *Lost Ark* og *RuneScape*. Disse to videospillene er grunnlaget for forskningen, og forskningen er en tekst/spillanalytisk studie, hvor fokus har vært å beskrive, undersøke, sammenligne – og kontrastere de to spillene, inntektsgenereringsmodeller. Nåværende forskning på inntektsgenerering i videospill handler hovedsakelig om hvordan inntektsgenerering er negativt for spillere og hvordan det påvirker spillere. Dette prosjektet har som mål å oppdage nyanser som kan berike gjeldende forskning om inntektsgenerering ved å undersøke spillernes innsikt i inntektsgenerering og spilling. Lost Ark og RuneScape er like ved at det finnes flere spillversjoner. Det er den vestlige versjonen av Lost Ark, men hovedversjonen er den koreanske versjonen. RuneScape har i stedet RuneScape 3 og Old School RuneScape, som ble brakt tilbake for spillere som savnet den gamle versjonen av RuneScape før endringene for RuneScape gikk over til RuneScape 3. Disse versjonene har åpenbare forskjeller i spillmekanikk og inntektsgenereringsmodeller, og disse forskjellene er diskutert. Prosjektets primære mål har vært å analysere og diskutere spillernes bekymringer og hva spillerne har å si om inntektsgenereringen av de to spillene, nærmere bestemt hvordan spillere forbinder inntektsgenerering med spillelementene til Lost Ark og RuneScape, ved bruk av sosiale medier systemet *Reddit*, som er vanlig for å diskutere spillene, og er grunnlaget og dataene for å se hva spillerne sier. Dette betyr at prosjektet viser frem mange kommentarer fra Reddit-brukere, forklarer hva de formidler og analyserer det til inntektsgenereringsmodellene og spillingen som spillere forbinder kommentarene sine med. Der det generelle publikumet mener inntektsgenerering er hatet fordi det koster penger, virket rovdyr, eller kan være knyttet til gambling, viser funnene at spillere i noen tilfeller ikke hater inntektsgenereringssystemene på grunn av det; i stedet fordi inntektsgenereringsmodellene er dårlig implementert og sammenvevd med spillaspektet ved spillene, som spillernes progresjon på karakteren deres, inntektsgenererte kosmetikk er knyttet til spillerens karakterstyrke, tilleggsfordeler knyttet til abonnementet er nødvendig for at hver spiller skal spille spillet effektivt, og å måtte spille en annen spillmodus for å unnslippe inntektsgenerering. Konklusjonene som ble funnet er at spillselskaper bevisst oppretter inntektsgenereringssystemer for spillene deres for å tjene penger, men til tider er omfanget av hvordan det kan påvirke spillingen uklart for utviklerne, og på grunn av det er noen spillers problem med inntektsgenerering at det kan påvirke for mye av spillets spilling.

Abstract

This master's thesis is about monetization in video games, focusing on two games from the MMORPG genre, *Lost Ark* and *RuneScape*. These two video games are the basis of the research, and the research is a text/game analytical study, where the focus has been to describe, examine, compare – and contrast the two games, monetization models. Current research on monetization in video games is mainly about how monetization is negative for players and how it affects players. This project has aimed to discover nuances that can enrich current monetization research by researching players' insight on monetization and gameplay. Lost Ark and RuneScape are similar in that multiple game versions exist. There is the Western version of Lost Ark, but the main version is the Korean version. RuneScape instead has RuneScape 3 and Old School RuneScape, which was brought back for players that missed the old version of RuneScape before the changes made for RuneScape transitioning into RuneScape 3. These versions have overt differences in game mechanics and monetization models, and these differences are discussed. The project's primary goal has been to analyze and discuss players' concerns and what players have to say about the monetization of the two games, specifically, how players associate monetization with the gameplay elements of Lost Ark and RuneScape, with the use of the social media system *Reddit*, which is commonplace for discussing the games, and is the basis and the data for seeing what players say. This means the project showcases many comments by Reddit users, explaining what they convey and analyzing it to the monetization models and gameplay with which players associate their comments. Where the general audience believes monetization is hated because it costs money, is seemed predatory, or can be tied to gambling, the findings show that players in some cases do not hate the monetization systems because of that; instead, because the monetization models are poorly implemented and intertwined with the gameplay aspect of the games, such as players' progression on their character, monetized cosmetics being tied to player characters strength, additional benefits tied to subscription being necessary for every player to play the game efficiently, and having to play another game mode to escape from monetization. The conclusions found are that game companies deliberately create monetization systems for their games to earn revenue, but at times, the scope of how it might affect the gameplay is unclear to the developers, and because of that, some player's problem with monetization is that it can affect too much of a game's gameplay.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As someone who loves and has played video games since childhood, I have experienced the different phases of monetization and most business models, especially in computer games. Back in the early days of video games, the concept of video games was much simpler than it is now. As a classic example, one would ask their parents about a game they would want for Christmas, and if the parents obliged and bought the present, the video game would come in a compact disc or a CD. One would insert the CD into the digital machine it was developed for, mainly computers and consoles, install the video game if necessary, and then play to one's heart's content. One-time purchase with a physical copy for oneself, nothing more to it.

However, jumping to the time we are living in now, this has not only changed drastically, where the CD is a thing of the past for most video games, now video games can be purchased and downloaded from the internet and various platforms developed for the respective digital machine. For example, on the computer, there is the platform *Steam*, the most popular platform to purchase (if it has a price) and play video games. One would say this is a convenient development, which is true; no more going into the store, purchasing the CD, inserting it into the digital machine, and so forth; everything is online.

With that, some video game companies now use the revenue model of in-game monetization to earn revenue instead of players directly purchasing a game for a set price, and this is more common for free-to-play games. There are various ways to monetize a game; a typical example is the notorious loot box system. The player pays a sum of money to open a loot box in the game for the chance to get a virtual item in return, which can be cosmetics used for the player's avatar, to game-changing equipment. However, there are also less notorious monetization models, such as converting real-life money into in-game currency, which has no random factor.

Predatory monetization is a highly debated concept regarding monetization in video games. If unlucky, the players can spend thousands of dollars before getting what they seek. In this master's project, I have investigated monetization practices in two games of the same genre to see what the players say, if/how monetization matters to them, and in relation to gameplay.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Monetization in video games affects some individual players more than others, for example, how fast one progresses in a video game. If a player is more financially capable, they can pay through the most progression of a video game. Players have a term for these kinds of players: a *whale*, someone who pays excessive money in a game. On paper, this does not seem to be a problem; however, there is frustration in how players that pay for progression already can be at the latest content, while free-to-play players have to be stuck for several weeks before they can be at the same content path, meaning many players are left behind.

On the flip side of the coin, however, there can be the argument that having the option to pay for progress is an excellent optional method since many players might not have time to play each day and progress. For example, Player A, a married player who has a child and works full-time, does not have as much time as Player B, a teenager going to school and has no job. If no monetization method included paying for progression, Player A could never reach the same content area as Player B. On the other hand, some B Players might also be busy with real-life situations; however, they might not have the income needed to progress. In that way, Player B will be stuck while Player A gets to the content. There has to be some balance, and that balance is what players argue about, "This game is pay to win," "You need money to progress," "As a free-to-play player, this is not fair," and "Whales already are at the newest content." These are one of the many other examples that players face from monetization.

Ultimately, players know that some video game companies are deliberately producing video games with some monetization method implemented. There is already a substantial amount of research on monetization; however, I argue that there is a lack of research on precisely what players consider unfair with monetization concerning gameplay elements of games.

1.2 Methodology

The research method for this master's project is primarily a text/game analytical study. I have thoroughly described, examined, compared – and contrasted the two games chosen for this project and their monetization use. The two video games that are the basis of the research are

Lost Ark and *RuneScape*. These two video games are both in the same genre, an MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game). Having two video games of the same genre has been a benefit when it comes to research on their monetization models, as the game's main concepts are better comparable than taking another game from a different genre. Also, focusing on the MMORPG genre is more beneficial than other genres, as the community of players interacts with each other much more (thanks to the multiplayer aspect) than, for example, in a Triple-A (AAA) video game, which usually is single-player/cooperative. Furthermore, by having hours of playtime and experience in Lost Ark and RuneScape, I know how the gameplay systems work, which has benefited the goals of this project.

It is also worth mentioning that Lost Ark and RuneScape have different game versions. There are several versions of Lost Ark, but the only two versions examined for the thesis are the Western and Korean versions, where the Korean version is the game's main version. RuneScape, however, only has two versions, that being RuneScape 3 and Old School RuneScape; where both versions are their own separate game, but they are related to each other since Old School RuneScape was an older version before RuneScape was transitioned into RuneScape 3. Using the Korean Lost Ark and Old School RuneScape as a comparison for the respective games has been a helpful method to see the monetization model differences and players' perspectives on the other versions. Also, to represent the games, several screenshots have been taken from the Western version of Lost Ark and RuneScape 3 while logged into my respective account for both games, which I have used in the thesis to represent what I am discussing. If the figures caption says, "Screenshot taken from in-game," it means I took it while logged into my personal account.

I am supporting my findings with what the community and their respective players say about the monetization models by investigating the social media system *Reddit*, where the players post discussions and opinions about the game. Game developers also contribute their thoughts on the player's voice on the matter in the official forums, which has benefited the project. That is the *Official Lost Ark Forums*, but not RuneScape's forums, since it is not as active as it once was. The method to gather the data was by using the website camas.undit.com, which uses the pushift.io Reddit API, which is: "designed and created by the /r/datasets mod team to help provide enhanced functionality and search capabilities for searching Reddit comments and submissions." (Baumgartner [2017] 2023). The data is gathered from the /r/lostarkgame

subreddit for Lost Ark and the [/r/runescape](#) subreddit for RuneScape, the two subreddits with the most Reddit activity for the respective games. The data aims to identify users who have left comments regarding monetization for the respective games, analyze what they complain about and their concerns, and explain why it is a concern for them and how there can be solutions to fix or improve the issues. Additionally, I am looking at how players associate monetization with the gameplay elements of the two games. Rather than players hating the implemented monetization models, there are signs that players are more annoyed that some monetization models affect the gameplay of the games too much.

The data is transferred from the website camas.undit.com into two Excel spreadsheets that show the Reddit user, the exact time of their post, what they posted, and links to the respective subreddit, user, post, and comment. This proves helpful, as it makes the data dynamic instead of static, thanks to the exact time of their post. The Excel spreadsheets have the functionality to show how many users have posted on the subreddit only once or several times, using a specific word in their post that was filtered in the data search. Using the "Pivot Table" function in Excel, I organized the comments by different methods; for example, I organized all users with one comment into one sheet or the top commenters of the respective subreddit into one sheet. There are several figures in Chapter 7 that include comments from Reddit users, and these were taken as screenshots from the individual Excel spreadsheets.

The data was also filtered with specific search terms for the respective subreddits. For /r/lostarkgame, the data was filtered with the search term "P2W" (Pay-to-win), so only users that had that term in their post were gathered, while for /r/runescape, only users that had the word "MTX" (Microtransaction) in their post were gathered. To clarify, this means that there is the possibility that a user with only one comment has interacted more than once in the subreddit but not while using the filtered words. It is also possible that a user has returned to the subreddit after the timeline of the gathered data. The reason not to filter both subreddits with the same term is that players do not use "MTX" as much in Lost Ark, while RuneScape does not use "P2W". As for other potential terms that could be used, there were few options, and the two chosen terms are the most common terms associated with monetization in the respective games.

1.3 Research questions

With the methodology explained, the thesis is built upon three research questions that suit the thesis's central claim: players do not hate the monetization systems because they are wrong but because it is poorly implemented and intertwined with the gameplay aspect of the games. The research questions are based on that argument, and the goal has been to investigate and answer these questions. They are as the following:

1. How are the wide range of players' experiences and reactions about computing and digitally mediated communications transformed by monetization in MMORPGs?

As the main research question of the thesis, it will be answered by seeing what players have to say about the monetization of the two games chosen for the thesis by analyzing the comments made by players on the respective subreddit.

2. What are some of the implications of having monetization tied too much to video games gameplay?

The question concerns monetization models, which are poorly implemented and intertwined with the gameplay aspect of the games; where one example of such a case can be if a monetization system pressures the player to spend real-life money on it because of how impactful it is to the gameplay and how the player will be at a significant disadvantage if they do not do so.

3. How is Random Reward Mechanism (RRM) different between gameplay and using real-life money to get a random reward?

The following question is asked regarding the design of Random Reward Mechanism in video games, which is inherently distinct and similar when compared to a gameplay element not tied to any monetization whatsoever and a gameplay element that can/is influenced by a monetization system. An example of this can be the chance to acquire a rare item from an in-game activity, which is developed without the influence of monetization, as developers have not incorporated monetization into the activity. The counter-example is the chance to acquire a rare item from an in-game activity; however, the player can buy boosts that increase their chance of acquiring that rare item by spending money.

1.4 Significance

I hope that by having conducted this master's project, I have been able to add sufficient development and answers to what players believe about monetization in video games. Using Lost Ark, RuneScape, and their other versions as the basis, all of them being incredibly popular MMORPGs in their separate way, and video games that there is not much research on, I hope it has been sufficient for a contribution to aid in the discussion of monetization. I also desire to see if monetization necessary is not as detrimental as people, players, and researchers entail it to be, depending on exactly how the monetization is constructed for certain video games and depending on the player base and the culture surrounding it.

If my research finds alluring answers, I have faith that other researchers can conduct similar research on other genres of video games besides MMORPGs. There are many video games with monetization schemes implemented that have different communities, cultures, and player bases, and this master's project has its basis on only one part of the much more extensive scope of video games and monetization. I anticipate this research can also be viable to players and developers, as it can impact their viewpoint on monetization, which can be beneficial to change their thoughts on the matter.

1.5 Summary of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 started by introducing monetization and explaining why I have chosen monetization as the thesis topic. It also showcased how some individual players can benefit, and some cannot benefit from monetization, depending on their current lifestyle. The research questions and the methodology of the thesis were discussed. Lost Ark and RuneScape are the basis of the thesis while using data gathered from Reddit to see players' discussions and concerns on monetizing the respective games. I also gave my hopes by writing and researching monetization.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter discusses some key literature associated with monetization. This is to support and showcase that monetization in video games is a highly researched topic among researchers. It also discusses the literature on the history of MMORPGs, computer, video game MMORPGs, and tabletop RPGs to understand how MMORPGs became what it is today.

2.1 What is Monetization?

Monetization has expanded exceptionally in video games, and many have some caliber of monetization implemented, predatory or not. Many researchers are intrigued and have researched video games and monetization, which this section discusses. (Davidovici-Nora 2013; Ivanov, Wittenzellner, and Wardaszko 2021; King and Delfabbro 2018; King et al. 2019; Király et al. 2021; Mistry 2018; Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022; Sotamaa and Svelch 2021; Xiao and Henderson 2019)

The part of monetization researchers are most intrigued by are the predatory schemes developed as a part of some. King and Delfabbro bring up one of the most common techniques of predatory monetization: loot boxes. Loot boxes are essentially paying real-life money to gamble and have a chance to acquire a variety of items, cosmetics, or other related items in video games. It can be seen as the virtual version of slot machines. Typically, one or more rare items can be acquired; however, one has to spend a significant amount of money to get it if they are not lucky on their first few tries. This can lead to entrapment, which is the belief that one has invested too much to quit (King and Delfabbro, 2018).

Gambling is arguably the most common problem associated with predatory monetization. In the case of loot boxes, Király explains how loot boxes permit and promote underage gambling (Király et al. 2021). Children are a vulnerable group, as they do not grasp the precise situation of spending money on predatory schemes; they aim for what they see/want without the consequences. The notion of getting addicted and spending countless money without parental permission has increased drastically since the rise of in-game monetization (Király et al. 2021: 854).

Predatory monetization does not necessarily need to entail a financial aspect. Xiao and Henderson have written their paper based on King and Delfabbro's research. They argue how psychological manipulations are also presented in what is known as Random Reward Mechanisms or RRMs (Xiao and Henderson 2019). An example of RRM can be *events* in video games that occur a few times a day with only one participation each day. The video game *Lost Ark* has such a mechanic implemented, and the player can participate in a particular event once a day, to have a chance to gain the core reward of that event. There is no guarantee that one can get it the first time; it can take hundreds of times, whereas some get it first-try.

As Xiao and Henderson explain, RRM may lead to potentially abusive psychological manipulation, which impacts players' health and social lives (Xiao and Henderson 2019: 180). As an example from *Lost Ark*, if a player writes out in the global chat that they got the core reward first try and they never need to come back, while some other participant is on their hundredth time without the core reward, there is a high chance this would affect their mental state in some way.

Taking a step back from the gambling aspect of monetization, an important point to take up is the different types of monetization there. Besides predatory schemes, some games combine them with other monetization types. Ivanov and his co-writers list the core monetization types in the book. They mention the following: 1 Standard product price, 2 Expansions or expansion packs, 3 DLC add-ons or DLC packs, 4 In-Game currencies, 5 Loot boxes, 6 Subscription-based revenues, and 7 Free-to-play products with microtransactions (Ivanov, Wittenzellner, and Wardaszko 2021).

An example of the two games that are the basis for this master project, *Lost Ark* and *RuneScape,* can be categorized under numbers 4, 5, 6, and 7. Even though both games are technically F2P, the developers need a sustainable income source from these monetization types. Ivanov also describes microtransactions. In MMORPGs such as *Lost Ark* and *RuneScape*, microtransaction is the basis of monetization. A famous example of microtransaction is *premium passes*. All premium passes work similarly; the player pays extra money to unlock extra in-game items while playing the game. The premium pass usually has a time limit and a limit of levels one can progress until the next one comes around.

The journal by Király explains how microtransactions have raised concerns because of the financial costs incurred by children and adolescents, and where gambling mechanisms such as loot boxes have generated heated debate because the features evade regulations, permit and promote underage gambling (Király et al. 2021). One chapter in the book by Sotamaa and Svelch discusses the same as Király about microtransactions controversies and how the general concerns about microtransactions have been exacerbated by the backlash at loot boxes, which shares gambling characteristics (Sotamaa and Svelch 2021). They also explain how microtransactions can either affect gameplay, for example, by giving an advantage to the paying user, the notion of pay to win (P2W), or adjusting the cosmetics that the player can equip, such as skins for their player character (Sotamaa and Svelch 2021: 200).

The paper by Petrovskaya and Zendle has a section where their discussion is the same as what I am hoping to bring forward later in the thesis with the use of players' comments from Reddit, which is how players regularly interact with in-game transactions and therefore are likely to have an in-depth understanding and nuanced perspectives on when these transactions might be considered misleading or unfair (Petrovskaya, Link to external site, and Zendle 2022). They also explain how even player community members have attempted to build up informal classifications of monetization techniques. This indicates that such knowledge is essential and exciting to players and the research community (Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022: 1066).

Petrovskaya and Zendle also researched some participants, where they found 35 monetization issues that players reported as being either misleading, unfair, or aggressive. (Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022: 1068). They have categorized them into eight sections, that is game dynamics designed to drive spending, product not meeting expectations, monetization of the essential quality of life, predatory advertising, in-game currency, pay to win, the widespread presence of microtransactions, and others (Petrovskaya and Zendle 2022: 1068). These results can be used to compare what is found out later on for Lost Ark and RuneScape players and what they have to say about monetization throughout Reddit comments.

In another paper by King, they discuss how because of the rapid expansion and uptake of video games that offer in-game purchasing options for consumers, King now suggests how it is an opportunity to evaluate these products from a consumer protection perspective (King et al.

2019). King explains how academic research has already been linked to monetized games that may offer a pathway to some types of gambling (King et al. 2019: 132).

The issue arising from monetization in video games is how gameplay design is combined with monetization, as Davidovici-Nora explains (Davidovici-Nora 2013). Davidovici-Nora discusses how the basic premise is to monetize a player engagement by building a money-making strategy into the gameplay and how F2P monetization consists in making spending money fun (Davidovici-Nora 2013: 24). This can relate to how RuneScape monetization and F2P game design is constructed, where the loot box system of RuneScape is designed with the many different skills that the player can train and experience. Moreover, Lost Ark can relate to the store where the player can buy skins and cosmetics to cosplay and experience their character as they want to envision it, the goal being for the player to have fun with their character.

Davidovici-Nora also lists five main inner and personal motivations that drive the player to use microtransactions, that is, advancement in a status hierarchy, emotions/immersion, feelings, customization and self-expression, and progress/achievement (Davidovici-Nora 2013: 36). This can be especially seen in Lost Ark, where the player has to have a constant advancement in the status hierarchy if they want to fit in and be able to play the same content as other players that are higher level than them. The paper by Mistry also supports the same argument as Davidovici-Nora, where microtransactions sully the gaming experience because players get incentivized to purchase in-game items instead of earning these items by progressing through the game (Mistry 2018). Consumers and commentators are concerned that developers use recurring revenue streams to abuse microtransaction monetization schemes by increasingly sectioning off content behind paywalls (Mistry 2018: 543).

One example that Mistry brings up is that of the game Destiny, where players could buy silver to open loot boxes that gave them a chance for cosmetic rewards that did not affect gameplay (Mistry 2018: 544). However, at one point, the developers of Destiny, Bungie, decided to implement the feature of having armor into the loot box system, which alters the player's in-game power as well (Mistry 2018: 544). This brought about considerable controversy in the Destiny community. This example is also related to Lost Ark later on in the thesis, where a specific system was decided not to be implemented into the Western version of Lost Ark because

the loot box system would reward the player with cosmetics that gives stat bonuses to the player, meaning it is not only cosmetic but also gameplay and power related.

The last subject that Mistry discusses is how loot boxes are sometimes free, but the keys to open them cost money, and loot boxes have an addictive potential (Mistry 2018: 546). To briefly mention, in RuneScape, the player daily has one key to spend - two if they are subscribed to the game, and this makes the player interact with their loot box system daily, enticing the player to potentially buy keys to spend even more on the loot boxes.

2.2 History of MMORPGs, computer and video game MMORPGs, and tabletop RPGs

Since this master's thesis focuses on two MMORPGs as its basis, it is beneficial to give a brief overview of the history of MMORPGs, computer, video game MMORPGs, and tabletop RPGs, and what some researchers discuss. MMORPGs throughout the years have changed drastically, whereas, in the past, it was a more specific genre of games consisting of simple graphics, mechanics, and little to no monetization. The community surrounding MMORPGs also comprised young people intrigued by what an MMORPG had to offer, such as its social availability, where many young players could bond friendships and even learn the standard English language. Researchers have discussed the history of MMORPGs, which this part focuses on. (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008; Bartle, Richard A. 2010; Hagström, David, and Viktor Kaldo 2014; Sanchez, Joe. 2009; Tresca, Michael J. 2014)

The history of MMORPGs can be categorized into four different categories that Achterbosch and Cowriters explain and have used parts of it to relate their research. What are the social interactions between players in MMORPGs, the different architectures to build MMORPGs, the effects of latency on MMORPGs, and the problems that plague MMORPGs (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008: 2-3)? As previously explained, an intriguing part of MMORPGs is what it offers for socialization. An ongoing study on socialization in MMORPGs explains how the appeal of MMORPGs is vital for a wide age range of players, who average 22 hours per week playing. With that, the architecture of an MMORPG is also essential, such as the questions of how many people can be active simultaneously on a server or how much control the developers have over the game. Followed by it latency, which is how much time it

takes a packet of data to get from one point to another; this is also important because delays in actions players take can happen, which can affect their interaction. Moreover, finally, problems such as cheating must be considered if one desires to have an MMORPG running (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008: 2-3).

MMORPGs have evolved and changed over the years, and there are multiple precursors for them. Sanchez has a chapter looking at the social history of virtual worlds. He explains that since 1979, five different milestones can be used to summarize the history of the virtual worlds (Sanchez 2009). That are Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), TinyMUDs, MOOs (Multi-User Dungeons object Orientated), MMORPGs, and 3-D social virtual worlds (Sanchez 2009: 9). Achterbosch however, explains Computer Role-Playing Games (CRPGs) another different milestone, which with MUDs, borrowed its concepts from Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), which is a tabletop RPG (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008: 5).

The book by Bartle has several chapters discussing the five different ages of MUDs and MMORPGs. Compared to Sanchez's version of the five milestones, there are some differences in Bartle's version. Bartle explains that the first age, related to the years of 1978-1985, was focused on MUDs, which is a text-based game consisting of everything the characters did, saw, or heard, given to the player as text (Bartle, Richard A. 2010: 25). The second age around 1985-1989, focused on MUD1-inspired virtual worlds, and at that point, those games were redubbed to be called MUD1 (Bartle, Richard A. 2010: 26). The third age from 1989-1995, had AberMUD, that inspired the likes of TinyMUD, LPMUD, and DikuMUD, as different types of virtual worlds. The fourth age from 1995-1997, Bartle discusses the first commercial virtual world, the Sceptre of Goth (Bartle, Richard A. 2010: 28). Finally, there is the fifth age, representing from 1995 to the present. This was when MMORPGs, such as World of Warcraft, started making a name, becoming one of the most popular MMORPGs of all time (Bartle, Richard A. 2010: 36).

Compared to Sanchez and Bartle's milestones and ages, Achterbosch explains how MMORPGs followed in the footsteps of MUDs. However, also, TinyMUD, which focused only on the social interactions between players, is a vital aspect of all MMORPGs now (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008: 7). Then there was CRPGs, which introduced real-time mechanics, meaning all actions was instant instead of turn-based, and 3D games, which

many MMORPGs are developed on (Achterbosch, Leigh, Robyn Pierce, and Gregory Simmons 2008: 7).

2.3 Summary of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 showcased much current research on two critical pieces of literature for the thesis. The themes for monetization were predatory monetization, gambling, random reward mechanism, core monetization types, microtransactions, loot boxes, and gameplay design related to monetization. The themes that occurred in the history of MMORPGs, computer, and video game MMORPGs, and tabletop RPGs, were four different categories of the history of MMORPG, the social history of virtual worlds, and the five different ages of MUDs and MMORPGs.

Chapter 3: From Tabletop RPG to MMORPG and the Element of "Chance"

This chapter discusses vital components associated with tabletop RPG and the MMORPG era by using the company "Hasbro," the publishers of D&D, and the company "Jagex," the developers and publishers of RuneScape, to discuss and compare their revenue systems over the years and what these systems are. Lastly, the element of chance is also discussed by looking at the most common dice and why the element of chance is an essential aspect of RPGs.

3.1 A look at the history of how RPG makers have made revenue, from tabletop RPGs to MMORPGs

Understanding the history of how RPG makers have made revenue and how this has changed from tabletop RPGs to MMORPGs is a beneficial aspect to discuss for the master's thesis. People tend to forget that before there were loot boxes and other mischievous monetization models, RPG makers had to have a way to make revenue that involved different methods.

To make this segment simpler to understand, I am looking at the company Hasbro, which is the parent company of several different publishers, the notable one for this segment being the classic tabletop RPG Dungeons & Dragons (commonly referred to as D&D), which is under the influence of Wizards of the Coast LLC or "WotC," but once was under the influence of the original publisher Tactical Studies Rules or "TSR." Moreover, for the MMORPGs, the company Jagex, the publisher of RuneScape, is the focus of this segment. This is because RuneScape is one of the first MMORPGs to be created and has undergone many revenue changes and systems throughout its 21 years of history. This gives an overview of how revenue models have changed since the age when there were only tabletop RPGs alone dominating the RPG industry. Below is a table clearly showing the companies and their relation:

- **Dungeons & Dragons (DND)**
- Hasbro (Current parent company)
- Wizards of the Coast LLC (WotC) (Current publisher)
    - Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) (Previous publisher)

- **RuneScape**
- Jagex (Developer and Publisher)

The previous and current company of DND have two core models to earn revenue that is relatively different and similar to how MMORPG companies earn revenue. The two core models are:

1. Serialized content
2. Subscription model

These two revenue models, what are they and how do they function? First, there has to be an explanation of what serialized content is. The website Loomly explains that it is the idea of taking a topic, in this case, DND, and turning it into several smaller pieces of content that is similar and relatable to that particular content ("Serialized Content: How to Take Advantage of Serialization to Grow Your Brand" 2020). DND, as a whole, is about going on fictional adventures with one's friends. However, when one DND adventure is over, what will become of the next? That is where serialized content and the aspect of "modules" come in. Modules, as they were called before the 3rd Edition of DND, are adventures published by TSR that players (usually the "game masters") would buy and use in their DND session, essentially making so there are an

infinite number of adventures players can experience. Beyond the 3rd Edition, WotC used the term adventure instead of modules, but it entails the same aspect.

This not only made DND more popular, but it is a genius way to earn revenue. The players would wait on their particular favorite module and then buy it to go on more adventures, thus being an excellent source of revenue while at the same time keeping the players engaged in DND.

Besides serialized content, there was (physical) and (online) subscription model. The subscription model is a revenue model used in many different genres, whether tied to RPG/MMORPG or something unrelated and can be used in many different ways. In the case of DND, there is the so-called "Dragon Magazine," released in 1975, that players could subscribe to, and it would come out monthly with a new edition. After Hasbro took over and WotC became the new publisher, the magazine turned digital instead and was named "Dragon+," which launched in 2015.

Taking a look at the 1975 version of the magazine, Daniel Quinn, an RPG hobbyist, writes in their blog post the following about the Dragon magazine: "Upon its inception in 1975, *Dragon* was the first magazine to endow its readers with a voice that would shape the development of the nascent role-playing game (RPG) phenomenon." (Quinn 2018). That is to say; the magazine was more than just an ordinary magazine; it shaped the RPG model into what it is. The magazine was a huge success gaining the companies extra revenue besides their main attraction being DND.

Having covered DND and their revenue systems in the tabletop RPG genre, how does the MMORPG genre compare to their system? MMORPGs can have several monetization models that tabletop RPGs cannot have. In their book Ivanov and his co-writers, they have a table with seven of the most common monetization schemes in video games. These are in their table order:

- Standard product price
- Expansions or expansion packs
- DLC add-ons or DLC packs
- In-game currencies
- Loot boxes
- Subscription-based revenues
- Free-to-play products with microtransactions

(Ivanov, Wittenzellner, and Wardaszko 2021: 391)

In the case of tabletop RPGs that only have two core revenue systems, MMORPGs instead have an astonishing seven systems of revenue. However, this was not always the case, which is reviewed in this section, using RuneScape for comparison.

When RuneScape was first released in January 2001, that version, now known as "RuneScape Classic," was in its early stages of development, by three brothers, the Gower brothers, under their company name Jagex which is the same now. They were passionate about creating video games, and RuneScape became their big hit. For the first year of RuneScape Classic, the game had no form of monetization, meaning the game was utterly free-to-play. However, in February 2002, the brothers added the first type of monetization to the game, membership. In this case, membership is the same as subscription-based revenues, where the player could buy the one-month, three months, or one-year package deal for some amount of money. This then would let the player access numerous additional parts of the game, such as members-only quests, areas, and skills, to name a few. The Gower brothers had to add it to continue developing RuneScape Classic.

As the years passed, membership was the only form of monetization the game had, and players were generally happy with it; it was the same as any other MMORPG monetization system. If players wanted to get new content and for the game to develop, some revenue system had to be implemented for the developer; it was as fair as it could be. However, ten years later, in February 2012, a new revenue system was introduced to RuneScape, an infamous monetization model; the loot box system was added to the game, in RuneScape known at that time as "Squeal of Fortune" (SoF), and currently "Treasure Hunter" (TH). In the same year, July 2012, the microtransaction store "Solomon's General Store" (SGS) got added to the game as well. Now, RuneScape has two new revenue systems in the game.

With the Squeal of Fortune came the loot box system where free spins or paid spins could be used to spin the SoF for the chance of random loot. The random loot could be various common and scarce items, even some game-changing if a player had won it. This was an extremely controversial monetization model, as it could lead to gambling and other conditions.

Solomon's General Store was the next monetization model added to the game. In the following figure, my own RuneScape account logged in SGS can be seen as an illustration of how it looks:

Figure 1: A showcase of Solomon's General Store logged in to my account on 25.09.2022 (Screenshot from the store https://www.runescape.com/solomons-store)

In SGS, two new currencies were added, Loyalty points and RuneCoins. Loyalty points are earned monthly by being a member of the game. The player acquires even more points the more they are a member without canceling their membership. This means players can hesitate to cancel their membership for fear of earning fewer points. In Figure 1, my account has a consecutive membership of 3 years and ten months with a cumulative membership of 7 years and seven months. Unsubscribing would result in a consecutive membership reset, and the subsequent reward would drop from 30000 to a lesser amount. Then there is RuneCoins, which is currency bought with real-life money, and players can use it to, for example, buy cosmetics for a certain amount of RuneCoins. Figure 1 shows a balance of 457 RuneCoins, around 8$ in cash.

With all that covered, 2012 for RuneScape was a considerable shift for the players and how the game would be monetized going forward. However, observing it from a narrow aspect, which was added so far in 2012, was probably a necessary step to earn more revenue without changing the prices of the subscription aspect. Jagex was also no longer driven by the three brothers; it had

a significant number of employees, meaning more money had to be produced if all employees were to get sufficient money and for the company to continue with success.

However, the three revenue systems, membership, Squeal of Fortune, and Solomon's General Store, was not the last revenue system to be added to RuneScape. 25 September 2013, another system was added to RuneScape, termed "Bonds." However, the twist was that this system was different from the commonly known revenue system and was implemented to combat what is known as *gold farming*, a problem that appears in various MMORPGs. On the website howstuffworks, Clint Pumphrey explains that gold farming is: "a trade in which individuals play online games to earn virtual currency and other goods, then turn around and sell them – for real money – to other players looking for a shortcut" (Pumphrey 2015). Moreover, bots (computers controlling the in-game character) are usually used to earn a massive amount of in-game currency and then sell it to players needing more in game-wealth. This has many problems on its own, the first being that it is an illegal activity in various ways, and the first is that botting is not allowed since it fills the market with resources not collected by real-life players. Second, selling gold to other players is also illegal. On the website "Venture Beat," there is a blog written by Giancarlo Valdes explaining Bonds. Valdes writes:

> "In a serious tone that resembles tragic public service announcements, Jagex chief executive Mark Gerhard explained in a video (above) how the new bonds will help "destroy" gold farming. Bonds cost $5 a pop. You can gift them, trade them for items and in-game currency, or redeem them (either for a 14-day membership, 160 RuneCoins, or 8 spins on the Squeal of Fortune wheel to win prizes)." (Valdes 2013)

Moreover, to give a better idea of how it works, in Figure 2, there is Jagex's interpretation of their bond system:

Figure 2: Jagex explaining how Bonds work on their website (Screenshot from the Bonds section https://www.runescape.com/bonds)

Fundamentally, the idea was that Bonds gave the players the option to buy in-game wealth instead of in-game wealth illegally to combat players buying gold from other players. This does not fix the botting problem, but it is still a massive hit since it reduces the amount of illegal trade between players.

3.2 Chance and the Use of Dice

In most RPGs, chance and dice are core mechanics players encounter and must use. However, why is it that dice are a fundamental mechanic in RPGs? First, examining the most popular type of dice in tabletop RPGs can be beneficial, as also the other five types of dice besides the most popular one. Various dice are used in RPGs, but the most-used one is the D20. In the book "Designers & Dragons," it is explained how in the 2000s, the D20 brand was created and how: "a company's success was often measured by how agile it was: how able it was to respond to the quickly developing marketplace.", meaning that many companies such as "Necromancer Games" and "Fiery Dragon Productions" to name a few, were hard at work to create tabletop RPGs designed with the use of the D20 dice ("Designers & Dragons: The 00s" n.d.).

However, D20 being the most popular and essential of the dice, five other types of dice are used besides the D20. They are the D4, D6, D8, D10 and D12. Additionally, there can be an extra D10

simultaneously, making it, in actuality, seven dice in total. Each of these dice plays a role when the player interacts and throws them. On the website "skullsplitterdice," there is an explanation of what each of the dice primarily functions in broad terms:

> D20 – "In battle, it determines **who strikes first** and **how accurate their strike**."
>
> D12 – "Almost exclusively a die that **determines battle damage.**"
>
> D10 + D10 – "Primarily used to determine damage from **specific weapons or spells**."
>
> D8 – "Is used more often than not for **determining damage done.**"
>
> D6 – "Is used for determining the damage done by **spells and weapons.**"
>
> D4 – "Determines damage for the **smallest weapons** found in Dungeons and Dragons."
>
> ("D&D Dice Explained" n.d.)

These six/seven dice are used when playing most types of tabletop RPGs on the market, and in DND, all seven are used. Knowing that so many dice are used for tabletop RPGs, this brings back the question, why are dice a fundamental mechanic in RPGs?

In the article by Gailloreto, he explains that one: "generally incorporate said dice into their rules for conflict resolution and challenges" and how: "RPG players do not roll dice for simple, mundane actions, but for dangerous, difficult deeds" (Gailloreto 2021). In other words, Gailloreto means that the dices make the RPGs such as DND into playable and exciting games, where each dice has its role to play, but it is associated with chance. While on the subject of chance, in the paper by ostenbb, they mention that dice: "provides fairness and complexity to a game's design and allows everyone the equal opportunity to win the game." (ostenbb n.d.). So one possible reason for dice in RPGs is to make it so that there is fairness between the players of the different RPGs.

Ostenbb also has the same point as Gailloreto, where dice mechanics: "not only adds tension to the game but also adds excitement as the player will get more hopeful that they will roll that number." (ostenbb n.d.). Dice seems to be an excellent addition to RPGs, making them flexible and fair. Earlier, it was mentioned how the six types of dice are associated with different mechanics of RPGs, such as the D20 being the one determining who strikes first and how

accurate their strike is. These mechanics are very much complex, and to discuss more, *action resolution* is the next topic to discuss.

In the article by Mogensen, he uses the term *randomizers* and associates that with dice. Then, Mogensen explains action resolution, the several actions that a character can perform, and the factors that can affect the outcome. These are categorized as the following by Mogensen:

> **Ability** – "Measure how well the character performs the type of action he or she attempts."
>
> **Difficulty** – "Measure how hard the action is. Form of active opposition, inherent "hardness" or a combination thereof."
>
> **Circumstance** – "Measure of external factors that may affect the outcome, making it harder, easier or less predictable."
>
> **Unpredictability** – "Measure of how random the outcome is. Often depends on the type of action performed."
>
> (Mogensen, n.d.).

Additionally, with dice, these actions also partake in how and what the result becomes in an RPG. In a sense, dice might be balancing out the several actions in action resolution to make the RPGs even fairer.

Next, discussing the topic of precisely the question of "What is fair?" can be beneficial. In the blog post by a user going by the name of jhkimrpg, jhkimrpg goes on to tackle the question of what is fair. Jhkimrpg thinks that: "random rolls of varying interest are used to create a type of social fairness by giving all the players a chance to shine" (jhkimrpg 2013). This is the same statement as Gailloreto and Ostenbb, and all three mutually agree that chance is there to make the RPGs fair. Jhkimrpg then goes on to give the following example:

> Suppose Shelly comes in to play and RPG, and she's had a rough day and isn't at her best. She isn't popping with great ideas. Still, she rolls a critical result at a good time, and she gets her moment in the spotlight. Her friends high-five her for doing well. This was unfair in Ernest's usage because that Shelly got the result when others didn't, but it was fair because everyone gets equal odds for lucky results like these. (jhkimrpg 2013)

This example of Shelly rolling a suitable die and giving her an advantage, some, like Ernest, might see it as unfair; however, since the chance of dice gives everyone the same equal odds, it is considered fair. Then, how about questioning what would make such a result not fair? If, for example, one player was to secretly change one of the dices used in an RPG and switch it out with the real one, where the fake one is physically looking the same, however, it weighs more on one side of the dice than the other sides, meaning that one side has more chance of happening, that would be considered as not fair and in other words, that would be considered cheating.

3.3 Summary of Chapter 3

Chapter 3 first discussed how RPG makers had made revenue, from tabletop RPGs to MMORPGs. I discussed and compared their revenue models by looking at the company "Hasbro" for RPGs and "Jagex" for MMORPGs. Serialized content and subscription model are the two core models that both RPG and MMORPG use. However, going towards MMORPGs, Ivanov explained video games' seven most common monetization schemes. Using RuneScape, which has added several monetization models over the years, shows how monetization has evolved in MMORPGs. Lastly, chance and dice were discussed to showcase why it is a fundamental mechanics in RPGs. The element of chance and dice can be seen everywhere in MMORPGs, especially with action resolution, which is the several actions a character can perform. Even if MMORPGs do not use dice as an object of chance that players interact with, the element of chance from dice is added to many different activities in MMORPGs which the player interacts with.

Chapter 4: As a game, what are Lost Ark and RuneScape?

Before going further, this chapter summarizes the core activities, mechanics, and stories of the two MMORPGs, as it is beneficial to know before discussing and comparing the game's mechanics to monetization later on. However, it is necessary to state that this touches the tip of

the iceberg and that there is much more to the games than what is described here, but what is deemed the most important for the master's thesis goal is explained in this chapter.

4.1 Lost Ark

Lost Ark is a Korean MMORPG developed by the game company Smilegate. For the longest time, it was only available in Korea and Russia until February 2022, when Amazon Game Studios partnered up with Smilegate to release the game to the Western audience.

Most MMORPGs are in the third person, but Lost Ark is different as it uses an isometric camera view, making it one of the few with such a point of view. When it comes to the story of Lost Ark, the player is set to find the seven arks scattered around the world of Arkesia to defend against the growing darkness, seeking the destruction of Arkesia. The game's main antagonist is the Evil Legion Commanders, consisting of six powerful commanders led by their leader, the Lord of the Abyss Kazeros. When the player starts the game, they can select five base classes: an assassin, gunner, mage, martial artist, and warrior. At the time of the writing, these can split into different advanced classes, such that the warrior can become a berserker, gunlancer, paladin, and destroyer.
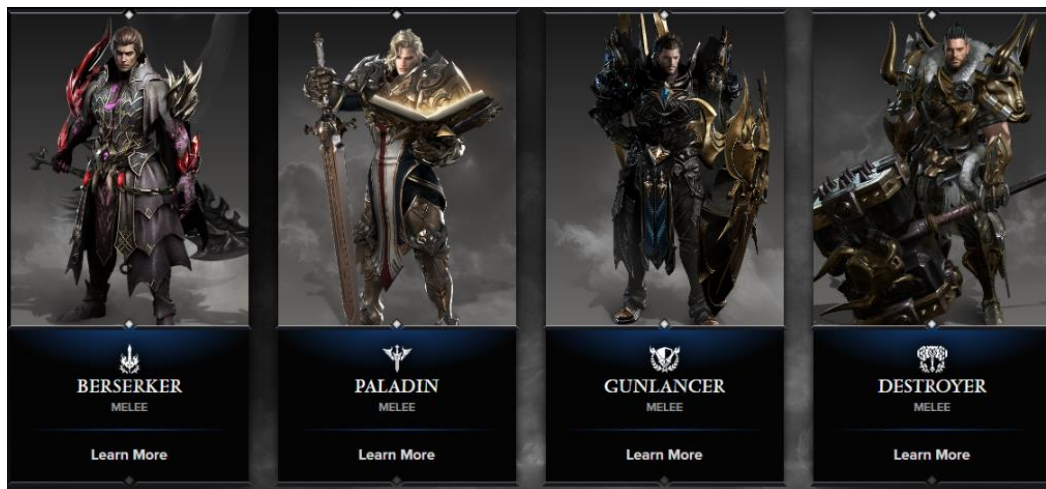
Figure 3: The current warrior advanced classes in the Western version of Lost Ark (Screenshot from the warrior section https://www.playlostark.com/en-us/game/classes/warrior)

To progress throughout Lost Ark, the player advances the main story while visiting different continents and doing side activities. The primary progression system comes in the form of a

"gear score," where the player hones their gear to improve its stats but, more importantly, gets access to more game content. For example, a player with a gear score of 1200 can do everything from 1200 and under, and if they want to access content beyond that, they need to increase their gear score. As the gear score increases, the materials needed increase, and chances to succeed in increasing the gear score go down. Because of this and it being the main mechanic loop of the game, it is a long and daunting process, where it can take weeks to get only a few gear score numbers up to access new content. Besides gear score, various other aspects can strengthen the player's character, such as ability stones, accessories, gems, cards, skills, character levels, and much more, which are necessary for the player to focus on if they want to do various activities without trouble.

Many activities earn the player various rewards. The two main activities used to progress the gear score are the chaos dungeons, fighting waves of enemies for their loot, and guardian raids, fighting a boss enemy. However, what is worth mentioning, is that approximately everything can be bypassed if the player decides to spend money on the game and buy gold. Gold is the game's main currency, used in nearly all situations. The player can decide to buy gold with real-life money, then use that gold at the market board to buy the loot they would get by doing chaos dungeons and guardian raids. This has brought the term P2W (Pay to Win) within the community surrounding Lost Ark, as a player can technically only use real-life money to become stronger.

On the topic of real-life money, a few months before Amazon Game Studios published the game to the Western audience, they published a blog post on October 25, 2021, titled "Lost Ark Business Model." Of the several parts they discuss, two of them are about an overview of the business model of Lost Ark and an in-game currency overview. Below is the figure they show to explain the in-game currencies of the game.

Figure 4: All four primary types of currencies found in Lost Ark (Screenshot from the business model blog post https://www.playlostark.com/en-us/news/articles/lost-ark-business-model)

To explain, the currency that is buyable with real-life money in Lost Ark is Royal Crystals. They can be used to buy an assortment of items, outfits, packages, and benefits, to name a few, from the in-game store. They can be bought in four packages, as seen in the figure below.
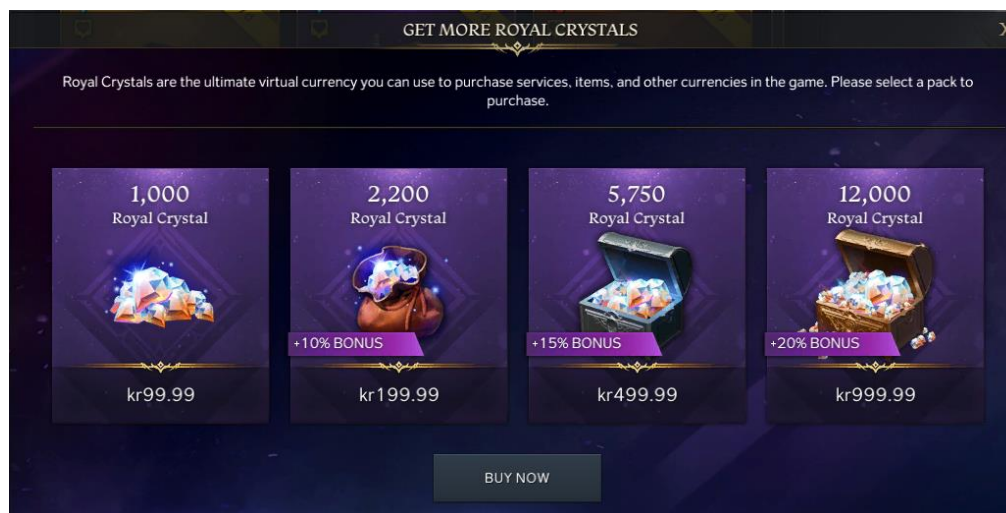

Figure 5: The four different packages of Royal Crystals and their current price in NOK (Screenshot from in-game)

Then there are Crystals, or as the community likes to call them, Blue Crystals. Blue Crystals differ from Royal Crystals in that there is the option for the player to get some from playing the game or can be converted from gold for a ratio with the currency exchange. This currency is also used in the in-game store and other places to increase the player's inventory space. This brings

the currency of Gold, which is the main currency used to buy items from the market or spend to upgrade one's gear. It is acquirable from many activities, but Gold can also be acquired by converting Royal Crystals to Gold for a ratio with the currency exchange. The figure below shows the currency exchange in the in-game store.

Figure 6: The currency exchange, one for purchasing Gold and the other for buying Blue Crystals (Screenshot from in-game)

The currency exchange and how much Gold or Blue Crystals the player converts depend on the server's economy. If there is too much Gold in the economy, the price of Blue Crystals will be high, and the price of buying Gold from Royal Crystals, while if it is low, it will be the opposite.

Finally, there is Silver, also acquirable from near to all activities in the game from the smallest to largest. As two examples, it is used for basic needs such as repairing one's gear or paying to travel across different lands. It is a currency not available for use in the in-game market. A vendor can turn the player's Gold into Silver if they wish to do so, as shown in the figure below.
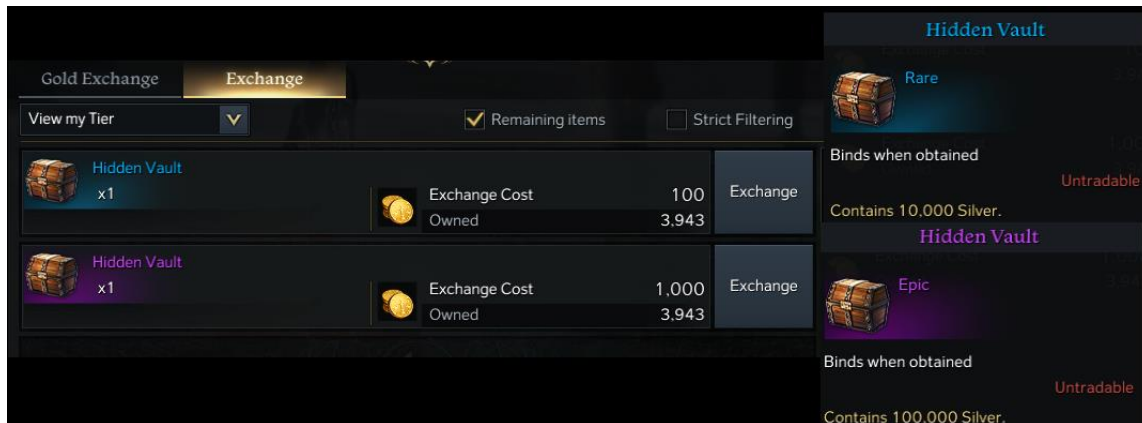
Figure 7: Converting Gold to Silver, where 100 Gold is 10,000 Silver and 1,000 Gold is 100,000 Silver (Screenshot from in-game)

In summary and to make it clear, this means that the currency system of Lost Ark looks like this:

- Real-life money converted to Royal Crystals (4 different packages)
  - Royal Crystals used to purchase from the in-game store
- Royal Crystals converted to Gold (from the currency exchange)
  - Gold used to buy from the in-game marketplace and other places
- Gold converted to Blue Crystals
  - Blue Crystals used to purchase from the in-game store and other places
- Gold converted to Silver
  - Silver is used for basic needs in the game

An issue and question that arises in the Lost Ark community are why there have to be several currencies implemented in the game instead of having one or two universal currencies. For example, instead of having Blue Crystals converted from Gold, there could be an exchange with Royal Crystals converted from Gold, with every purchasable in-game store item using Royal Crystals. Moreover, instead of having Silver, Gold could substitute the activities that use Silver. This would eliminate two currencies, making the system much less confusing. In the paper by Asadi and Hemadi, they discuss currencies in video games and show the following figure:
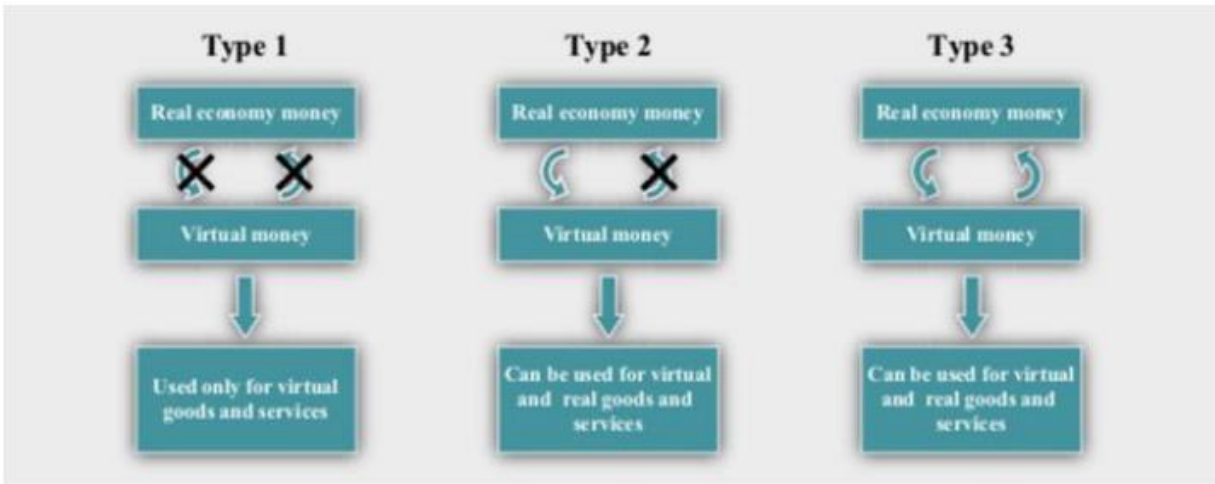
Figure 8: The three types of virtual currencies (Refer to Asadi and Hemadi in the bibliography for the screenshot)

They explain closed virtual currency (Type 1), which is not connected to real money. Players can earn it from playing the game, a virtual currency with a unidirectional flow (Type 2), where the virtual currency can be purchased with a specific exchange rate but not converted back to real money, and virtual currency with the bidirectional flow (Type 3), the virtual currency players can buy and sell with real money (Asadi and Hemadi 2022). Comparing the figure to the virtual currencies of Lost Ark, two of them can be checked off. Type 1 would be Blue Crystals and type 2 would be Royal Crystals. A game does not need two or three types implemented, but why do companies do that? It is because it is designed to hide the actual monetary cost of a single system.

4.2 RuneScape

RuneScape is an MMORPG developed by the game company Jagex. RuneScape is arguably one of the first and most notable MMORPGs ever to be created, so much so that they have brought up an old version of the game for players who miss how it was in the 2000s. RuneScape has seen various development and changes in its core systems and design; because of that, it has gone through numerous versions. It started from what was known as "Classic RuneScape," "RuneScape," "RuneScape 2," and finally "RuneScape 3", with an old school version running beside it now, termed "Old School RuneScape." This section mainly explains RuneScape 3 since

it is heavily monetized and considered P2W; however, there are bits about Old School RuneScape compared to its less heavily monetized version. Also, going further into the thesis, anytime RuneScape is mentioned, it is based on RuneScape 3 if otherwise mentioned to be another version.

In RuneScape, the player creates their character and is set into the world known as Gielinor. The most notable system in RuneScape is the skills system, which players will constantly interact with when playing RuneScape. There are 28 skills in the game currently, each connecting to one aspect of the game, and they are categorized into "combat," "gathering," "artisan," and "support." For example, the woodcutting skill, a gathering skill, lets players chop trees for their logs, and then they can use the fire-making skill, an artisan skill, to burn those logs up and level up their fire-making skill. Alternatively, for a combat type skill, there is attack, strength, and defense, three melee combat skills that make the player stronger in combat, with the support skills on the side such as slayer, killing monsters assigned by a slayer master, an NPC, which works hand-to-hand with combat.

Figure 9: My character's skills and the levels (Screenshot from in-game)

However, the skills in RuneScape are connected to monetization in their ways. First, there is the need to have a membership if the player wants to access all 28 skills in the game, as 11 of the

skills are members only. Over 190 quests are locked behind membership, making a tiny portion of the game can be explored. Then, there is the loot box system "Treasure Hunter," which affects the skills in how the player can spend money to level up their skills, bypassing the need to grind and get the levels in one's spare time. Treasure Hunter is the main element of predatory monetization that makes RuneScape P2W, compared to the other version, Old School RuneScape, implemented without Treasure Hunter. However, both versions have the option for the player to buy in-game gold by buying what is known as a "Bond," which is then converted to in-game gold, so for Old School RuneScape, that is the only form of monetization, besides the subscription for membership.

4.3 Summary of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 showcased and explained Lost Ark first by explaining briefly what the game is about and then showcased the game's business model, which is complex and will be associated with the rest of the thesis. The question of why developers implement so many currencies was also asked. As for Lost Ark, for RuneScape, there was an explanation as to what the game is before explaining briefly how the gameplay is affected by monetization. The overall difference in their monetization system is that Lost Ark relies on several currencies as the key to interacting and purchasing the game's various monetization offers. These currencies are also intertwined and related, making it a convoluted system for players. In RuneScape, however, most of the monetization comes from Treasure Hunter, where the player can spend real-life money to have the chance to acquire different items that impact their game.

Chapter 5: Randomization in Game Design – Random Reward Mechanisms (RRMs)

Randomization is a process that frequently occurs in games and can appear in various methods. This can range from players defeating a creature in a game for the randomized chance of the creature's rare drop to using money to open loot boxes for a randomized chance of getting something particular the player is aiming for, which can cost an incredible amount of money, if

the player is unlucky. This segment has an in-depth analysis of the randomization process in game design.

To start, the paper by Nielsen and Grabarczyk has a chapter that questions whether loot boxes are considered gambling. What is particularly interesting in their paper is their discussion about the notion of "random reward mechanisms," or RRMs for short (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019). RRM consists of three components:

> Eligibility condition: The requirement the player must meet to trigger the random procedure, such as defeating a creature in a game or using money to open loot boxes. →
>
> Random procedure: The methods to make something random, such as programming for the digital and shuffling a deck of cards which can be a physical method. →
>
> Reward: The player can acquire any reward element, common examples such as the creature's rare drop of a weapon or skin from loot boxes.
>
> (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019: 174-175)

This chapter's fundamental topic is where I have compared RRM to Magic the Gathering, Lost Ark, and RuneScape and their RRM to their respective main activity.

However, before doing that, there is a model that I would like to lay down that is important to the RRM design and that can be compared and discussed going forward. The one aspect to distinguish in an RRM design is the question: "What are the restrictions of the reward acquired from the RRM design?". Variant A is a group of five friends that all have an equal chance of winning the possibility to play an early-in-development video game. Whoever wins has only the chance right at the spot to play the early development video game; they will not get any second chances. If they agree to play, that would be it, but they got the experience to try it out before others. Then there is variant B, where the winner is allowed to hold on to play the early development game, and not only that, but they also get a ticket that can be used whenever they want. On the spot, the person can give the ticket to one of their four friends, use the ticket immediately, put the ticket on sale, or keep it as a keepsake item.

Variant B, in particular, means that the person gets something as property and is free to do what they want with the ticket. At the same time, variant A has a strict restriction, where the person has to accept to try the game or decline, losing their chance. These two variants are necessary to

remember going forward, as it changes the aspect of the RRM design depending on how the game's mechanics interact.

5.1 RRM in the card game Magic The Gathering (MTG)

Having that laid down, an example of RRM in the card game Magic the Gathering (MTG) would be the following. The eligibility condition would be buying a deck of cards for MTG with real-life money. The random procedure would be two factors: the cards the player bought and the shuffling of the deck of cards. Lastly, the reward would be either the player's victory or defeat.

The question is, is MTG considered gambling, or does it have any gambling systems involved? Putting it through the RRM system, it might seem to be the case that this purchase is gambling. Nielsen and Grabarczyk even mention that besides video games, other entertainment can be built around RRMs, and one of the examples they give is the card game MTG (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019: 176). However, in a blog post by Nicholas Lloyd, Lloyd discusses if MTG is gambling. One of the points Lloyd lays down is the **legal definition** of what is considered gambling, which is: "The act or practice of gambling; an agreement between two or more individuals to play collectively at a game of chance for a stake or wager, which will become the property of the winner and to which all involved make a contribution." (Lloyd n.d.).

Let us then take one of the aspects of MTG into consideration, booster packs. Inside a booster pack, the player will acquire 15 cards of different rarity, with one having a chance to be a foil card, which is considered rare. This then leads to the random procedure in RRM. However, Lloyd implies then that: "They argue that players are spending a certain amount of money hoping to get cards that are more **monetarily valuable** than the amount of money spent on buying the booster pack." and that: "Most players open booster packs to use the cards in the **draft**, **build decks**, or **trade** with other players for cards needed for their collection." (Lloyd n.d.). Even though it can be implied that there is the ability to buy booster packs in the hopes of getting a rare card to then sell it for more money than what was used on the booster pack, it is such a minor majority of players that do it, where the majority of players use the cards for their created purpose, that player action rather than game structure makes something gambling or not.

5.2 RRM in the video game MMORPG Lost Ark

Let us then have a look at a video game, the MMORPG Lost Ark, and two examples; the first is an in-game non-payable activity that can be related to RRM, and then an example of a payable RRM. One of the most notorious luck-based activities in Lost Ark is the collectible called *Island* Tokens. In Lost Ark, players can by ship explore over 100's pre-made islands. Besides a few islands, each has its core reward as the collectible, the Island Token. Moreover, each island has different requirements as to how the player will be able to acquire the respective island's Island Token. Some only require the player to do the quest chain created for that specific island, guaranteeing the island token. However, some are entirely random number generated based (RNG-based).

As an example, I am going to describe the island of *Argon*. A dedicated website offering numerous guides for Lost Ark, *Maxroll*, has a guide written by Yaen for Argon Island's Island Token acquisition method: "Argon Island Token is a reward from destroying any of the ice pillars on the island to create a perfect ice sculpture. If you're thinking this is too good to be true, you'd be correct. The caveat here is that you must destroy the pillar by dealing exactly the amount of damage equal to the health remaining on the pillar. You will not be able to see the exact health of the pillar." (Yaen 2022). The theme of Argon Island is that of ice sculpturing. The player has several spots of ice pillars that they can sculpt. If the player wants to acquire the Island Token for Argon Island, they must go through many steps. Let us then take Nielsen and Grabarczyk RRM and apply it to this activity. The first thing to be said is that the random procedure comes from programming, and the reward is the Island Token. However, what does the eligibility condition look like?

The eligibility condition is multi-factored and goes as the following:

1. Ice pillars reset at specific times each day.
2. There are limited amounts of available ice pillars for players to sculpt.
3. Players that are fastest to meet at the activity have a higher chance to acquire it since there are limited amounts of available ice pillars.
4. Players cannot see the exact health pool of the ice pillars, forcing them to be careful/use careful methods.

5. Players must not damage the ice pillars too much and, as such, fail the sculpturing, or else they will not get anything.

6. Other players may interrupt and get in the way of each other since all ice pillars are attackable by everyone.

7. Even if players manage to sculpt the ice pillar, it is not guaranteed to get the Argon Island Token.

8. Other minor factors, such as server disconnects, can come the player's way.

As can be seen, to get the Argon Island Token, the player has to go through an immense number of steps to get the Island Token. If the player is late or unlucky in many different ways, they must try several times to earn the Argon Island Token. This type of game design can fall into the dark game design patterns category. In the paper by Deterding and his co-writers, they mention how dark patterns can relate to: "grinding, appointment play, pay to skip, or social pyramid schemes." (C. S. Deterding, Stenros, and Montola, n.d.). Argon Island Token falls under the category of the dark grinding pattern.

To give a players perspective and their experience on the Argon Island Token, Reddit user Sevonate writes: "Argon Island Soul was what triggered me the most so far. Got it on my fourth attempt because the first three attempts a random would come and destroy my ice sculpture." (Sevonate 2022). This is the eligibility condition number 6 mentioned above; Sevonate had to go through Argon Island four times to get the Argon Island Token.

It is also fair to state that Island Tokens cannot be traded between players; once the player gets it, it is their property, and they also cannot get that same Island Token again.

Now that an in-game activity of Lost Ark has been explained and compared to the RRM system, how bad are Island Tokens for Lost Ark and their players as an RRM overall? Since Argon Island is the only example of the 100s of Island Tokens, what can be said for now is that Island Tokens can be a nuisance to achieve. However, there is no particular way to influence the chance of achieving an Island Token with real-life money.

Then, how about an RRM involving real-life money if the players want to achieve something faster? That would be the card collection system in Lost Ark, and the card packs player can achieve, either by playing the game or buying the card packs through the in-game store. The card

packs in Lost Ark generally work the same way loot boxes work but with some differences. First, there are five tiers of card rarity; from the most common to the rarest, there is Normal (Grey), Uncommon (Green), Rare (Blue), Epic (Purple), and Legendary (Orange). There are also several card packs, each with cards from different rarities. For example, one type of card pack includes all five rarities in the roll, but there is also one that only has Epic and Legendary. Then, when the player acquires a type of card rarity, they again have to open it to get one random card in that rarity pool. For example, getting a rare card pack from a card pack includes all rare cards in the game as a roll, so if the player is seeking a specific rare card, they might have to open thousands of rare card packs to acquire it.

The card collection system aims to gather cards for various effects when the player equips them in their card deck. Players can also level up their cards up to 5 times in total, resulting in players having to gather 15 duplicates of a card if they want to max it out. Most of the card sets are obsolete, and in general, there are only two decks of cards players are near to mandatory to acquire, which are the "Lostwind Cliff Set (LWC)" and "Light of Salvation Set (LoC)." The goal for the player will be to get 12 pieces awakening in LWC and LoS to activate their mandatory bonus from the card set. Here is a representation of the LWC card set in Lost Ark and how it functions:
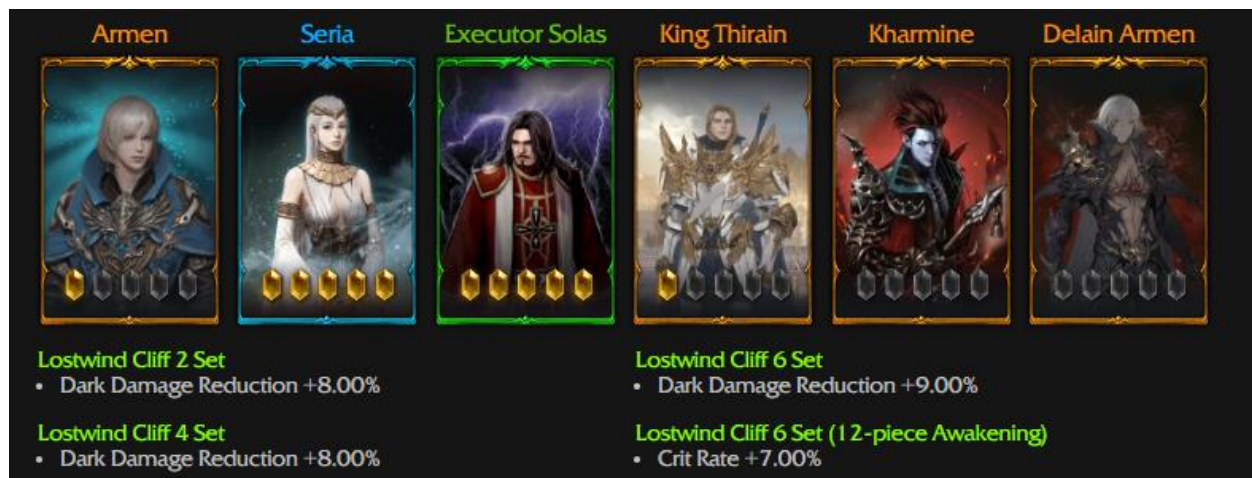
Figure 10: Lostwind Cliff Set (LWC), consisting of 4 legendary (orange), one rare (blue), and one uncommon (green) (Screenshot from the website maxroll https://maxroll.gg/lost-ark/resources/best-in-slot-card-sets-for-endgame)

In the figure, the yellow diamond icons show how many times the card has been "awakened," which requires duplicates, 15 in total if aiming for five yellow diamonds. If the player gets 12-piece Awakening in total, no matter which of the cards, they get the best bonus out of the card

set. This means aiming to max out and get duplicates of rare and uncommon is best for this card set.

However, what makes getting a complete set of awakened cards difficult, is that most cards in the sets are tied to the Legendary rarity. That means players have to gather an astonishing amount of card packs and legendary card packs in the hopes of getting the right cards. This fits right into what Nielsen and Grabarczyk say about the idea of collectibles:

> "One important reason why these mechanisms became popular is that they increased sales of products because the more cards or pictures the customer already had, the less probable it was that they would get what they wanted with a single purchase. The result of this statistical scarcity was that customers had to purchase more items to increase the odds." (Nielsen and Grabarczyk 2019: 176)

For instance, in the Lost Ark card system, after having 4 out of 5 cards maxed out in a deck of cards, the chance of getting the last one remaining to get maxed is significantly lower since there is a chance to get the already maxed ones as duplicates, serving as no purpose besides card experience.

What solution is then given to the player? They either have to A, play for an incredibly dedicated amount of time, and get lucky with the card packs they get, or B, buy card packs from the store, potentially reducing the time significantly, but they still have to get lucky and real-life money is on the line. Moreover, what are the issues if players decide not to get the mandatory sets of cards by either grinding or trying their luck with real-life money? Players then have a high chance to get what is called "gatekept," which is: "the act of attempting to control, and usually limit, general access to something" and that: "more or less, discouraging people from calling themselves gamers or implying they have not done enough in gaming to be a gamer is gatekeeping" (Garcia 2018). This happens when other players in a party inspect the player's card set and see that they do not have the mandatory card sets, denying them into the party and substituting them for one that does have the card sets.

A player's perspective can also be given here. Aithosrds, a Reddit user, says this about the cards in Lost Ark: "If you have LWC people aren't going to gatekeep because you don't have LoS 18. The card gatekeeping is if you don't have LWC 12 and after LoS 30 starts becoming more

achievable for a greater number of people than those hardcore farming or spending money/gold on cards." (aithosrds 2022). Aithosrds here explains how if players have Lost Wind Cliff (LWC) 12 set, they will not get gatekept, even if players do not have Light of Salvation (LoS) 18 set, and how the gatekeeping meta for cards will eventually change when more players have LoS 30 set.

So, what are the possible solutions for such an RRM system as the card system in Lost Ark? The most crucial aspect of rectifying would be the gatekeeping aspect cards give the players. Cards should not be a part of what makes the player choose whether a player is suitable for their party. Thankfully, a solution has already been developed in the Korean version of Lost Ark, which has not yet arrived at the Western version. In the Korean version, newcomers to the game will temporarily get the mandatory card sets for free while they collect the collectible version. Everyone will have at least LWC 12 from the start, completely removing the gatekeeping aspect. Another solution for the collectible version is to give the players more selectable card packs, which is already a thing but is rarely given to players. Selectable card packs let the player choose exactly what cards they want instead of relying on RNG and opening thousands of card packs. This would make the card system less monetary than it is now.

Another solution for the card system could be to make the cards tradable, either by putting them on auction for gold or having an equal exchange between players, where cards of the same rarity can be swapped between players, since the system, as of now does not have the possibility for cards to be traded or sold to other players. For example, if player A has several Armen cards but needs King Thirain, they can seek player B with the opposite need. Then, they could trade Armen and King Thirain between them. However, it is worth mentioning that both selling/trading and having an equal exchange will bring problems, such as players creating multiple accounts to trade cards between their own.

5.3 RRM in the video game MMORPG RuneScape

The second game, and for comparison to Lost Ark, is RuneScape. Again, as I did with Lost Ark, a comparison of in-game activity and a payable RRM is given. To start, one of the activities players can choose to do in RuneScape is killing various bosses. A boss is a powerful monster

with various mechanics players face for the many unique loots they can drop. In RuneScape, one of the most sought-after and rare drops that one can get, that most of the bosses have, is known as a *boss pet*, that is: "pets that resemble miniature boss monsters." ("Boss Pets" n.d.). These boss pets can follow the player around, and the player can interact with them to have a dialogue with the player. Other players can also examine the pet to see how many kills the player has on the particular boss. The chance of getting a boss pet varies from boss to boss, and it can start from as low as an average of 50 kills and to 5000 kills for a boss pet, based on how long it might take to kill a boss and their difficulty, so an easy boss might take 5000 kills while a demanding boss might take 50 kills.

However, what is different from getting an Island Soul in Lost Ark to getting a boss pet in RuneScape, is that Jagex, the developers of RuneScape, have implemented a mechanic known as the *bad luck mitigation,* which: "is a mechanic that can affect the drop rate of certain rare items or the chances of certain events occurring" and that: "when a player has not received an item by a certain threshold, the drop rate is altered so that players are more likely to receive it." ("Bad Luck Mitigation" n.d.). This is a genius way to make something based on RRM an actual fair mechanic, where in the end, the player is guaranteed to get the boss pet if they are unlucky for many bosses kills. In contrast, a player searching for an Island Soul in Lost Ark can, in technicality, go forever on and never get it if they are unlucky.

There are even players voicing their frustration about how there should be some mitigation in Lost Ark for some of their other activities; one Reddit user named jasieknms says: "I wish at least the lowest drop rate% had pity. I don't mind going to kfc island nearly 200 times for the soul even if it was boring it's at least fast. What I mind though are sea bounties locked behind triple rng barrier from sea coop things." (jasieknms, 2022). Jasieknms believes that some of the low drop rate activities should have a pity, which is another way of saying mitigation. They do not mind doing Alakkir Island (kfc island) over 200 times for the Island Soul since it is one of the fairer Island Souls to get. However, for another activity, such as Sea Bounties, they wish it had some mitigation because of the time and effort it can take to try their chance of getting a Sea Bounty.

Nevertheless, returning to the topic of RuneScape's RRM boss pet system and the bad luck mitigation system, how does it fair in Nielsen and Grabarczyk's RRM eligibility condition then? The eligibility condition might look something like this:

1. The player kills the boss for their other loot besides the pet.
    a. The player obtains the pet.
    b. The player does not obtain the pet and continues killing the boss to the first threshold.
2. The player continues killing the boss, still profiting something from the boss.
    a. The player obtains the pet.
    b. After several kills, the player reaches the first threshold and starts their bad luck mitigation.
3. The player continues killing the boss, still profiting something from the boss with an increased chance for a pet drop.
    a. The player obtains the pet.
    b. The player reaches the second threshold, lowering the pet drop rate even more.
4. Step 3 continues for the player with either the a or b result until the pet drop rate is so low that they eventually will get the pet if they do not get it earlier.

As it can be seen, there is a vast difference in what players has to go through to get a pet in RuneScape versus the example Island Soul of Argon Island in Lost Ark. Whatever the player's luck might be in getting a boss pet, they technically do not waste their time at all, since even if they do not get the pet in several kills, they at least profit from the bosses different loot besides the pet. Moreover, eventually, they will reach a peak where getting the pet is guaranteed. Compared to Argon Island Soul in Lost Ark, the player has to go through numerous steps and chances even to attempt to get the Island Soul, and if they succeed and do not get it, they get nothing in return, not even mitigation. The system in RuneScape is undoubtedly fairer and healthier than the system associated with Island Souls and other collectibles in Lost Ark.

However, this is not to say that everything in RuneScape has mitigation. For example, all other unique drops, besides the boss pets from bosses, have no mitigation. In technicality, this would mean a player can get the boss pet done before completing the other unique drops. A Reddit user

going by the name Great_Minds has made a post discussing how RuneScape needs mitigation everywhere and their reasoning for it. A part of what Great_Minds has to say is the following:

> For me, the real issue lies within PVM. Now the problem isn't the droprates unlike you would expect, it's the RNG involved with said droprates, and methods trying to get around them (doing content solo instead of in a group to get more drops). A possible solutions to this is BLM at every boss, at the very least. But personally I would even go further than this and give a guaranteed, untradable drop at 2x or 3x the expected droprate. Use it as a flex, waste bankspace on or disassemble it for chance of a rare component if you already have said ability or item unlocked. (Great_Minds 2023)

What Great_Minds has said in the attached quote is that the problem lies in the RNG (Random Number Generated) and how if a player decides to do PVM (Player Versus Monster), they have a benefit to doing it alone since the chance is affected by the player deciding to do the content alone or with other players. Their solution is to either A, give mitigation to all bosses and their drops, or Great_Minds own proposal of another solution, to give the missing unique drops guaranteed at two times or three times the average drop rate; however, the player is unable to trade and sell that version of the unique drop they get, the only purpose of this version of the unique drop, would be to complete their boss log much earlier than it would take if one were to be incredibly unlucky.

Then what about a monetization model implemented in RuneScape, and how does that fair into RRM? One of RuneScape's monetization models is that of the microtransaction system, Treasure Hunter. Treasure Hunter is developed to be Jagex's model of what is known as loot boxes. To keep it short, as a different chapter focuses more on loot boxes, King and Delfabbro explain how loot boxes are essentially paying real-life money to gamble and have a chance to acquire various items, cosmetics, or other related items in video games. It can be seen as the virtual version of slot machines. Typically, one or more rare items can be acquired; however, one has to spend a significant amount of money to get it if they are not lucky on their first few tries. This can lead to entrapment, which is the belief that one has invested too much to quit (King and Delfabbro 2018: 1967).

Treasure Hunter differs from other loot-box systems because the items the player can acquire exceptionally impact their account. In most loot-box systems, the player usually gets cosmetics,

which cannot be used to benefit the player's progress in the game. However, in RuneScape's Treasure Hunter, the player can get both in-game money and experience points, the two core systems of the game. The experience points can come in two forms, that is prismatic lamps, giving a direct amount of experience to a skill, and prismatic stars, giving bonus experience to a skill, and when the player trains that skill with bonus experience, they gain more experience than the usual. The prismatic lamps and prismatic stars come in different sizes; for example, a small prismatic lamp/prismatic star gives less experience than a huge prismatic lamp/prismatic star but is rarer to hit in Treasure Hunter. Moreover, different types of lamps/stars, such as smoldering and supreme stars, come and go between Treasure Hunter promotions.

5.4 Summary of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 discussed randomization in game design and Nielsen and Grabarczyk's notion of random reward mechanisms to showcase the differences between an in-game non-payable and payable activity. It showcased first the three components that RRM consists of: eligibility condition, random procedure, and reward, which are the basis for applying RRM to the three games. Then, the card game Magic The Gathering was compared and related to RRM. The findings show that RRM in MTG, when booster packs are considered, even if players buy booster packs for the chance of getting a rare card and selling it for real-life money, not a majority of players do so, making so MTG is not gambling. Afterward, Lost Ark was discussed concerning RRM and showcased the system of island tokens, an in-game non-payable activity, and card packs, a payable RRM. The overt difference between the two systems is that even though both are designed around the element of chance, the system of island tokens can not be boosted, skipped, or increased odds by paying real-life money, whereas for the card collection system, the player can either play the game and overtime get the cards they need, or they have the option to pay money to increase their chance of getting the missing cards. That is not an issue, but there should be other ways to get cards rather than just opening several card packs, either paid or unpaid. Suggestions then would be to have a way to trade cards or sell them between players, for example. Then, the same was done to RuneScape, killing bosses, an in-game non-payable activity, and Treasure Hunter, a payable activity. Here, one of the unique

reward from bosses, and its system of bad luck mitigation, was compared to Lost Ark's island tokens, which has no mitigation to its system. A mitigation system makes the content fairer and equalized, even if it is based upon the element of chance, as the player will, at some point, get the reward guaranteed. It is a genius way to design gameplay associated with chance. Then briefly, Treasure Hunter was associated with RRM. The issue arises from the loot box system affecting how the player can progress through the game by paying for Treasure Hunter rather than interacting with the gameplay.

Chapter 6: Discussion about different monetization models in Lost Ark and RuneScape

One part of this chapter discusses monetization models in Lost Ark that was not implemented in the Western version, based on player feedback and the developer's reasoning for the model being too predatory. It is an important aspect to discuss, as it implies that even though developers are there to make as much money as they can, sometimes, they will step forward and decide not to use a predatory monetization model for their game. The second part discusses some of Jagex's controversies with Treasure Hunter, as well as explaining the Ironman game mode, which can be used as an escapism from MTX in RuneScape. It is also important to note that, for the Korean Lost Ark, as I do not have an account there and cannot access it or read Korean, I have used screenshots from two of the videos from the Korean Lost Ark content creator *Memorizer92*, who is a popular content creator for Lost Ark, and has several videos aiming to assist and give information to the players of the Western version. The two videos discuss the monetization system in the Korean version of Lost Ark. I use it to compare it to the Western version and explain the monetization system Yoz's Jar, which is not yet implemented in the Western version.

6.1 Developer's interference on the monetization model known as Yoz's Jar in Lost Ark

In Lost Ark, one predatory monetization model is not implemented in the Western version of Lost Ark, even though the June and July roadmap indicated it would be coming: *Yoz's Jar*. What

was initially stated in the June and July roadmap was removed to be: "Yoz's Jar will no longer be released in the June Update. Please read our June Team Update article to hear why." ("Team Update & June - July Roadmap" 2022). What was written originally before this edit was an explanation of what Yoz's Jar is and how it was set for it to be released with the June update of Lost Ark.

Investigation into Yoz's Jar has shown that it is a predatory monetization system, which would be hurtful to the Western audience. Two key points make it so, the first being that the system is built on different currencies, which aims to confuse the player. By that, I mean how if there is a lack of one of the currencies, but there is enough of the other one, the player has to seek to get the currency they lack, so several currency systems are tricking the player and making the system convoluted. Instead of having several currencies, why can't Yoz's Jar only use one currency? The second point is how the reward from Yoz's Jar impacts the gameplay, where the reward, cosmetics, have ties to combat stats, making the character powerful if they wield it. This makes it so players are pressured to spend money gambling on Yoz's Jar to get the necessary cosmetics, not for how it will look on the player, but how it makes the player more robust in-game activities.

So, what is Yoz's Jar, why was it decided to be no longer released, and what is the player's opinion on the matter? First, it is necessary to state that the Korean version of Yoz's Jar was first implemented and used in the original version of Lost Ark. Because of that, I am explaining what Yoz's Jar is from the perspective of the Korean version. This also means that the figures I am showing will be in Korean, but it is explained what each figure means.

Yoz's Jar is a monetization model in the form of an item purchasable in the store in bundles of one or ten (with a 10% discount if buying the ten versions) with blue crystals, a currency converted from gold in the game. Then, a secondary item is needed, cloth, which in the Korean version, can be gained by dismantling epic rarity skin piece, gained from Yoz's Jar, resulting in 7 cloths, or it can be purchased in a package, for a total of five times a month, where one purchase costs around 26$ and gives 28 clothes and an additional 3 Yoz's Jar.

Figure 11: On the left is the Yoz's Jar bundle of one and ten, purchasable with blue crystals, converted from gold, and on the right, the package containing 28 clothes and 3 Yoz's Jar, purchasable with royal crystals, converted from real life money (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] Legendary Skin Guide, Yoz's Jar" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfo6F-nWImY)

When the player has a Yoz's Jar and some cloth, they can open the menu by clicking on Yoz's Jar. This menu then contains the monetization model, which uses Yoz's Jar and cloth to roll on a chance to get a random skin piece for a specific class of the players choosing. The menu looks like this in the Korean version:

Figure 12: The Yoz's Jar menu, where one jar is used with 14 clothes to roll on a loot box system containing skins (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] Legendary Skin Guide, Yoz's Jar" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bfo6F-nWImY)

In the menu, the player can preview the skins they can acquire and see the chance of the skin rolling for the player with each attempt. The figure above shows how legendary skin, the two

orange ones, has a 5% chance of dropping, so 10% to get legendary skin. In contrast, the epic skins, the purple ones, have a chance of 9% dropping each, and there are 10 of them in total, resulting in a 90% chance of getting an epic skin piece. What players seek to get from Yoz's Jar is to get a complete set of legendary skin, which means a weapon, headwear, bodywear, and legwear. That is because the skins are cosmetics and give some minor extra stats to the player wearing them. Moreover, since legendary skins give more stats than epic skins, that is what the players want to get and equip. Lastly, any of the skins acquired from Yoz's Jar are tradable in the in-game market of the game, meaning players can sell the skins for a massive amount of gold.

That is Yoz's Jar in the Korean version of Lost Ark explained, a loot box system where the player uses one Yoz's Jar and 14 clothes to be able to roll on the chance to get either a legendary or epic skin piece, where the legendary skin pieces are mainly sought after, because of the stat boost it gives. To summarize the process of Yoz's Jar, this is how it can go for the player if they are entirely unlucky and do not get a singular legendary skin piece:

1. If the player decides to buy all five packages containing 3 Yoz's Jar and 28 clothes, they will get 15 Yoz's Jar and 140 clothes in total, resulting in 10 pulls, with 5 Yoz's Jar in reserve and around 130$ dollars spent.

2. If the player were unlucky not to get a singular legendary skin piece with the amount spent and only get epic skin pieces, they would have wasted their money, but there is still a chance.

3. The chance then would be if the player decides to dismantle the ten purple skin pieces they got for more cloth, resulting in 70 clothes in total. That will be enough for five more pulls, and since the player has 5 Yoz's Jar in reserve, they can try their luck five more times for a legendary skin piece.

4. If the player still does not get a legendary skin piece, they can again dismantle the five epic skin pieces for 35 clothes, but they would have to buy more Yoz's Jar to use the remaining pulls they have.

Yoz's Jar is the most predatory monetized system in Lost Ark because of the amount one must spend to get a legendary skin. It does not help that Yoz's Jar has no bad luck mitigation system to at least assist the player in finally getting a legendary skin piece if they are unlucky. However, as mentioned, Yoz's Jar is only in the Korean version, not the Western version.

Why did Amazon Game Studios, the publishers of Lost Ark for the Western version, decide not to implement Yoz's Jar in the game? For that, I will discuss what Amazon Game Studios stated in their updated news post. The short version is that after they looked at the system's design and listened to player feedback, they decided to remove Yoz's Jar. ("June Team Update" 2022). The extended version is that they state how the epic and legendary skins are not purely cosmetic, how they give a slight stat increase, and that players seek every advantage in Lost Ark's challenging activities.

Moreover, even though the skins would be tradable on the market between players, their data and feedback suggested that they would fetch very high gold prices, making it difficult for players to acquire legendary skin, much less a matching set. ("June Team Update" 2022). They start by stating that they did not want players to feel that the skins would be necessary for the gameplay, especially when a significant amount of money and in-game currency could be in the way. That flexibility and fairness to players have always been their driving forces. ("June Team Update" 2022).

What is seen here is how developers, if they want, can change something because of an unfair system design and listen to players' feedback. Even though in Korea, Yoz's Jar is a core system of the game, they did not want the Western version to get such a predatory system in the game.

Another reason for pulling out Yoz's Jar from the Western version is some countries' regulations regarding loot boxes and gambling. The first few days, when the news post got released, players stated how the developers had to change and rework the systems in Yoz's Jar if it wanted to be released with no issues. Many players also thanked their decision, but it is not a permanent solution, as some stated. In the end, in August 2022, on the Official Lost Ark forums, one of the most notable community managers for the game, Roxx, stated that: "Yoz's Jar is still not in our plans to be implemented into the game, and we do not yet have another path to releasing Legendary Skins. It has come up in several discussions since then, but we haven't settled on anything." (Roxx 2022).

In January 2023, a post on the Official Lost Ark forums by the player Primadiva sparked a discussion about Yoz's Jar after it was in the shadows for a while. Since there is much discussion in this post, I have attached the most notable ones in the figure below and discussed them:
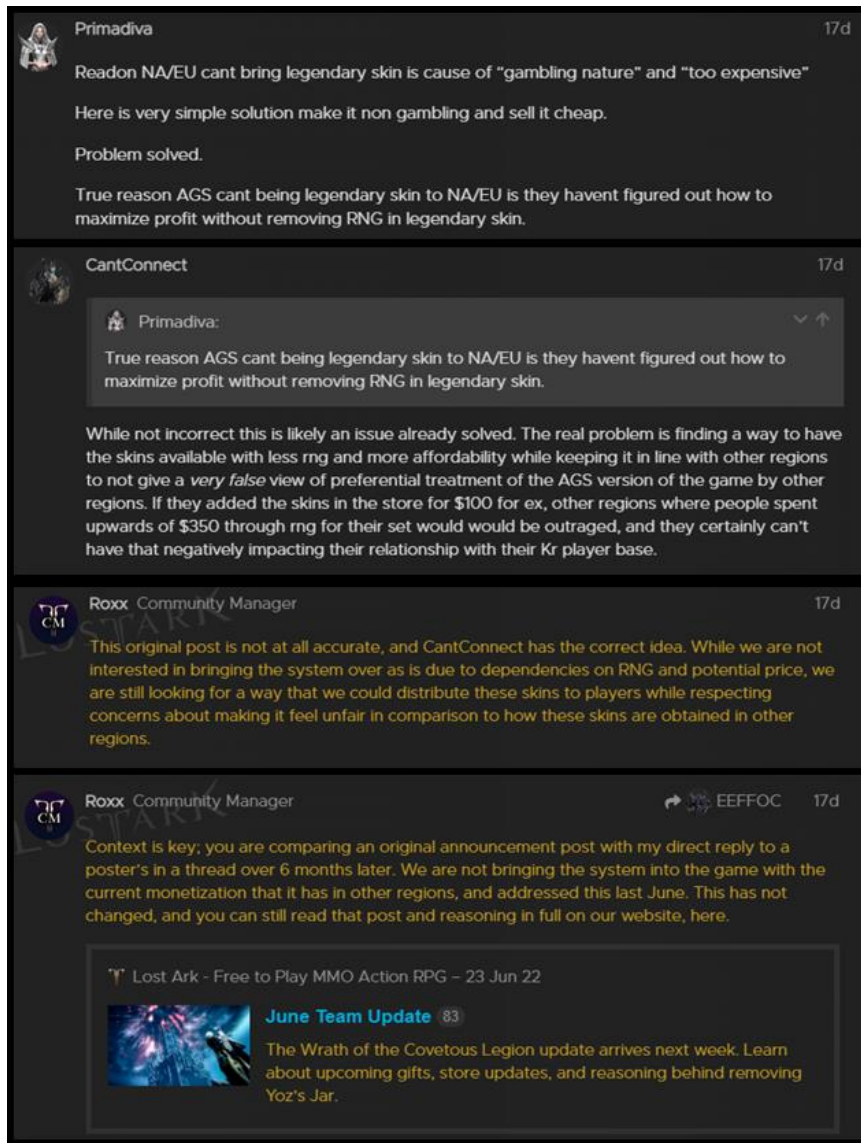
Figure 13: Primadiva, CantConnect, and Roxx's discussion of Yoz's Jar (Screenshot from the Official Lost Ark forums https://forums.playlostark.com/t/ags-problem-with-legendary-skin/508187/5)

Primadiva starts the post in the figure above by writing how legendary skin has not been released because of the "gambling nature" and the "expensiveness." Their solution is to make it non-gambling and cheap to buy. Lastly, they state their opinion of why Yoz's Jar is still not implemented: Amazon Game Studios has yet to find a way to maximize profit while retaining the gambling aspect of legendary skins. Afterward, the player, CantConnect, replies to Primadiva and explains how the players in other regions would become furious if the Western version got the skins for cheaper when they had to pay much more and go through RNG to get the legendary skins.

Then, community manager Roxx jumps in the conversation and writes how CantConnect has the right idea; Amazon Game Studios is not interested in bringing the system as it is in the Korean version. However, they are trying to find a way to distribute the skins while respecting the concerns it can cause of feeling unfair compared to how the skins are obtained in other regions, such as Korea. Lastly, Roxx replies to another player, where they state they are not bringing the Yoz's Jar system into the game with the current monetization system. This has not changed; the reasoning is still in the June Team Update mentioned earlier.

With this, it can be seen how much of an impact the Yoz's Jar controversy has taken on the player base of Lost Ark, where players now want the developers to implement a way to get the legendary skins from Yoz's Jar without the system of Yoz's Jar in itself. However, Amazon Game Studios are in the wrong position since making it much easier to get will make other regions that already have spent much money on Yoz's Jar furious.

6.2 Other P2W features that only exist in the Korean version of Lost Ark

The previous sub-chapter discussed Yoz's Jar, the most controversial monetization system in the Korean version of Lost Ark, which was decided not to be implemented in the Western version at the last moment. However, several other P2W features only exist in the Korean version of Lost Ark and have not been implemented in the Western version yet, or are implemented differently, suitable to the Western audience. This sub-chapter showcases two P2W features: the "Crystalline Aura" and the "Pet System." Investigation into these different pay-to-win features shows how the publishers of the Western Version of Lost Ark, Amazon Game Studios, have changed the monetization systems between the Korean and Western versions. They have done so by making the various systems more straightforward and combining several systems into one bundle. They have also added the option to buy a subscription-based system with in-game currency, which is not a feature in the Korean version. These solutions have made the systems in the Western version much less pay-to-win than they would have otherwise been if no changes had been made and have benefited the game's health significantly.

The first system to discuss is the subscription system Lost Ark called the "Crystalline Aura." In the Western version, Crystalline aura can be purchased from the in-game store by directly paying for it with real money or buying with blue crystals. For visuals, see the figure below.

Figure 14: The in-game store and under the "Essentials" tab, showing the different purchasable crystalline aura in NOK (Screenshot from in-game)

It comes in five different price tags, each with a different subscription time. The directly purchasable ones are 30 days for 10$, 100 days for 30$, 180 days for 50$, and 365 days for 100$ (Converted from NOK to American dollars). In addition, it is possible to maintain a 30-day crystalline aura just by playing the game and turning gold into blue crystals. That subscription costs 420 blue crystals. As for what crystalline aura gives to the player, this can be seen in the figure below.
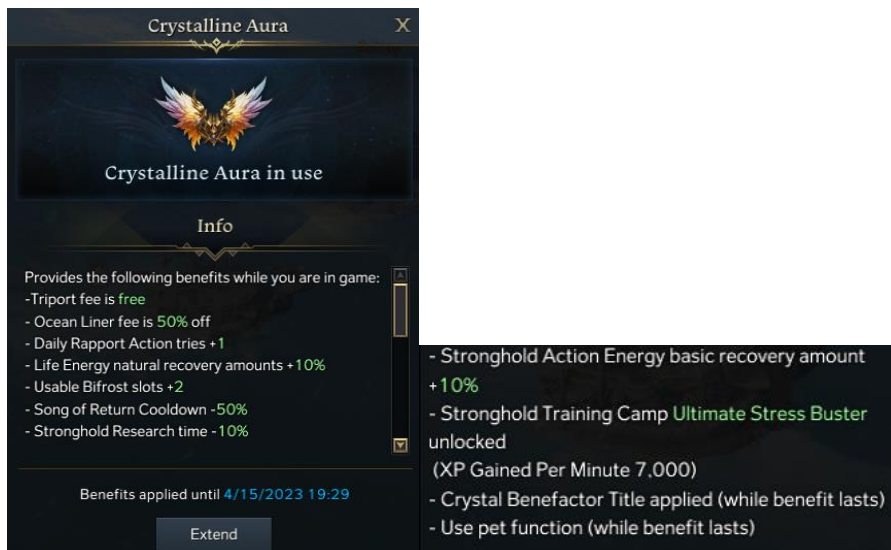
Figure 15: The 12 benefits crystalline aura gives, affecting different aspects of the game (Screenshot from in-game)

Having a crystalline aura is an optional but beneficial assistance for the player, and by just playing the game, the player can afford to buy it without spending any real-life money. So, how does the crystalline aura compare to the Korean version of Lost Ark? Crystalline aura is vastly different from the Western version, as it is split into two versions, which the figure below shows the Korean store and the Korean version of the crystalline aura.
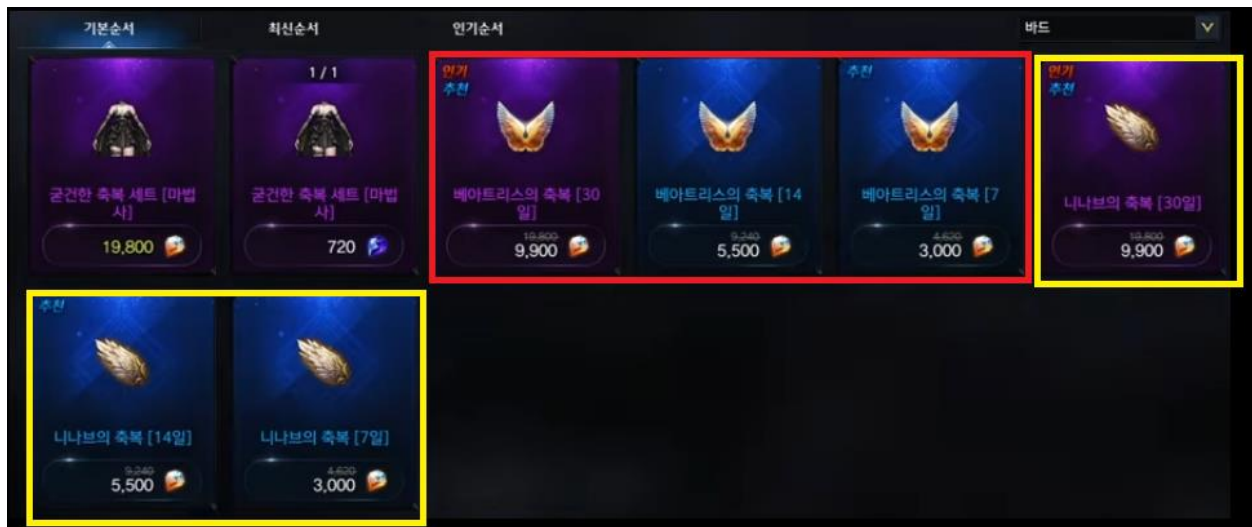
Figure 16: The Korean in-game store and the different options for crystalline aura (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] P2W features that only exist in KR" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OJqdFm93U&t)

In the figure, the ones around the red border are called "Beatrice's Bless," and those around the yellow border are called "Nineveh's Bless." To get the near identical effect of what a Crystalline Aura gives in the Western version, in the Korean version, the player has to buy both Beatrice's Bless and Nineveh's Bless. And not only that but there is also no option to buy blue crystals, meaning the player has to spend real-life money if they want the benefits.

Before discussing the price tags, it is necessary to note that the currency used in the Korean version of Lost Ark is South Korean Won; when converted to American Dollars, 1300 South Korean Won is around 1$, and the royal crystal in the Korean version is converted in the same matter, where for example 1300 royal crystals would then be 1300 South Korean Won, which is 1$.

There are only three options the player can buy, which are 30 days for 9900 royal crystals, around 8$, 14 days for 5500 royal crystals, around 4$, and seven days for 3000 royal crystals, around 2$. This means if the player wants the full benefits for 30 days, they have to spend 16$ to

get the nearly identical same benefits as the players do from crystalline aura in the Western version. To summarise then:

- The Western version of Lost Ark:
    - "Crystalline Aura" comes in five different purchasable subscriptions
        - Four of them costs real-life money (30 days 10$ - 100 days 30$ - 180 days 50$ - 365 days 100$)
        - One of them costs blue crystals (30 days 420 blue crystals)
- Korean version of Lost Ark:
    - "Crystalline Aura" is split into two separate subscriptions; both can be bought for the full benefits
    - Only purchasable with royal crystals and three different purchasable subscriptions for both of them
    - Beatrice's Bless
        - Gives the player a portion of benefits (30 days 8$ - 14 days 4$ - 7 days 2$)
    - Nineveh's Bless
        - Gives the player a portion of benefits (30 days 8$ - 14 days 4$ - 7 days 2$)

As it can be seen, there is quite a difference; where in the Western version, if the player wants to go an entire year with crystalline aura, it will only cost 100$; in the Korean version, however, if the player aims for a full year of both Beatrice's Bless and Nineveh's Bless by buying the 8$ version each month, for a year it will cost them 192$, a near double the price from the Western version. However, what makes the system P2W is not that it costs around 100$ more; it is not possible to buy the benefits with blue crystals, and it is split into two versions. How would the players have reacted if this system had been implemented in the Western version?

The second to discuss comes from the pet system of Lost Ark. There are several pets players can acquire, which helps them in many different ways. These systems can be classified into "Basic Stats," "Pet Support," and "Pet Function." For visuals, see the figure below, including my account's "Pet Collection."
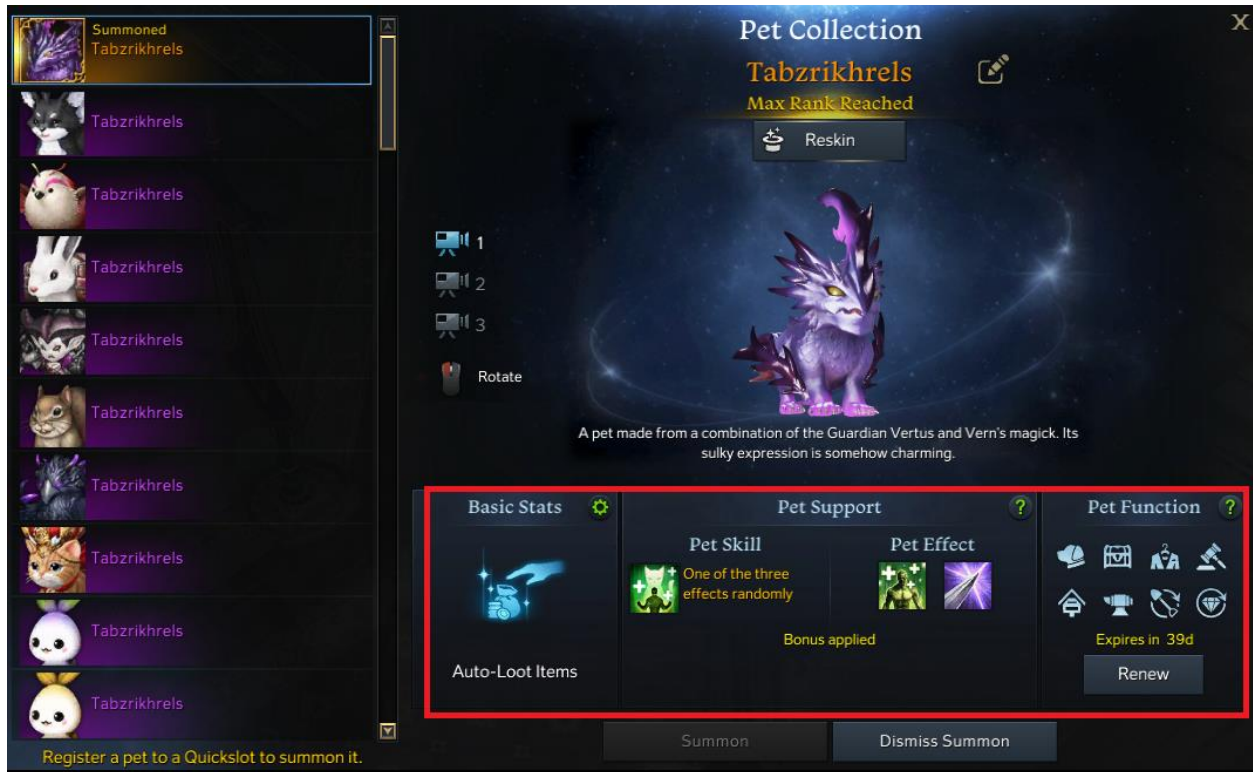
Figure 17: My own "Pet Collection" in the Western Version of Lost Ark. The red box shows the three main functions of pets (Screenshot from in-game)

In short, "Basic Stats" allows the pet to auto-loot items, and the player can decide to filter what the pet auto-loots.

"Pet Support" is split into "Pet Skill" and "Pet Effect," and their public benefit is the different buffs/stat boost it gives. "Pet Skill" is given to the player after upgrading their pet to Legendary level, while "Pet Effect" is something all pets have.

Then there is the "Pet Function," which only works if the player has "Crystalline Aura" active, which is an in-game subscription giving the players different benefits, one of them being the "Pet Function." "Pet Function" gives the player quick access to several different mechanics of the game, such as quick repair of armor and tools, which generally cannot be done without going to a repair vendor.

That is, in summary, what the pet system is in Lost Ark, and they are a necessity in most situations. Then the question is, how does it differ from the Korean Version? The figure below shows the same as the figure above and the contents of the red box, but in Korean and with some differences.

Compared to the Western version, the only visual difference that can be seen is that one additional button is available under "Pet Support." That is a "Renew" button, which "Pet Function" also has in the Western version. However, there is a big fundamental difference in the "Renew" under "Pet Functions" in the Korean version. Clicking the Renew button in the Western Version prompts the player to buy more Crystalline Aura to renew their "Pet Function." However, in the Korean version, the pet system is its entity. It is not bundled with the other benefits of Crystalline Aura, or the Korean version of crystalline aura, for that matter. Clicking the renew button brings up another menu, and both can be seen in the figure below.
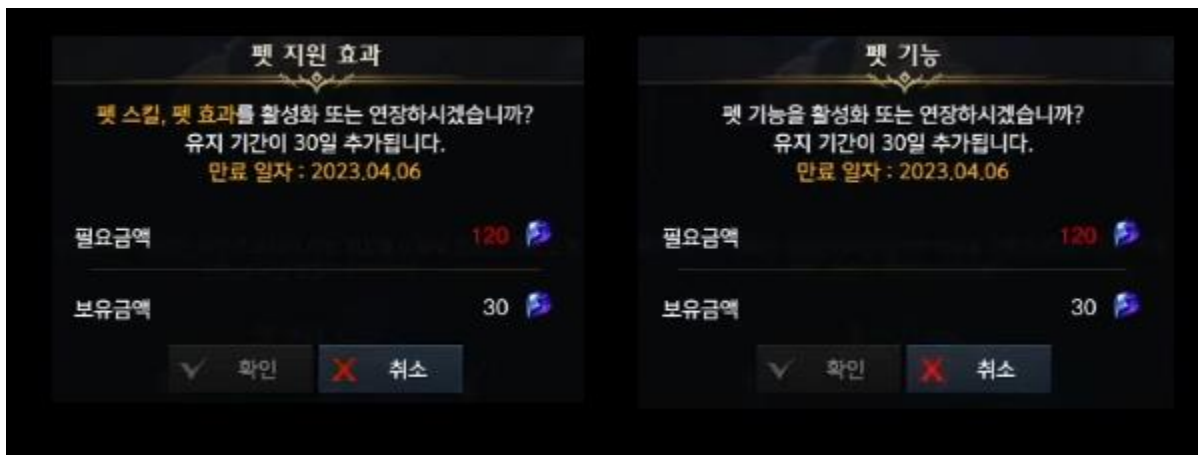
Korean players, if they want to maintain "Pet Support" and "Pet Function" every month, must pay 120 blue crystals. That is roughly 10$ a month if the player buys both each month. That means the differences are:

- The Western version of Lost Ark:
    - "Pet Support" is entirely free of charge.
    - "Pet Function" is tied to "Crystalline Aura," bundled with several other benefits. "Crystalline Aura" costs 420 Blue Crystals, around 17$ a month
- Korean version of Lost Ark:
    - "Pet Support" costs 120 Blue Crystals, around 5$ for a month
    - "Pet Function" is its separate mechanic not tied to "Crystalline Aura," it also costs 120 Blue Crystals, around 5$ for a month.

However, that is not all P2W systems tied to the pet system; there is a gambling mechanic tied to the "Pet Support" and its "Pet Effect" in the Korean version. As briefly mentioned previously, "Pet Effect" gives extra stat boosts depending on what type of effect the pet has. There are two types, one pet effect is in the category of defensive stat boosts, the other in offensive stat boosts, and where the pet can have both one defensive and an offensive. In the Western version, the player goes to an NPC, where they can retrain their pet and choose which type of pet effect they want, free of charge. The figure below shows the interface.
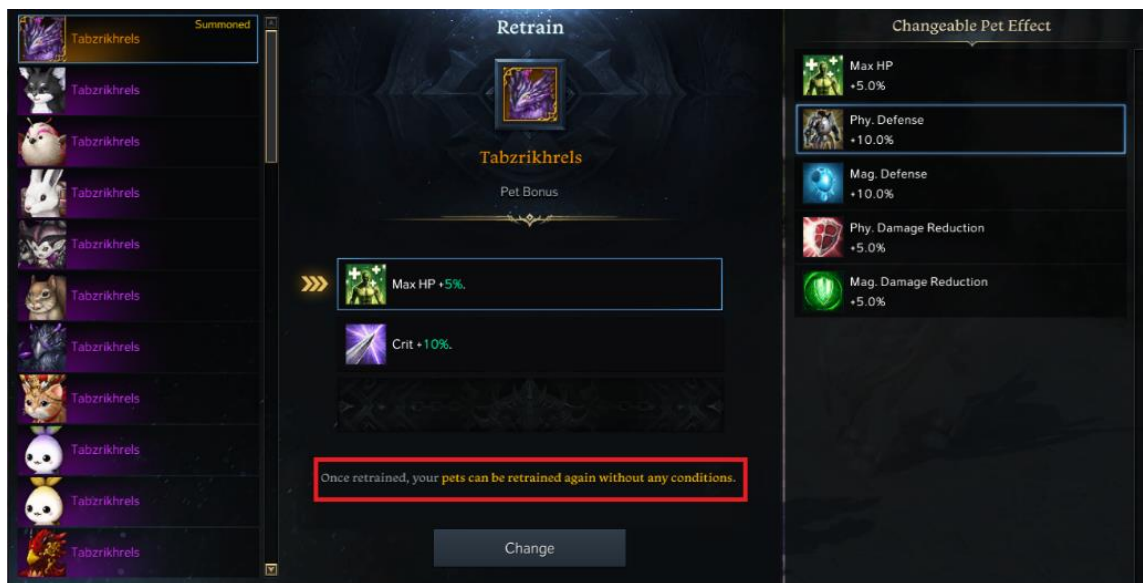
Figure 20: My pets and the interface for retraining and changing pet effects (Screenshot from in-game)

As seen, it is stated that: "Once retrained, your **pets can be retrained again without any conditions."** the player is free to change the pet effects whenever they desire for no cost. However, there is a difference between the Korean version and the pet retraining system, as it is

tied to gambling. For visuals, the figure below shows the Korean interface of the pet retraining system.

Figure 21: Korean version of the retraining and changing pet effects interface (defensive stats) (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] P2W features that only exist in KR"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OJgdFm93U&t)

The figure above shows two significant differences from the Western version. The first is that changing a pet effect costs blue crystals, seven for each attempt. However, what makes the system gambling, is the other difference which is that each attempt gives the player the choice of picking three random effects that the game chooses. The effects have a dynamic number, meaning that the Max HP stat, for example, can roll from 1% - 5%; meanwhile, in the Western version, the player always gets the highest number effect, meaning it is a static roll. For visuals, see the figure below.

Figure 22: The interface and an attempt at what the player can pick in the defensive stats (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] P2W features that only exist in KR" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OJqdFm93U&t)

In the figure, the first effect is what the pet already had, which is 3% more Max HP for the player. The three other ones are randomly decided by the game, where the first one is 4% Physical Damage Reduction, the second is 4% Physical Defence, and the third is Physical Defence, but 6% instead. If the player gets the wrong skill or a lower number, they can either choose one of the new three effects or stay with the same effect as previously owned and then the player has to pay another seven blue crystals to try again. The same goes for offensive stats, as the figure below shows.

Figure 23: Korean version of the retraining and changing pet effects interface (offensive stats) with the interface and an attempt at what the player can pick in the offensive stats (Screenshot taken from the YouTuber Memorizer92's video "[Lost Ark] P2W features that only exist in KR" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1OJqdFm93U&t)

The issue with this system is that it is gambling, but 90% of the effects the player can get are something they do not want. For instance, in the defensive stats, the player's only effect is Max

HP, while in the offensive stats, players' effects are bonus Critical Hit Rate, Specialization, or Swiftness. Moreover, the player wants to aim for the highest number, meaning 5% Max HP and 10% of either Critical Hit Rate, Specialization, or Swiftness. This means a Korean player, if unlucky, can be gambling thousands of blue crystals before getting the sound effect with a good number roll. To summarize then the difference between the Western version and the Korean version:

- The Western version of Lost Ark:
    - "Changing/retraining pet effects is completely free of charge
    - "Once retrained, your **pets can be retrained again without any conditions."**
- Korean version of Lost Ark:
    - "Changing/retraining pet effects costs seven blue crystals each attempt for both categories of defensive and offensive effects
        - Each attempt yields three random effects chosen by the game
            - The three random effects come with a random stat number
    - If the player gets an unwanted effect, they have to try again for seven blue crystals
    - If the player gets the wanted effect but with a low stat number, they have to try again for seven blue crystals

6.3 The controversies of Treasure Hunter in RuneScape, Jagex's responses to them, and solutions

Regarding RuneScape, the monetization model players discuss daily is Treasure Hunter, the loot box system version for Jagex. What makes Treasure Hunter so controversial is the various promotions they get and how some are handled after Jagex is at fault for exploiting the promotions. The difference between this section and the previous one looking at Lost Ark's Yoz's Jar, is that Jagex has been getting hate for their poorly monetization implementations. Instead of taking the right action to take out their current promotion, they use solutions that stir up the community.

One of these examples is the treasure hunter promotion released on 24 August 2020, which brought up an exploit letting players acquire immense amounts of different rewards because of

another promotion that was running beside the treasure hunter promotion. In Treasure Hunter, when the player uses a key to open a random chest, they are always rewarded with what is known as "oddments." Oddments is a currency used in the Oddments store for various rewards, including buying more keys to roll more on Treasure Hunter. The figure below shows the marketplace and the oddments store page.

Figure 24: The oddments store at the marketplace (Screenshot from in-game)

The player can convert their reward from treasure hunter for more oddments but at the cost of losing that reward, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 25: The option of converting the reward to oddments, as seen in the red box (Screenshot from in-game)

On 24 August 2020, the oddments store had a promotion where buying treasure hunter keys for oddments was reduced by 50%. Coinciding that, the Treasure Hunter promotion Loot Duels was

running beside it, which gave more oddments than usual when players rolled chests. The amount given was enough for players to turn oddments infinitely to more treasure hunter keys via the oddments store, meaning an infinite amount of loot box openings could be exploited.

This was a problem that Jagex had to act towards as fast as possible. However, how was the action taken? On 28 August 2020, they let out a blog post on their official website, describing how they had identified around 4000 players attempting the exploit and how they had been categorized into three separate groups (Jagex 2020). The ones that had tested the exploit had no action taken against them, 835 accounts that exploited the discount was banned for 72 hours, and 65 accounts that were severely exploited were banned for 14 days and were expected to get a rollback on their accounts (Jagex 2020). They closed their statement by explaining how they do not tolerate bug abuse or exploits in their game (Jagex 2020). Moreover, precisely how was the community's response to this?

Moreover, the community was furious, saying that this was not the player's fault and that Jagex should have tested everything beforehand before releasing it into the game. Some players started to break down and give their opinion on how awful MTX is in RuneScape. LordJanas, a Reddit user that posted on the "Follow up: Discounted Key Oddment Exploit – August 24th, 2020," for example, had this to say: "At this point, you should just be able to buy levels and items directly. This game has no integrity, and your achievements mean nothing because of how bad the MTX is. MTX now constitutes an "update" to the game with no other real content and then even that is bug-riddled." (LordJanas 2020).

How did Jagex then respond to these accusations made by their player base? Their final statement wrote that this controversy needs a deeper investigation and that the player's bans that they did were done under their policy of knowingly exploiting a bug or error (Jagex 2020). With that, the controversy would continue, and Jagex would not make any more statements until the talk of it was eventually forgotten. This is Jagex's way of dealing with controversies related to Treasure Hunter, doing a poor job at implementing a promotion, having it take effect on the player base, responding to these controversies without compensation, and finally letting the controversy tone down over time.

There is one substantial difference between Lost Ark's monetization system and RuneScape, and that is that RuneScape pushes the idea to use their monetization system Treasure Hunter all the

time, whereas this is not to be seen in Lost Ark. When logging into RuneScape, the player is greeted by a UI that shows the player their daily keys, and the player can click this UI to go into Treasure Hunter.

Figure 26: The small UI that comes up on the main interface on each login (Screenshot from in-game)

There is no way to disable this UI from popping up each time the player logs in; they either have to close the UI each time or use the key for the UI to be gone for the day. Jagex preys on the player to open Treasure Hunter and try their luck with the free key to make them buy more keys to gamble.

6.3.1 Ironman Mode

If the player does not want to interact with Treasure Hunter at any point, there is one solution that Jagex has made: a different kind of game mode for RuneScape. This game mode is called "Ironman." On the official RuneScape website, Jagex explains the Ironman mode as the following: "With no trade, no multiplayer, and no XP handouts, it is about earning everything with blood, sweat, and tears – through gathering and crafting, or prising it from the claws of Gielinor's nastiest beasts." (Jagex n.d.). Notice how Jagex says **no trade, no multiplayer, and no XP handouts**; what do they mean by that? Their website has explained some restrictions implemented when the player plays Ironman mode, as shown in the figure below.
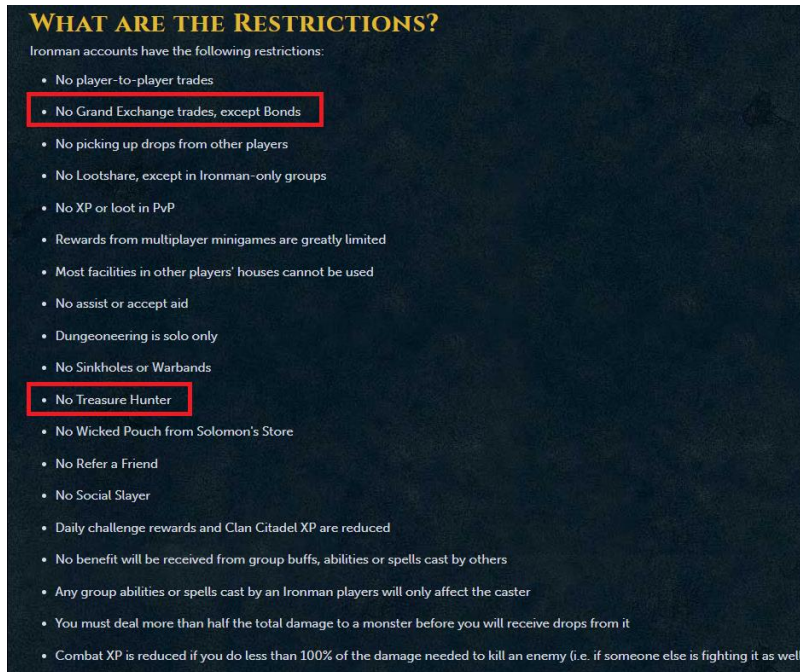
Figure 27: The restrictions for Ironman accounts (Screenshot from Ironman mode section https://www.runescape.com/game-guide/ironman)

Out of all the restrictions, two stand out regarding MTX. The first is that the player cannot play Treasure Hunter in Ironman mode. This also means the Treasure Hunter UI on every login is not there, and there are some restrictions in the Oddments store, such as the player being unable to buy some of the benefits with Oddments. The player is free from the main face of MTX of RuneScape and can play the game without thinking about it. However, Treasure Hunter is not directly removed from the game for Ironman players, and they cannot access it. Here are some figures showing what happens if the player tries to access MTX that is disabled in Ironman mode:
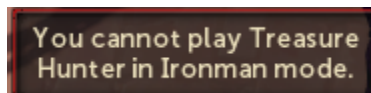
Figure 28: The UI that comes up when the player tries to access Treasure Hunter in Ironman Mode (Screenshot from in-game)
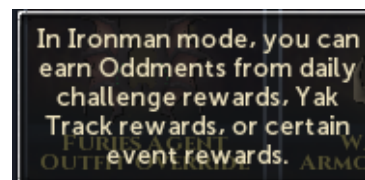
Figure 29: The UI that comes up explaining the alternative way of how Ironman players can earn oddments (Screenshot from in-game)

Figure 30: Consumables locked from being purchased with oddments (Screenshot from in-game)
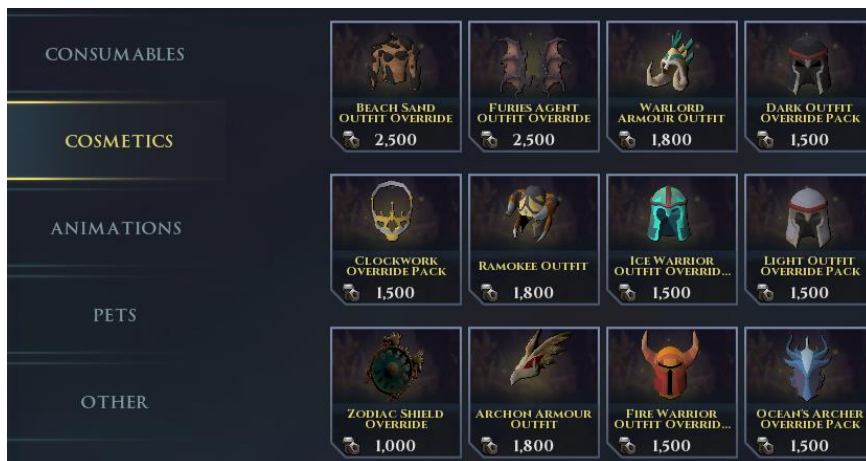
Figure 31: Oddments still available to be used for cosmetics, for example (Screenshot from in-game)
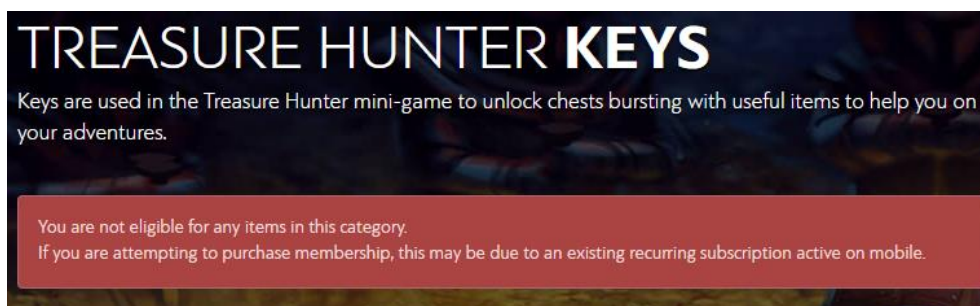
Figure 32: If the player clicks in the game to buy Treasure Hunter keys on their Ironman account, they are taken to the website but are greeted by the text in the red box explaining they are not eligible for Treasure Hunter keys. (Screenshot from the online store of RuneScape https://www.runescape.com/treasure-hunter)

The second is no Grand Exchange trades, except Bonds. Grand Exchange is the marketplace where players can buy and sell items to each other. In Ironman mode, trading on Grand Exchange is disabled, besides Bonds.

Figure 33: Trying to buy salmon, one of the many restricted items on Grand Exchange as an Ironman player (Screenshot from in-game)

A chapter before explained what and why Bonds were developed. However, Bonds can be purchased with real-life money and sold on the Grand Exchange for in-game money or used by the player for several benefits, including getting and extending membership. That means the player can self-sustain their subscription by just earning in-game money and then buying a Bond to redeem more membership. In the case of Ironmen, they can buy Bond with real-life money and buy them from other players on Grand Exchange, but they cannot sell the Bond for in-game money since otherwise, it would defeat the purpose of the Ironman mode.

Figure 34: Trying to buy a Bond as an Ironman player, the game explains I do not have enough coins to purchase (Screenshot from in-game)
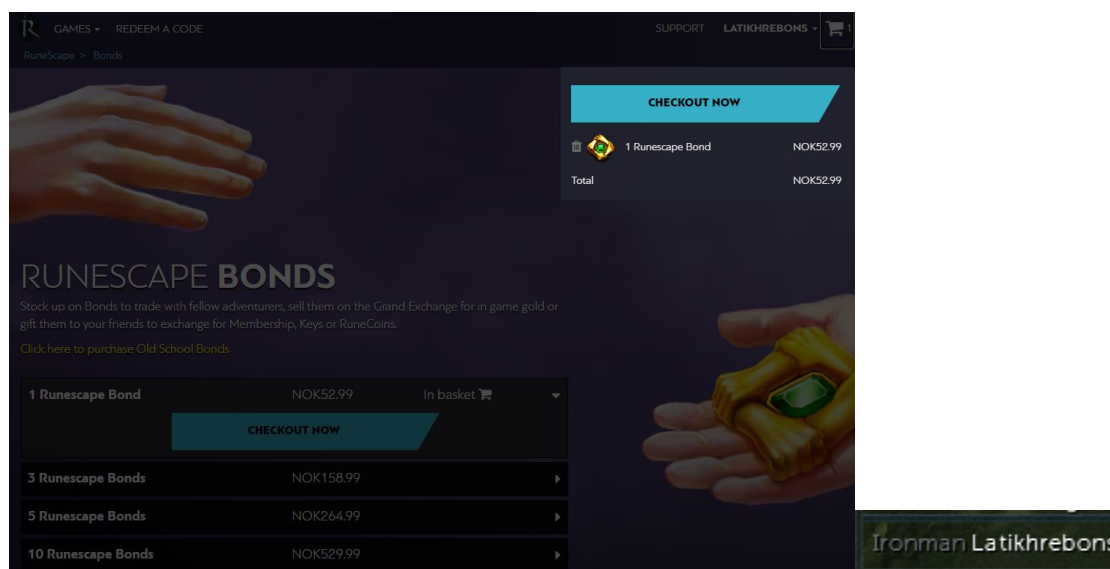
Figure 35: My own Ironman user, on the, left the website to buy bonds and showing it is possible to buy Bonds; on the right is the name of my user account and proof of being an Ironman besides username (Left screenshot from the online store of RuneScape, link unavailable without logging in. Right screenshot from in-game)

This game mode was mainly developed for players who wanted to play the game with the restrictions listed in the figure about restrictions. The game mode is a challenge for the player, but it is also a way to escape the MTX of the game if the player wants, but they are forced to be an Ironman player to escape the MTX. This means that Jagex did not create Ironman as a solution for players to escape from MTX, Ironman was created because it was a widespread challenge that players participated in with their regular accounts before Ironman was an official game mode, but then Jagex created it as an official game mode because of its popularity, not as escapism for MTX.

6.4 Summary of Chapter 6

Chapter 6 focused on different monetization models in Lost Ark and RuneScape. First, Yoz's Jar was discussed, a loot box system only existing in the Korean version of Lost Ark, and the reasons for it not being implemented into the Western version. Yoz's Jar was deemed a predatory monetization system that would harm the player base of the Western Version of Lost Ark. That is because combat stats are tied to the cosmetics available from Yoz's Jar. Players would be pressured to seek the legendary pieces to make their characters stronger rather than to make the

player character look different. As of now, an alternative to Yoz's Jar has not been implemented, because of the several factors that need to be taken into consideration, such as the reaction that would come from the Koreans if a changed version of Yoz's Jar was implemented in the Western version, which would make the cosmetics easier to acquire. After that, several other monetization models that were not implemented or implemented differently were showcased. That was the "Crystalline Aura" and the "Pet System." Amazon Game Studios changed these two systems to make them less pay-to-win in the Western version. They did so by combining the benefits and making it less of a gamble to get what the player needs and room to use in-game gold to get Crystalline Aura. This is seen as a net positive, where even the Koreans are happy for the Western audience. For RuneScape, some controversies of Treasure Hunter were discussed, such as the Treasure Hunter promotion on 24 August 2020. Jagex could do a better job in controlling issues that arise when it is their fault for it to happen. Players should not be punished when it is not their fault. Instead, like in Lost Ark, they should communicate and devise a solution to benefit the players and the developers. Finally, the last section discussed Ironman Mode as the escapism of Treasure Hunter. The overall points are that Ironman Mode should not be a solution to escape from the microtransaction of RuneScape 3. Some players want to play without the restriction of Ironman Mode to their account, but as of now, they have to go alongside the monetization systems that there are.

Chapter 7: Discussing the gathered Reddit Data – Player's concern on monetization in Lost Ark and RuneScape

This chapter analyzes and discusses select findings of Reddit data that was gathered with the help of the website camas.undit.com and discusses the data that is gathered from the /r/lostarkgame subreddit for Lost Ark and the /r/runescape subreddit for RuneScape, the two subreddits with the most Reddit activity for the respective games. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, for /r/lostarkgame, the data was filtered with the search term "P2W", and for /r/runescape, the data was filtered with the search term "MTX." Going further into this chapter, everything mentioned about comments is about the search terms "P2W" and "MTX," so I will not mention that further.

7.1 /r/lostarkgame subreddit for Lost Ark

The /r/lostarkgame data stretches from 02/09/2022 to 10/24/2022 when the < 02/11/2022> Lost Ark was released to the Western audience. This means that the data for the Lost Ark subreddit was limited since the subreddit was new alongside the game is new to the Western audience. However, 10230 results of Reddit comments are gathered from the /r/lostarkgame subreddit. As already mentioned, the data was gathered with the search term "P2W" filtered, as that term is mainly used in the context of monetization in Lost Ark, and everything shown further is in the context of the search term "P2W". Before analyzing the posts themselves, it is beneficial to give context and visualization of the statistics of the gathered data so it is seen how several players are discussing the topic of pay-to-win on the subreddit.

In the /r/lostarkgame subreddit, the number of comments in total from all users varied from 1 to 66 comments. The average number of user comments was two, with 4961 users and 10230 comments.
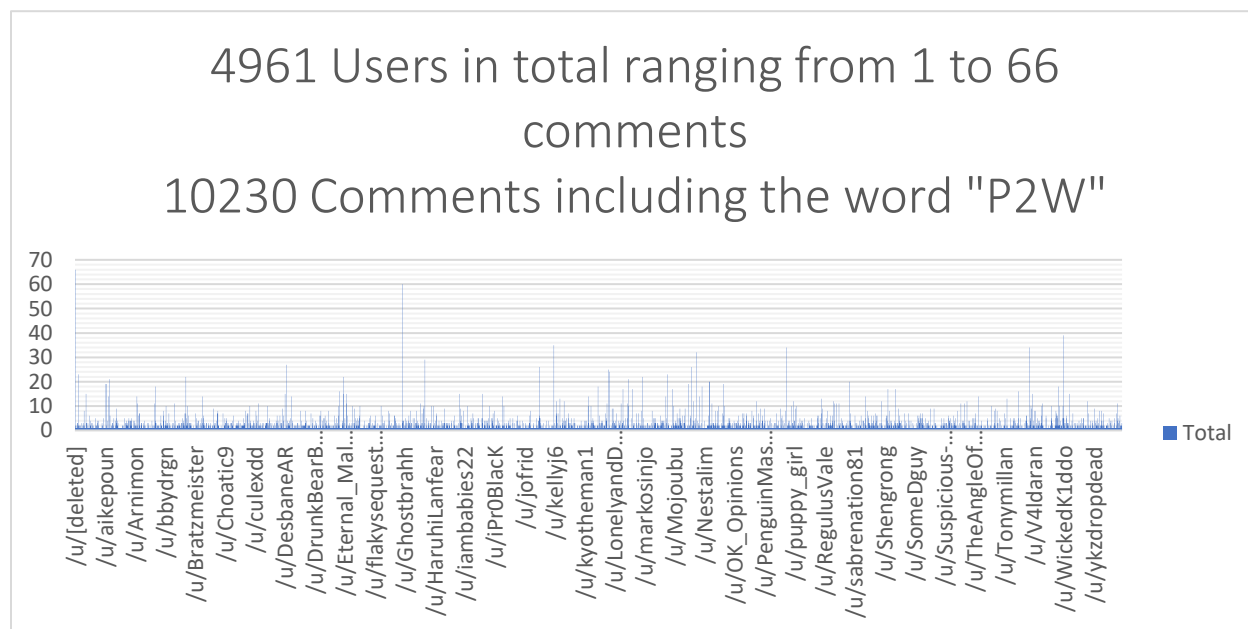
Figure 36: Chart showing the total distribution of comments between users

Average: 2,062084257   Count: 4961   Sum: 10230

Filtering the statistic then to every user that has commented more than two times, the average became four comments between users, with 1746 and a total of 7015 comments.
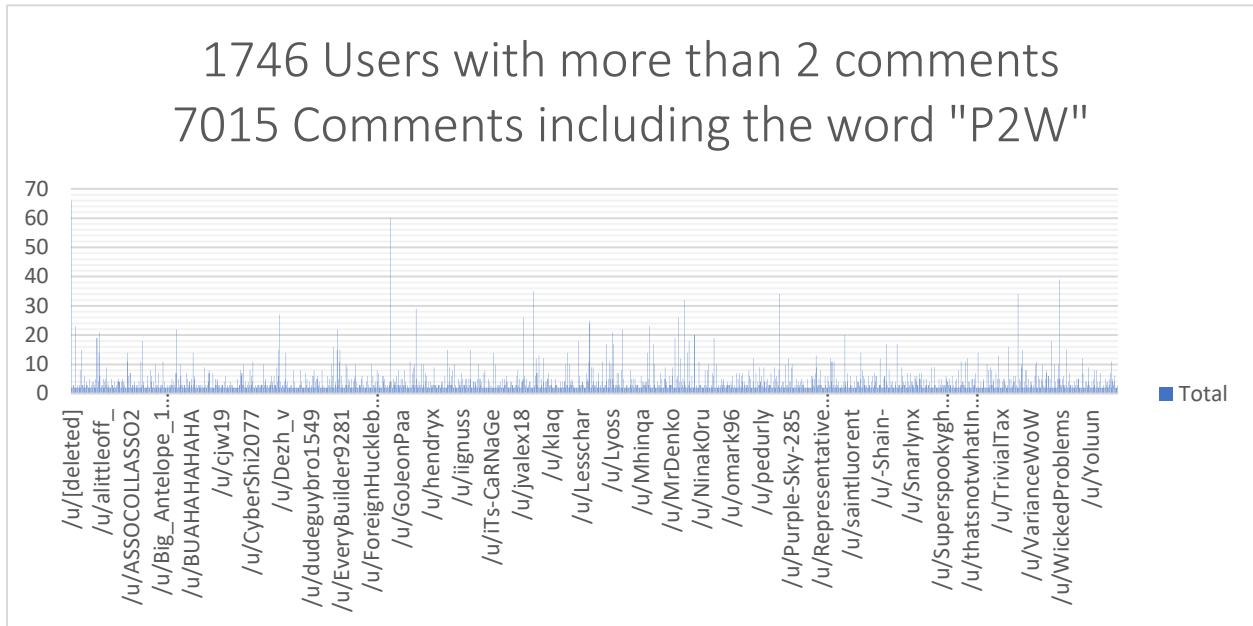
Figure 37: Chart showing the distribution of comments between users, where these users have commented more than two times

Average: 4,017754868   Count: 1746   Sum: 7015

That means that for users with only one comment, the average became one comment, with 3215 users and 3215 comments.

Lastly, the top 31 users had an average of 26 comments between them, totaling 819 comments.
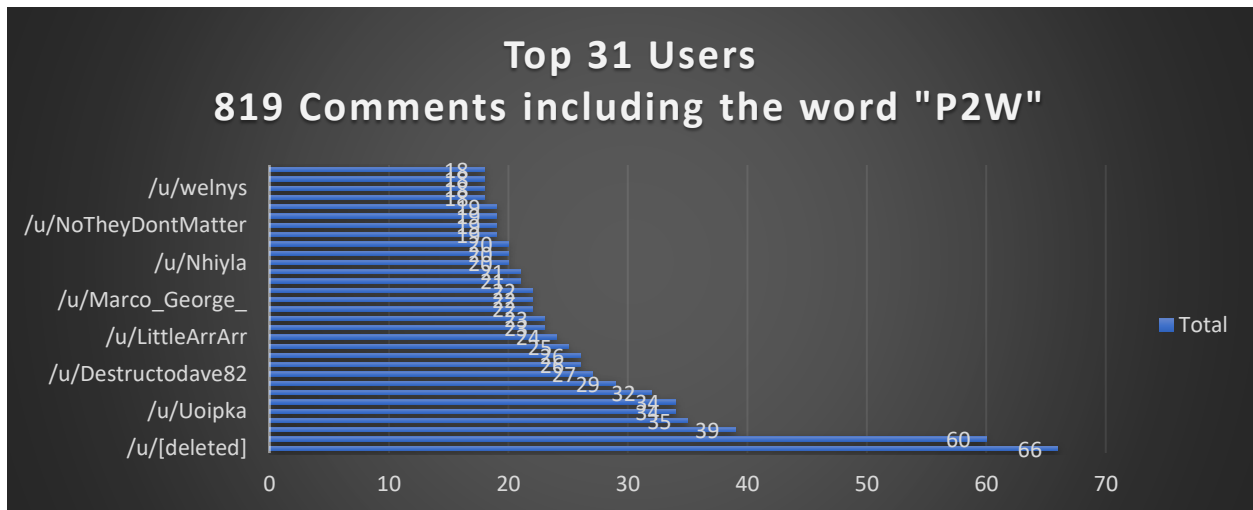
Figure 38: Chart showing the top 31 users

`Average: 26,41935484    Count: 31    Sum: 819`

From the figures, there have been several players that have had a conversation that included the word "P2W", where the minority had commented more than one time (1746 users), while the majority had commented only one time (3215 users). Concluding this section, these three charts have been used to showcase the number of players that base their comments on discussing several topics on the "P2W" aspects of the game. Going forward in this chapter, I will showcase my investigation of comments on a particular aspect of a gameplay and monetization system for Lost Ark and how it is influenced by monetization by explaining my insights and then showcasing several comments associated with the topic.

7.1.1 The comments on Gems

The following comment is about the gem system of Lost Ark. The gem system itself does not directly associate itself with monetization. The comprehensive investigation of comments on gems shows how there is an issue tied to it and monetization because of a nuance that affects how some classes need to have more gems than others, making it so players might decide to spend real-life money to purchase in-game gold and be able to purchase the gems needed for their player character to function optimally. This is an indirect way that the gem system is associated with monetization, and to fix the issue, the gem system needs a balance, so it costs the same amount to buy gems for each class. I start by showcasing only one comment by a Reddit user discussing gems, then explain the gem system of Lost Ark and discuss the user's comment. I only showcase one comment for this gameplay system because the comment touches upon the gem system very well. The comment is by Reddit user /u/AsianSquirrel, who says the following:

/u/AsianSquirrel

>Why you apply to whale's group? That seems weird. It seems like you're OK with people who spend lots of money in a MMO to be within their own exclusive group, with all the numerical and progression advantages that comes with it. I'm not OK with it. I do not believe throwing your wallet at a game should make your experience more advantageous and convenient compared to other people's. Social and progression interactions should be influenced by your gameplay and effort, not your wallet. There shouldn't be any 'whale groups' to begin with. As far as I'm aware, Koreans are far more accepting about money impacting gameplay than we are in the West, as evidenced by your casino-style game designs. I come from World of Warcraft. Beyond the initial cost of the game, I didn't spend money on it. I paid the subscription with in-game gold and was at the cutting edge of content. People who spend a lot on the game gets only marginal advantage, and F2P/low spenders could always compete with enough skill/effort/time invested. I can't do that in Lost Ark. I hate being 2nd class. The worst P2W aspect of this game are the gems. If you play a class that relies on numerous damage gems, you'd be at a gargantuan disadvantage compared to whales. I find this design to be particularly egregious and gross because Smilegate made a conscious decision to make damage gems scale non-linearly at level 9 and 10, no doubt in part because that their high spending customers would have a big numbers advantage. You may be OK with KR's P2W game design choices and remain perpetually disadvantaged compared to whales, but not everyone is nor should they. Playing field should be leveled in MMOs.

8/2/2022, 1:08:45 AM

Figure 39: Reddit user /u/AsianSquirrel, comment, and time of comment

It is worth explaining the term **whale** that the user mentions several times in their post. In short, a whale is a player that has spent much real-life money on a game's monetization system.

Reddit user /u/AsianSquirrel has much to say in their comment, which is part of their ongoing conversation. This player believes that using money to progress and get stronger should not be a solution to make one's experience more advantageous and convenient compared to other players. Notice how the player is not arguing about having a monetization system in the game, but they are arguing that it should not affect the gameplay aspect. They explain how they do not feel like being treated like a 2nd class and how the worst part of the game is the gems. Gems is a gameplay system I have not discussed up to this point, but in short, the player character can equip up to 11 gems in their gem inventory, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 40: My character, the Berserker Class, and the Gems I own (in red box) (Screenshot from in-game)

As seen in the figure, there are two types of gems, the ones that give a damage boost to a skill (in the yellow box) and the ones that give a cooldown reduction to a skill (in the green box). Gems range from level 1-10, each level making a gem stronger and costing more to buy on the marketplace, which other players sell. Alternatively, they are gained by playing the game, and over time the player combines low-level gems with higher-level gems that they can use. To put in perspective, to craft a level 10 gem from scratch, the player has to acquire 19,683 level 1 gems, which can take years if the player is only playing on a single character. Because of this, the fine line of level for gems for most of the content in Lost Ark is to have at least level 7 gems. There is also a tiny quantity of level 10 gems on the marketplace, making just one astonishingly expensive.

Going back to AsianSquirrel's complaint about the gem system, the complaint is how some of the classes need fewer gems to function as correctly and best as the class is intended to be played. For example, the Berserker class must have all gem slots equipped with at least level 7 gems to function correctly. They must be a mix of damage boost and cooldown reduction, while the Shadowhunter class only needs two gems to function correctly, one damage boost and one cooldown reduction, and the two gems only affect one of their skills. As a visualization of how impactful this issue is, here is the Lost Ark community reacting to this exact situation between a Berserker player and a Shadowhunter player:

Figure 41: One Reddit user fooling with a meme template (Screenshot from the Reddit post by /u/Hark211 https://www.reddit.com/r/lostarkgame/comments/v7gnvk/shadowhunter_mains_on_their_way_to_the_bank/)

The figure above illustrates Shadowhunter players looking at Berserker player's gems and saying, "Look what they need to mimic a fraction of our power," where the Berserker player is with 11 level 7 gems and the Shadowhunter player with only 2 level 7 gems.

In conclusion, this means that Shadowhunter players have an advantage at what time their class is at their best level, while the Berserker players have to work extra more towards getting enough gems to be at the same level. Moreover, all of this can be avoided by spending money on buying gold with royal crystals, but it will cost much less for a Shadowhunter player than a Berserker player. In the end, AsianSquirrel states how the playing field should be leveled in MMOs. As it can be seen, AsianSquirrel did not once mention that the monetization of the game is terrible, but how the game design system itself is causing the problem. The solution to this problem could be to make gems equal in some way between all classes without changing the already monetization model of the game.

7.1.2 The comments on Yoz's Jar

The following comments are about Yoz's Jar, which I discussed in a previous chapter of the thesis. Investigation of the comments of Yoz's Jar shows how players are still waiting and anticipating the skins that would come with it. Players agree that the issue of Yoz's Jar is not that it is a loot box system but that what it offers is tied to gameplay stat and power. If Yoz's Jar had just cosmetics without any stat boosts, players would not have had a direct issue with the system. On another side, some players feel that the cosmetics having stats tied to them are exaggerated, and players, over time, would stop complaining that it is a large part of why they did not want to spend money on Yoz's Jar. The first comment to discuss is the following by /u/skydevil10 and /u/twomilliondicks, who responded to skydevil10's comment:

/u/skydevil10
From my understanding, the reason why people thought this was p2w was cause the legendary skins had a higher buff than the epic skins and the rng made it stupid hard to even get them, so you had to pay a lot of money just to get one piece. I support removing Yoz's Jar, but i'm really bummed out that they just removed all the skins and don't plan on adding them to the game. I would have been fine with them removing the legendary skins only and kept the epic skins that were attached to Yoz's Jar, those skins had the same value of current skins. I don't understand why they decide to just remove all of them instead of removing only the legendary skins.
6/23/2022, 11:05:56 PM
/u/twomilliondicks
Yeah combining lootbox skins with attack power was the problem. This game already has attack power linked to cash spending and there are tons of popular western games with lootbox skins. AGS and SG too dumb to realize this though so we get nothing lol
6/23/2022, 11:34:38 PM

Figure 42: Reddit user /u/skydevil10 and /u/twomilliondicks, comment, and time of comment

skydevil10 expresses their understanding of why Yoz's Jar was not implemented into the Western version because it would have been highly P2W. After all, legendary skins give a more significant stat boost than epic skins, and to get just one legendary skin piece, let alone the whole set, would be challenging and expensive to get if the player was not lucky.

However, their frustration on the matter is, once again, like the previous comment, the monetization model itself would have been acceptable; their question and frustration are why the developers did not release a modified version of Yoz's Jar with only epic skins being acquirable. A fellow Reddit user going by twomilliondicks responds to skydevil10 and mutually agrees that

combining loot boxes with skins that give attack power is the problem. They also say how multiple other Western games use loot boxes that give skins without players arguing about it.

By reading Skydevil10's comment, it seems the player was intrigued by some of the epic skins available to be acquired throughout Yoz's Jar, and they do not see it fair not to be released because of the legendary skins. Amazon Game Studios could indeed change up on Yoz's Jar as they have done with the pet system, but there seems to be some caveat in doing so for Yoz's Jar. One issue that could arise would be that players would roll on Yoz's Jar without any chance of getting legendary skins, which players know exist in Korea. With that issue, though, Amazon Game Studios could release the legendary skins in its pack instead of having it tied to Yoz's Jar.

The main conclusion of these two comments is that both players do not mind getting skins from loot boxes; their issue arises from the fact that the skins give an advantage in stats and combat, whereas other games with a loot box system containing skins do not do so.

Another comment comes by /u/LoveKina, and they have a lot to say:

/u/LoveKina
To be fair, its because AGS framed it that way. They put in the update that it was removed because they didn't want people to feel pressured to spend money for the stat upgrade, but thats (imo completely assumption) complete bullshit. People complained on launch about skins have virtue and they got over it, people complained about these skins and would also get over it. Its easy to quickly be "outraged" My thought is it definitely has something to do with the trend of companies shifting away from loot boxes due to countries starting to have push back against them in EU and 1 in the US. The trend is clear and rather than add in and rake in profits in the short term, they have cleaned it up to make themselves look good in the average players' eyes. "We are against p2w too guys we're on your side, we are removing it and giving you what you wanted, please love us and keep playing" I would've definitely spent money eventually on Yoz's Jar, Im 100% fine with it being removed because I don't like loot boxes. The biggest question to me, is how is there no other way to monetize the legendary skins that they can copy, relatively quickly, and give us a timeline. "no current plans in place" is stupid af to me. They are a company and if they really want to gouge funds from people just use the current BiS selling tactic for games and cash in on FOMO. Literally add the Yoz's Jar skins into a rotating shop like fortnite or valorant or just make them accessible in the amethyst shop and turn amethyst into our version of mileage and lets get on with it.
6/24/2022, 5:47:43 PM

Figure 43: Reddit user /u/LoveKina, comment, and time of comment

LoveKina explains how Amazon Game Studios updated their website about Yoz's Jar not coming because they did not want people to feel pressured to spend money for the combat stats the skins gave. However, for LoveKina, they find that not true. That is because any other skins in the game have a form of stat boost that I have yet to discuss. However, it is not combat-related

and does not affect gameplay so much that it is necessary. This other stat type is called virtue stat. In the figures below, this has been showcased:
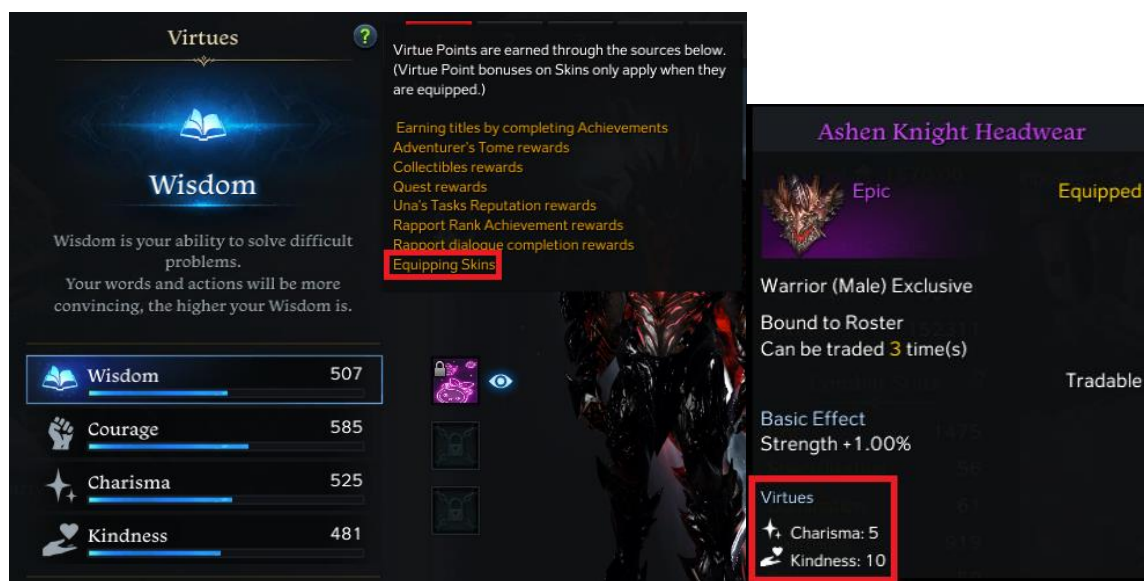
Figure 44: On the left, my virtues points and how "Equipping Skins" give more. On the right is an example of a skin for the helm slot giving five charisma and ten kindness (Screenshot from in-game)

Virtue stat is used as breakpoints to romance and befriend the different NPCs in the game throughout what is known as the "rapport" system. Befriending them can give different types of rewards. However, there are many other ways to get virtue stat, and what the skins give is only a tiny bonus that players gladly take. Going back to LoveKina's comment, they say how people complained about virtue stats on skins at launch, and they would stop complaining about combat stats on skins from Yoz's Jar also, and how it is easy to be quickly "outraged" when something such as the likes of Yoz's Jar gets talked about. I disagree with what LoneKina says, as the stats gained from legendary skins in Yoz's Jar would be far more difficult and necessary to get than just a few points in virtue stat, which all skins already do have.

LoveKina believes that Amazon Game Studios pulled out Yoz's Jar because it is a trend that companies are shifting away from loot boxes because of regulations from some countries. Rather than adding loot boxes for profit for the short term, companies aim not to add loot boxes to make themselves look good in the average player's eyes. LoveKina then mocks the companies by saying they are implying that companies are against P2W, they are on the side of players, and we are removing what you players hate, so continue loving us and supporting our game.

Then LoveKina states how they would have spent money eventually on Yoz's Jar, but they are also okay with removing it since they do not like loot boxes. To give my share of LoveKina's comment here, it is difficult to say what LoveKina wants, it seems like they believe companies are removing loot boxes for sympathy, but LoveKina also says they would spend money on Yoz's Jar at some point. However, they are also against loot boxes, meaning they contradict themselves.

In any case, LoveKina explains why Amazon Game Studios did not find another way to monetize legendary skins; instead of "no current plans in place," they believe that is stupid. As already mentioned previously, there are nuances in adding the legendary skins from Yoz's Jar in another way; for example, the Koreans have spent several thousand dollars on Yoz's Jar, only to see that the Western version gets it in a much fairer way, would stir up the central community of Lost Ark. LoveKina ends their comment by suggesting Amazon Game Studios could have the skins from Yoz's Jar in a rotating shop, or make them accessible with another currency such as the amethyst, and as such get on with having the legendary skins finally.

7.1.3 The comments on Crystalline Aura

The following comments focus on the player's perspective on the crystalline aura, the subscription-based monetization system that can be purchased with or without real-life money. Hence, the player gets multiple additional benefits in their gameplay. One particular aspect of crystalline aura that players call for P2W, which players think is a necessity and believe should not be part of the crystalline aura, is the benefit of repairing equipment anywhere. Before discussing the comments, explaining the game's repair system is beneficial.

There are two types of repairs the player has to do over time. The first is their gear, which, when the player engages in combat, will slowly degrade and need to be repaired when it reaches a certain threshold, or else the equipment that the player uses will be obsolete and will not work or give benefits in combat. Dying in battle guarantees equipment degradation. The second is the player's trade skill tool, the tools used in the gathering aspect of the game. These slowly degrade over time using the tools and will not be usable when they reach zero durability. See the figure below for a visualization of the interface for gear repair and trade skill tool repair.

Figure 45: The interfaces and my character in need of gear repair (on the left) and trade skill tool repair (on the right) (Screenshot from in-game)

The game has two ways gear repair or trade skill tool repair. The first is visiting a repairer, found in most game zones and indicated by the anvil symbol on the map. As shown above, the player talks to the NPC and is greeted by either of the two interfaces. There, with just a click of a button, they can spend silver repairing what is needed.

Figure 46: Example of a repairer in a city (Screenshot from in-game)

The second method, however, is tied to the crystalline aura. One of the benefits the player gets with crystalline aura is that the pet function will be available, which has been discussed previously in the thesis. With the pet function, one of the available benefits is remote repair gear and trade skill tools, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 47: My pet function, which will last 192 days, and the two remote repair buttons available in the red box, bringing up the same interface as the repairer (Screenshot from in-game)

Remote repair functions the same as visiting a repairer; the only difference is that players can repair their gear anywhere and anytime. As for why this is such a benefit and something that should not be tied to Crystalline Aura, it is because if players are divided into a group activity, where even a single player does not have Crystalline Aura, and their gear requires repair, every other player in that group activity have to leave, just for that one player without Crystalline Aura to repair their gear at a repairer in a city. Issues that arise from this are that players are pressured to have Crystalline Aura, or they have to leave in the middle of the activity if they have come past a certain point and their gear needs repair. When a monetization system such as Crystalline Aura goes this far as to make players feel pressured to buy Crystalline Aura for a reliable way to repair their gear, that concerns terrible game design because of monetization. Several players on Reddit have given their frustration on this matter, such as the comment by /u/Rulutieh:

/u/Rulutieh
I've done an abyssal with a guy that broke his equipment during the raid and when we told him to remote repair he said, "I don't have that p2w shit" and vote quit.
3/6/2022, 4:32:47 PM

Figure 48: Reddit user /u/Rulutieh, comment, and time of comment

The word *Abyssal* that Rulutieh mentions is a type of four-player activity in Lost Ark, where the player engages with three other players to conquer an abyssal dungeon for its rewards. In this instance, Rulutieh experienced that one of the other party members broke their equipment to an unusable state. Rulutieh and presumably the other two party members told the player to remote repair their gear, where then the player that needed repair told the other party members: "I don't have that p2w shit," and decided to vote to quit the dungeon.

If the player does not have the Crystalline Aura and is in a remote activity, and their gear breaks to an unusable state, the only way to repair is to leave the activity and go to a repairer to repair.

This also means the other party members have to quit the activity, and they all have to progress to the point where they quit. If they otherwise decide not to repair but continue the activity, that player will be unable to contribute because of their broken gear. This makes having a crystalline aura a guaranteed necessity because of such situations.

/u/MeEscobar
P2w xd, the problem is your group if you die 10 times in the dungeon/raid. Its a nice gimmick with the aura that you can repair but its nothing game changing wtf. The idea of repeair kits is for f2p is good. But the problem woudnt exist if your team is just good in the gamr or know the mechanics of the raid common..
2/21/2022, 9:11:26 AM

Figure 49: Reddit user /u/MeEscobar, comment, and time of comment

Another user, /u/MeEscobar, is trying to say that it is not P2W to have a crystalline aura, and as long as the players avoid dying several times, there will not be any need to repair gear. They state that it is an excellent addition to the crystalline aura but not game-changing. They say that for F2P, the idea of repair kits can be beneficial, but in the end, the problem of needing to repair gear will not exist if the players are good at the game.

My thoughts on MeEscobar's statement are that I am afraid I have to disagree with how they think players need to get good or be good immediately and avoid dying, not to be forced to repair. For one, several players might not be able to get good at the game however much they try, and second, some mechanics can be so random sometimes that the player dies, however good they might be. The only statement I agree with is to have an alternative way of repair in a remote activity, with the use of, for example, repair kits for the ones that do not want to use crystalline aura.

/u/Kelest
This is the most p2w aspect of the game. Everyone should be able to repair in dungeons smh. I always have crystaline aura but necause of people who don't have it others have to restart the whole dungeon. It is ok to not buy the aura because there are many reasons why someone can't afford it but repairing in dungeons is a must.
3/28/2022, 11:06:22 AM

/u/B9F8
1. % health potions. I don't really mind wiping a lot on raids, people make mistakes. But I burn through so many potions when this happens and it's hard to replenish them for all my alts. A lot of people also end up hesitating to use pots, contributing to failed raids. 2. Repairing in raids requiring the crystalline aura, this was probably the only time in the game where I really felt like the game was p2w. This was early on in my experience and I learned later that you can just trade gold for crystals to get it, but it almost made me quit.
3/1/2022, 9:18:48 PM

Figure 50: Reddit users /u/Kelest and /u/B9F8, comment, and time of comment

The users /u/Kelest and /u/B9F8 share similar opinions, where Kelest believes having to have the crystalline aura to repair gear in remote activities is the most P2W aspect of Lost Ark. They explain their frustration on how the activity has to be restarted entirely if one player does not have remote repair available, and how it is okay that some players cannot afford to buy crystalline aura. However, there has to be a way to repair it in a remote activity without a crystalline aura. B9F8 felt like having a crystalline aura to repair in remote activity made the game feel very P2W for them, and the only saving grace for them was that crystalline aura could be bought by just playing the game, but it nearly made the player quit.

/u/DEPRESSED_CHICKEN

if youre gonna play all day these maintenances are not that bad, with that said I am now probably gonna lose out on my weekly abyssal dung on my alt, that I kinda wanna make my new main. We all had crystaline aura so we wiped just fine over and over but started to get better. turns out the pally we found for the dungeon has bugged aura so he couldn't repair. we tried for 2 hrs again with other random supports but never got in. also how is that crystaline aura not completely p2w. how are you supposed to learn the last boss fight in a dungeon when theres no way to repair without it. im kinda pissed abt it, because I love the game but now I realize im actually "forced" to pay monthly since doing hard pve content is what I have the most fun with

2/16/2022, 8:53:54 PM

Figure 51: Reddit user /u/DEPRESSED_CHICKEN, comment, and time of comment

Moreover, the final comment by /u/DEPRESSED_CHICKEN expresses their frustration as well, saying that how are players not thinking that crystalline aura is not entirely P2W, and how are players supposed to learn fights when they cannot repair without crystalline aura? They realize and are angry at the fact that they are, in a way, forced to pay monthly, whether that being with or without real-life money, to do complex content, which is what DEPRESSED_CHICKEN has the most fun with and what makes them love the game.

In conclusion, this is another example of an exemplary monetization system, especially since the crystalline aura can be purchased with in-game gold. However, some aspects still need to be changed for the ones that want to play F2P or cannot invest enough time to earn in-game gold to purchase a crystalline aura. The fact that not only does the player that has not a crystalline aura for remote repair gets affected, but the other players do as well with them makes this situation worse. The developers either have to remove remote repair from the crystalline aura, making it so anyone can remotely repair for free, or they have to implement something like a repair kit that can be purchased from the in-game marketplace and brought into a remote activity for the ones that do not want to use crystalline aura. I agree that this particular benefit of crystalline aura

makes it P2W, as the benefit is too big of a gap from a player that does not have a crystalline aura.

7.1.4 Users with several comments on "P2W" for Lost Ark

This section discusses and shows some of the gathered comments by users between 18-66 comments, with the term "P2W" in the /r/lostarkgame subreddit. What makes some of the comments by these top users different from those that had commented once? Investigation of these types of comments shows that there are players who believe that some gameplay elements that are tied to monetization are exaggerated by the player base on being too harmful to the gameplay. Such examples are the primary leveling system of Lost Ark, increasing the player's gear score. Even if players can purchase gold with real-life money and spend it on materials to increase their gear score, its design does not harm players. The closest it comes to harming players is by making players jealous of other players' gear scores. In contrast, in the case of Crystalline Aura and gear repair, players were harmed by monetization and its association with gameplay. To support my findings, the comments for this section will showcase fellow players that believe that players are exaggerating when it comes to some of the monetization systems of Lost Ark. The Reddit user /u/Neod0c, with 18 comments, has this to say in one of their comments:

/u/Neod0c
the truth is, and i may get some hate for some of this. but the two main reasons people hate on whales are as follows; first is most peoples first experience with pay to win came from some form of pvp in a game, which is where the term originated (atleast to my knowledge) and in that regard p2w can be VERY oppressive against f2p players. that negative connotation never really leaves the term p2w for alot of people. and the second reason is that alot of players invest emotionally into there own characters, sometimes too scary degrees, and when someone comes in and is able to bypass there struggle and potentially even get stronger...they get upset. really its just them being jealous. (you see alot of "its not fairs" when whales in lost ark come up) im not a fan of p2w generally speaking, but in lost ark i dont mind it because i differentiate PvE focused p2w and PvP p2w. i HATE pvp p2w but pve stuff...i dont really care. if someone wants too spend money too have a higher ilvl or more skins or whatever. im fine good for them im as happy as an f2p player at 1355 and it doesnt really bother me if someone speeds past me. ​ (yes im aware lost ark has world pvp islands, and no i dont count that because its not the same as playing an mmo whose entire existence is built around world pvp. world pvp is .01% of lost ark)
3/24/2022, 5:53:56 AM

Figure 52: Reddit user /u/Neod0c, comment, and time of comment

Neod0c comment is about players that are whales. They start by saying the first reason players hate whales is that most players' experience with P2W comes from PVP (Player vs. Player) in games, and where the term P2W originated from that. In that regard, P2W can be very oppressive against F2P players, and this negative connotation never leaves the term P2W for many players. What Neod0c means with P2W coming from PVP in games is that, for example, in a PVP game, Player A will fight Player B, whereas Player A has an advantage against Player B because their equipment is so much better. Then, when Player A beats Player B, Player B will assume that Player A has spent much real-life money to get what they have, and their frustration on their loss against Player A makes them despise players that are P2W.

Neod0c's second reason is how many players invest emotionally into their characters, sometimes to a scary degree. When someone comes in and can bypass that struggle and potentially get even more potent, they get upset, but in reality, they are the only ones getting jealous. As an example from Lost Ark, gear score, which was much earlier talked about in the thesis, is the primary progression system of Lost Ark. At some point, gaining a higher gear score can take a long time if the player is unlucky. Then let us say Player A is gear score of 1520; they have used months to get there and were unlucky, then their friend Player B gets gear score of 1550, going beyond Player A's gear score in less than what Player A took to get to 1520, that will make Player A jealous.

Neod0c then mentions how they are not a fan of P2W, but in Lost Ark, they do not mind it because they differentiate between PVE-focused P2W and PVP-focused P2W, where they hate PVP P2W but do not care about PVE P2W. Neod0c does not care if someone spends much more money to have a higher gear score; then they are fine as a F2P player at a 1355 gear score, and for someone to go past them in gear score is trivial.

What Neod0c is implying is that the term P2W is overused by players most of the time, and when it is used, it is used because of jealousy. Another Reddit user with 26 comments going by /u/Destructodave82 says the following:

/u/Destructodave82
I dont think the argument most people have is whether it matters what a whale does or not. Most people argue the definition of P2W, because some people cant handle their game being called P2W, for whatever reason. I personally dont care if someone spends 100k in the game, nor do I care if its P2W or not; its fun, I'll play it and enjoy it. Bottom line is, people shouldnt care one way or the other which it is, but people DO care, fans and haters alike, so the argument basically boils down to IS it p2w or not, not whether it matters if its P2W or not. Lost Ark is P2W and I dont care. I'm playing and having fun.
2/15/2022, 11:28:11 AM

Figure 53: Reddit user /u/Destructodave82, comment, and time of comment

Destructodave82 explains how they do not think most players' argument is whether it matters what a whale does. Instead, players argue the definition of P2W because some players cannot handle the game they are playing, being called P2W. Destructodave82 then says they do not care if someone spends 100k in a game or if it is P2W; if it is fun, they play it and enjoy it. Their bottom line is that players should not care one way or the other, which it is, but the issue is that players do care, so the argument boils down to "Is it P2W or not" not "Whether it matters if it is P2W or not". Destructodave82 ends their comment by saying that Lost Ark is P2W, and they do not care; they are playing it and having fun. This is similar to what Neod0c had to say, and they acknowledge the game is P2W, but they do not care as long as they are having fun.

The following comments are several by the same Reddit user, with the most comments with "P2W", by /u/[deleted] with 66 comments. Unfortunately, this Reddit user's username has been deleted, which is why it is called /u/[deleted], so going forward, I am addressing them as [deleted]. One of their comments is the following:

/u/[deleted]
On the real note, it's how the p2w structured. The wall happens and if you want to break through it you will have to pay INSANE amount of money inorder to continue to progress. This gets steeper the higher Gearscore you go. Not just a little steep I'm literally talking $20,000+ When a new patch comes all that money spent by whales is wasted because f2p progress through the same Gearscore within a matter of days, just for the whales to have to repeat the process again. This the successful Korean model. You could say but P2W whyyyy, it's barely p2w. Does $20,000 for a 2% damage increase sound good to you at end game? Just for it to be wiped in 1 patch? You could say well, if they changed that structure and just made it cosmetics only they would do fine. Well than they would have to change the entire economy and how you can buy ANYTHING from the cash shop for in game gold. This means that as a f2p you would NEVER be able to buy skins from the cash shop. You could than say well, make the cash shop money only but than make them still tradeable in the auction house. That would than allow whales to completely control the skin market, thus creating an advantage still.
2/18/2022, 7:02:36 PM

Figure 54: Reddit user /u/[deleted], comment, and time of comment

In this post by [deleted], they discuss the P2W structure of Lost Ark. To break through the P2W wall, one must pay an insane amount of money, which steeps while getting a higher gear score. They say not only just a little, but $20.000+ when a new patch for the game comes, and all that money spent by whales is wasted as F2P players will progress through the same gear score within a matter of days, just for whales to repeat the same process next patch.

To clarify this part of [deleted]'s statement, they exaggerate the price and the time for F2P to catch up to whales. However, it is true that when a new patch of Lost Ark drops that lets the player increase their gear score even further from the current cap, whales usually pay as much money as needed to max it out. In contrast, F2P players will play the game, steadily gain resources, and increase their gear score to the same level, eventually meaning whales and F2P will be at the same gear score, but with playing and not paying.

[deleted] continues by saying this is a thriving Korean monetization model. They then ask if using that much money to do more damage for one patch is worth it after it goes away in the next patch with a new gear score increase. Then they say, what if they changed the structure and made it cosmetics only? Then it would be fine. However, the economy has to be changed, and how the player can buy anything from the cash shop for in-game gold. This would mean that as a F2P, one could never buy skins from the cash shop. Then what if the cash shop was real-life money only but made them tradeable in the auction house? That would allow whales to control the skin market, so there is still an advantage.

It is not easy to understand what exactly [deleted] means with their last statement, but it is incorrect how everything can be bought with in-game gold in the cash shop; as already discussed, there are royal crystals and blue crystals. It seems like [deleted] is concluding that whales will always have control and advantage at the start, but if some weeks go by, the F2P players will be in the same spot as them.

Another comment by [deleted] says the following:

/u/[deleted]
Lost Ark is P2W. There's no going around that. P2W = Cash Shop ingame that can skip content for you (gold to materials) or marginally make you stronger than an equal counterpart (cards). Is the game P2W? Yes. Is the game fun? Also yes. I still don't get people who keeps trying to make the game as if it's not P2W... just accept the fact that all mmorpg are P2W in varying degrees.
3/7/2022, 6:34:00 AM

Figure 55: Reddit user /u/[deleted], comment, and time of comment

They are stating again how Lost Ark is P2W, as the cash shop in-game allows the player to skip content by turning gold into materials or at least make the player stronger by buying card packs. Then they state, however, that the game is fun, and they do not understand how other players try to say Lost Ark is not P2W and responds to them that players should accept that all MMORPGs are P2W in a varying degree.

The commonality between Neod0c, Destructodave82, and [deleted] so far has been that they accept that the game is P2W, they want other players to accept it as well, and as long as the game is fun for them, they do not care if it is P2W, they will ignore the P2W aspect. While in the case of the one comment users, they specifically explain how parts of the P2W aspect of Lost Ark are ruining the gameplay.

7.2 /r/runescape subreddit for RuneScape

The /r/runescape data stretches from 01/07/2022 to 11/28/2022. Since RuneScape is an old game, the subreddit has been in place for a long time, so the latest year when the data was gathered was used for gathering the data from there. There are 8499 results of Reddit comments from the /r/runescape subreddit. As mentioned, the data was gathered with the search term "MTX" filtered. That term is mainly used in the context of monetization in RuneScape because of its various microtransactions. Before analyzing the posts themselves, it is beneficial to give context and visualization of the statistics of the gathered data so it is seen how several players are discussing the topic of microtransactions on the subreddit.

In the /r/runescape subreddit, the number of comments in total from all users varied from 1 to 213 comments. The average amount of comments between users was 2.5 comments, with 3320 users and a total of 8499 comments.
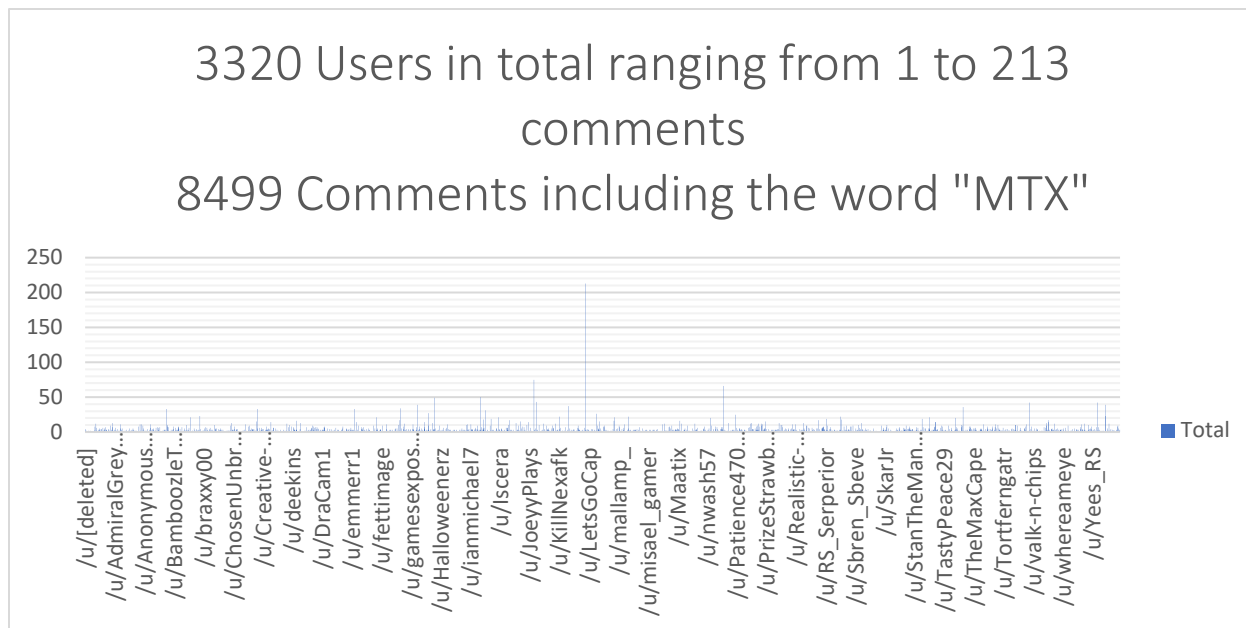
Figure 56: Chart showing the total distribution of comments between users

Average: 2,559939759   Count: 3320   Sum: 8499

Filtering the statistic then to every user that has commented more than two times, the average became 4.8 between users, with 1356 users and a total of 6535 comments.
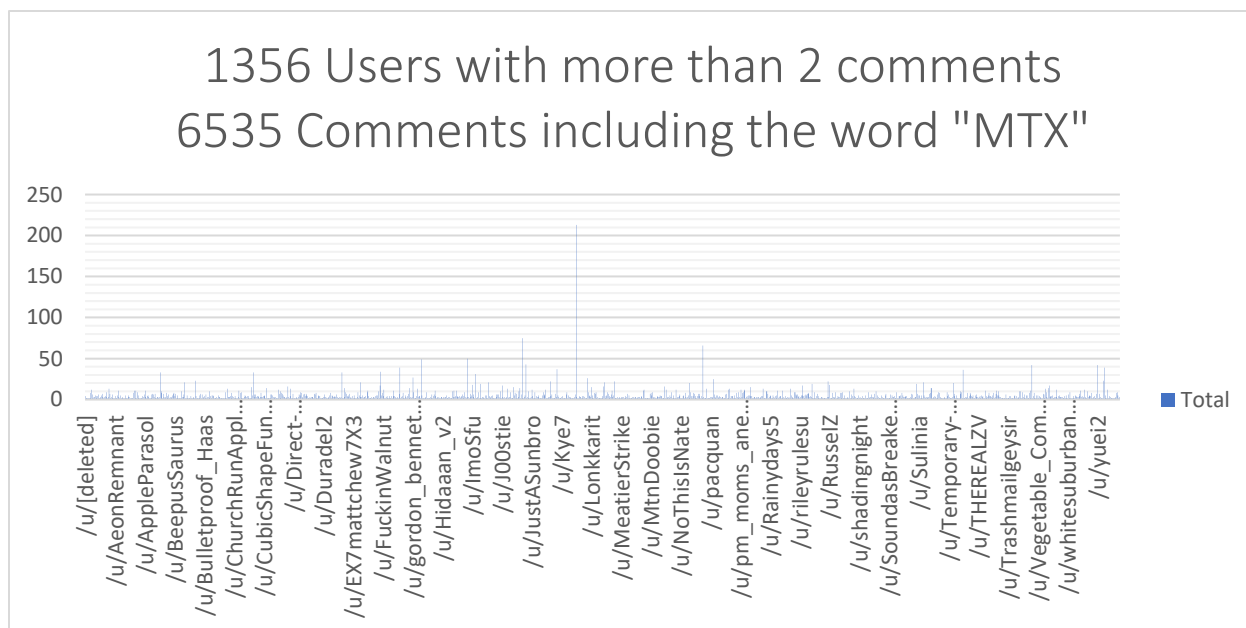
Figure 57: Chart showing the distribution of comments between users, where those users have commented more than two times

Average: 4,819321534   Count: 1356   Sum: 6535

That means that for users with only one comment, the average became one comment, with 1964 users and a total of 1964 comments.

Lastly, the top 31 users had an average of 40 comments between them, totaling 1190 comments.
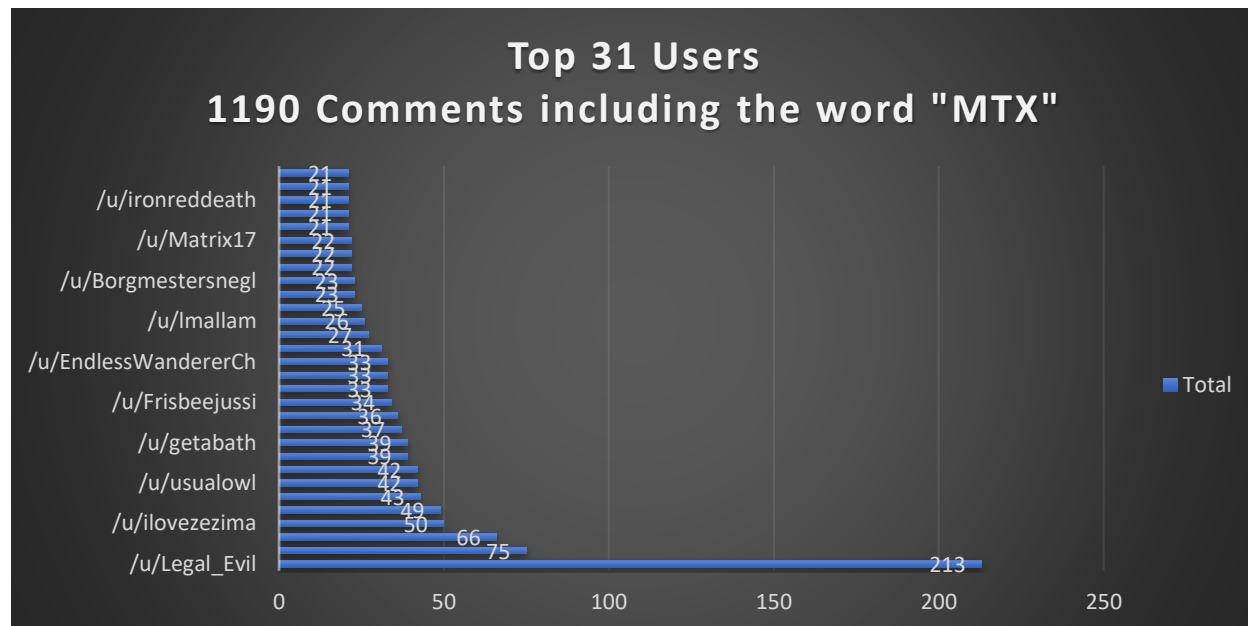
Figure 58: Chart showing the top 31 users

Average: 39,66666667   Count: 30   Sum: 1190

From the figures, there have been several players that have had a conversation that included the word "MTX," where the minority had commented more than one time (1356 users), while the majority had commented only one time (1964 users). Concluding this section, as in the Lost Ark section, this section also showcased three charts to show the number of players that base their comments on discussing several topics on the "MTX" aspects of the game. Going forward in this chapter, I will also showcase my investigation of comments on a particular aspect of a gameplay and monetization system for RuneScape 3 and how it is influenced by monetization by explaining my insights and then showcasing several comments associated with the topic.

7.2.1 The comments on Treasure Hunter

The first set of comments to analyze is the ones that discuss Treasure Hunter. As Treasure Hunter is the main face of MTX in RuneScape, it is a crucial monetization system to discuss first. Investigation of comments about Treasure Hunter shows how players see it as the main face of MTX, but in many cases, what it offers is exaggerated. Even though the main gain from Treasure Hunter is items to help progress faster in leveling skills, different cosmetics, and in-game gold, these are not necessarily enough to make Treasure Hunter harmful to the gameplay and the integrity of the game. Some users argue that if Treasure Hunter allowed players to skip content such as quests and it had the chance to give rare item drops from bosses, that would make Treasure Hunter hurtful for the gameplay. On the opposite side, though, players believe that leveling skills are one of the core parts of the game, which can be skipped with Treasure Hunter, so players seek to play Ironman mode instead, where Treasure Hunter and other microtransactions are disabled. Supporting my findings, the first Reddit user to discuss is /u/Ender593, who has much to say about Treasure Hunter:

/u/Ender593
It's fine for you to have that opinion, and I think it may very well be unpopular here lol. However, I'd encourage you to consider what makes a game fun (to you of course, but also others) and how MTX can undermine that until it's a hollow husk that simply asks for money with none of the associated gameplay. A clear example is obviously experience, right, that's what everyone's currently up in arms about (again). There are several core gameplay features in Runescape such as Skilling, PvM, Quests, Minigames, etc. Where you might view the skilling grind as a chore that you complete to get to end game, in reality it's a core pillar of Runescape's gameplay that is very much intertwined with the rest of the game. Giving you a button to skip that core pillar is surely detrimental to the full Runescape experience, but those who disagree with you are not only concerned about that erosion of core gameplay but what it means for the future of gameplay. If we consider another example, the point may be more apparent. Imagine that you could press a button to skip another core gameplay feature. Imagine a new treasure hunter promotion comes out that includes all boss/PvM-related unique drops in the game. Surely your time is more efficiently spent working a job and spending money on keys rather than grinding bosses for endless hours, right? Or what if another promotion offered automatic quest unlocks, and you'd never have to experience the lore, characters, quest locations, or anything ever again? Eventually, what is left of the game? Why would you play it? That's not to say that these things would ever come to treasure hunter, surely even JageX has their limits on MTX. More they're intended as examples that might make it more obvious to you what removing a core pillar of Runescape gameplay means to others, because that's what this MTX is doing. You might still be thinking "if you don't like it, don't buy it" and I don't think I can convince you otherwise if that's the case, but personally I think there is more to gain from the journey in Runescape than the destination.
7/11/2022, 10:21:32 PM

Figure 59: Reddit user /u/Ender593, comment, and time of comment

Ender593 is conversing with another user, which is their response to them. They explain how MTX can undermine what makes the game fun until it is a hollow husk associated with money

rather than gameplay. One example that many can agree on is the gaining of "experience" aspect of the game, where Treasure Hunter gives the player various rewards associated with gaining direct and indirect experience. Ender593 continues to explain how skilling, PvM (player vs. monsters), quests, and minigames intertwine with RuneScape's gameplay and the rest of the game. Ender593 gives a hypothetical example of what would happen if there were a button to allow skipping such aspects of the game; it would be detrimental to the RuneScape experience. Then, Ender593 gives another example to the user; they say, imagine there was a Treasure Hunter promotion, where the boss and PvM-related drops were included in it; indeed, instead of grinding the game and trying to get the drops, it would be better to get a job and use the money on keys to get the drops? Or another example, what if there was a promotion for skipping quests and anything else in the game? Ender593 then states the reason for playing RuneScape if there were such promotions. In the end, Ender593 says that Jagex has its limits on MTX, but if a promotion that removed a core pillar of RuneScape 3's gameplay, it would be detrimental to the game, such as MTX is right now with experience. In the end, Ender593 expresses how the journey in RuneScape is the magic of the game, not the destination, which can be acquired through MTX.

There is a lot to take in from Ender593's comment, but what Ender593 is worried about and sees as a problem is how Treasure Hunter can have the potential to ruin the core pillars of RuneScape, such as it already has with gaining experience by playing the game, where instead the player can spend keys on Treasure Hunter to gain experience. What if, hypothetically, Treasure Hunter promotions affected other core aspects of the game? Would the player even be playing the game anymore? The comment by Ender593 is meant to represent how Treasure Hunter affects the gameplay, and by giving other examples of promotions, it is meant to show how gaining experience in Treasure Hunter is just as bad as other core pillars of RuneScape getting the same treatment.

Next, another Reddit user is discussing the same as Ender593, but they have another stance on MTX.

> **/u/finka_me**
>
> I don't like MTX as much as the next guy, but I really don't think they're as 'game-breaking' as people make out. Xp is a very small part to completing this game. I'm maxed and there is still SO much content I am yet to unlock that I can ONLY unlock through playing the game- not MTX. I still feel like I've only scratched the surface of what RS3 has to offer. If other people want to buy there way to maxed stats it really does not impact me. If other people get 50m coins, or a rare walk token through treasure hunter it really doesn't impact me. If MTX starts to allow people to auto-complete quests, unlock items that require huge grinds instantly, unlock achievements or contribute towards collection logs thats when I'll start seeing them as 'ruining the integrity of the game'.
>
> *4/12/2022, 1:18:42 PM*

Figure 60: Reddit user /u/finka_me, comment, and time of comment

What makes finka_me's comment different and similar from Ender593 is that they first of all state how they do not like MTX, much like many else, including Ender593, but the difference from Ender593 is that finka_me believes that the current MTX is not as game-breaking as people make it out to be. Their idea is that experience is a small part of completing the game, and even though having maxed out experience, there is so much more to the game that cannot be unlocked through MTX. Finka_me does not care if people use Treasure Hunter to get maxed stats, in-game money, or a rare cosmetic. However, what they do care about is the examples that Ender593 gave; if MTX started to affect other core pillars of RuneScape, such as giving auto-complete quests, unlocking items that can take a lot of grinding, achievements, or contribution to other gameplay elements of the game, that is when finka_me starts to see Jagex ruining the integrity of the game.

Let us look at another Reddit user stating a different perspective on MTX. Reddit user /u/codexramira has posted the following.

> **/u/codexramira**
>
> Since the game isn't really about competing for highscore positions anymore, an individual choosing to spend their money on MTX is not a problem at all - it's their money to spend as they see fit. The problem comes from the element of randomness that's used to trigger people who are vulnerable to gambling addiction. Straight-up buyable xp would be far more healthy from a gambling perspective, and shouldn't be a problem for your gaming experience whatsoever. If you can only get enjoyment out of having a higher number than your neighbour, you should really question why you're playing a casual yet grindy MMO game instead of a competitive one.
>
> *10/28/2022, 12:53:37 AM*

Figure 61: Reddit user /u/codexramira, comment, and time of comment

Codexramira first explains how high score positions do not matter anymore as they used to before MTX since there is no way to compare non-MTX users and MTX users. They explain that spending money on MTX is not an issue; however, the problem comes from the randomness that

triggers people vulnerable to gambling addiction. For codexramira, just buying experience without having the chance to get it would be much healthier. Lastly, they state that if focusing only on higher numbers in RuneScape, one should seek another much more competitive MMO.

Based on Codexramira's comment, Jagex already allows players to buy experience directly without a chance. However, the caveat is that it is intertwined with previous oddments, where spending keys give you oddments, which the player can use in the oddments store to buy several benefits, including direct experience. So not only does Treasure Hunter intensify the player to spend keys, but the Oddments store does the same, especially since the player can buy more keys with Oddments.

7.2.2 The comments on Ironman mode and relation to MTX

As previously explained, Ironman mode is an alternative game mode created because of its popularity, where players challenge themselves to do everything in the game solo and without MTX. Once made as an official game mode by Jagex, it restricted MTX from the players' accounts. However, what do players have to say about Ironman mode and its relation to MTX? Investigation on such comments shows that several players believe that if a player is not playing on an Ironman account, that player's account will eventually become an MTX account because of the pressure given by Jagex for players to interact with Treasure Hunter. Some of the players on Reddit recommend to new players of RuneScape 3 to create an Ironman account or use Ironman to forget about MTX. Veteran players also believe that playing on Ironman is the proper way to experience RuneScape 3 at its full potential, as players cannot skip core game mechanics such as leveling up their skills using Treasure Hunter. The main issue is that players use Ironman mode to escape from MTX, which is not the solution to the problem. To support my findings, here are some of the comments players have had on what was just mentioned:

/u/F7OSRS	
But we play ironman to escape MTX	
7/20/2022, 2:17:50 PM	
/u/Fe0lo	
Play ironman - you will forget that MTX exists	
2/11/2022, 7:07:17 AM	
/u/fullinv	
This is why I quit my main and went Ironman. No bullshit mtx, no pay 2 win.	
10/23/2022, 6:20:33 AM	
/u/Fuzzy_Nugget	
Play ironman, dude. 0 mtx.	
11/18/2022, 2:44:45 AM	
/u/GetThisPickle	
If you wanted to keep playing with limited MTX options, I would suggest creating an Ironman account as there are extreme MTX restrictions in Ironman mode…. At least for now	
9/1/2022, 7:45:22 PM	
/u/IronmanM4C	
If you play an Ironman you actually get to engage with the game instead of mtx	
1/16/2022, 11:45:16 PM	
/u/kevenknight	
Stuff like this is why I only play ironman mode. On my regular account I just get handed free stuff from treasure hunter keys and the occasional temptation to buy MTX. Ironman is the only way to go for playing this game if you ask me, so I can avoid this BS all together.	
4/5/2022, 4:23:24 PM	
/u/MoreBrief3712	
if you don't want to spend any money then I would suggest play normal not ironman. you will be able to purchase membership for in game money and can simply ignore MTX like I do. I haven't spend a single penny on this game just bought everything with in game money.	
9/9/2022, 11:47:37 AM	
/u/Nice_Prior	
unless its an ironman its just mtx account	
2/12/2022, 2:39:42 PM	

Figure 62: Several Reddit users, comments, and time of comments

The first comment by /u/uF7OSRS explains that players play Ironman mode to escape from MTX. /u/Fe0lo says to play Ironman mode, as it makes the player forget that MTX exists. /u/fullinv says they quit their main account that was not an Ironman to instead play on a new account with Ironman enabled, so they will not have to experience any MTX or P2W. /u/Fuzzy_Nugget responds to someone else and tells them to play Ironman mode because of zero MTX. /u/GetThisPickle also responds to someone, telling them to play Ironman mode as there are extreme MTX restrictions. /u/IronmanM4C explains how if one plays as Ironman, they get to engage with the game instead of MTX. /u/kevenknight explains their reasoning for playing Ironman mode because, on their regular account, they would be handed free stuff from Treasure Hunter and occasionally be tempted to buy from MTX. For kevenknight, playing as an Ironman is the only way to play RuneScape so that they can avoid all MTX. /u/MoreBrief3712 gives their

alternative: to not play as an Ironman, play on a regular account, and ignore everything related to MTX. /u/Nice_Prior states that unless it is an Ironman account, it is just an MTX account.

As can be seen, these comments are some of the few short ones that players discuss and express their opinion on Ironman mode, and how if one wants to avoid MTX, they have to play Ironman mode. The depressing fact about this is that if players do not enjoy Ironman mode and want to escape from MTX, they, unfortunately, have to try their best to avoid and ignore it on their main account. However, even then, other players see those players as MTX players because their account has no restrictions. In many players' view, to play RuneScape, the player has to be playing as an Ironman; they get much more respect and are deemed as players that avoid MTX.

As for more descriptive comments, here are some that go more in-depth about Ironman mode and MTX.

/u/605_
Dude I'm tired of reading this shit every other week. Literally every video game these days has some sort of in-game pay-2-play. Here's a suggestion, play fucking Ironman and stop bitching. Everyone complaining about mental health and not taking responsibilities for their own actions. No one is forcing you to buy MTX. Without it, my favorite game of 20 years would have been shut down by now because of capitalism.
5/14/2022, 2:49:08 PM

Figure 63: Reddit user /u/605, comment, and time of comment

The following Reddit user /u/605 expresses how they are tired of reading about MTX every other week and says every video game has some in-game pay-to-play. Their suggestion, play Ironman. 605 says everyone complains about mental health, but no one forces them to buy MTX. They finally explain how the game would have shut down if MTX was not an addition.

My opinion on 605's comment is that the issue lies in how Treasure Hunter is advertised to players, not how it is implemented. The game advises players to spend their free keys on Treasure Hunter, and they get promotions every so often, telling them they can buy keys for a discount. Playing Ironman mode should not be escapism from MTX since the game mode changes other restrictions besides MTX; if players do not like the fundamental gameplay of Ironman mode, they should not be forced to play it to escape from MTX. As for if the game would have shut down without MTX, that is difficult to say, it is true that other games, such as Lost Ark, do have pay-to-play features, but in the case of Lost Ark, for example, the player is not

advised to spend money on opening card packs to get the right cards for their deck. Pay-to-play is there in Lost Ark but not advertised to the player, as RuneScape does with Treasure Hunter.

The following comment is by /u/Accomplished-Run-807, which had the following comment:

/u/Accomplished-Run-807

Believe it or not, I've been playing even longer. (Not trying to "humble brag" or something, just stating it for context.) Also had many long breaks along the way. I'm now a late game RS3 Ironman, and I enjoy the game more than I ever have. The key for me though was making an Ironman account. I don't like the state of "MainScape" these days due to rampant MTX, treasure hunter, DXP, etc. So unless you're absolutely set on returning to the game on your old account, my advice would be to start over as an Ironman. There's been so much new content and changes since you last played that you'd probably benefit from starting fresh anyway. Check out r/RS3Ironmen if you're interested. Welcome back. :)

1/12/2022, 10:55:08 AM

Figure 64: Reddit user /u/Accomplished-Run-807, comment, and time of comment

Accomplished-Run-807 is replying to another player, and they say how they are a veteran of the game but have had long breaks along the way. At the time of their comment, they were a late game RuneScape 3 Ironman and enjoyed the game more than ever. The key for them, though, was to create an Ironman account. They do not like the state of what is known as "MainScape" because of the rampant MTX. They advise the player they are replying to not return to their old account and instead start over as an Ironman. They explain how the game has changed a lot since the player was gone and that there is a benefit to starting over again. Finally, they advise the player to check out the Ironman subreddit r/RS3Ironman if they are interested and welcome the player back.

Even for players returning to the game, other players suggest starting on an Ironman account instead of returning to their old account. "MainScape," which Accomplished-Run-807 talks about, is the original game mode without Ironman restrictions.

Another comment is also suggesting another player start an Ironman mode, and this one is by /u/david98900:

/u/david98900
100% start iron. While I think the game is fun non iron, you won't have the "headache" associated with MTX. Plus in general, I find the gamemode more rewarding, and it will force you to do some "suboptimal" things instead of just focusing on money making to get gear etc. Also, since you brought it up, and I had this problem, the start of ironman is at account creation, not after tutorial island. When creating your character there is an button that says "advanced options" and that's where you choose Ironman hc iron etc.
6/3/2022, 11:36:23 PM

Figure 65: Reddit user /u/david98900, comment, and time of comment

David98900 first says to the player to start 100% as an Ironman. Even though they think the game is fun non-Ironman, the headache that comes from MTX is avoided by playing Ironman. They explain how the game mode is more rewarding as it changes how the player plays it. They also explain to the player when they can create an Ironman account.

This is another example of the user suggesting another player start as an Ironman because of MTX. The change in gameplay should be enough to make the game feel different to the player.

Finally, there is the comment by /u/DontMissGE that says:

/u/DontMissGE
As somebody who found myself in the same boat almost 2 years back, I do feel like ironman puts a heavier emphasizes on playing all aspects of the game, while eliminating the MTX all together. Dont get me wrong, thats a band-aid ass fix for largely outstanding issues with the game that I whole heartedly agree with. Point being, nobody is making mains swipe their card, and if you dont like the guy beside you having that option, theres always ironman mode for what I feel like is the "real experience" of the game.
9/1/2022, 5:22:28 PM

Figure 66: Reddit user /u/DontMissGE, comment, and time of comment

DontMissGE says how Ironman emphasizes heavier playing all aspects of the game while eliminating MTX. However, they know it is a band-aid fix for vastly outstanding issues with the game. They say that nobody is making MainScape players swipe their card, and if the other players do not like that they have that option, they can always play in Ironman mode, which for DontMissGE is the "real experience" of the game.

In conclusion, to Ironman mode and MTX, the player should not be forced to play Ironman to escape from MTX. From my experience as a player of RuneScape, I do not find Ironman mode enjoyable to play, as I like to trade with other players and can buy from other players. Nevertheless, unfortunately, I have to interact with Treasure Hunter or try to avoid it as best as

possible. A player like DontMissGE knows that having Ironman mode as the way to escape from MTX is a band-aid fix.

7.2.3 The comments on Bonds

Besides Treasure Hunter, Bonds can be seen as a type of MTX RuneScape offers. However, Bonds are not all that gloomy and were created to combat RMT's as previously explained in another chapter of the thesis. However, what do players have to say about Bonds? Investigation of comments about Bonds shows that some players believe that Bonds is the main MTX of the game. That is because of the several benefits Jagex has implemented to Bonds overtime; where it once was just for the ability to buy a membership, now Bonds reek of benefits such as the possibility of redeeming it for Treasure Hunter keys, an indirect way to support Treasure Hunter and MTX as a whole. Players also discuss how even if a player is not buying a Bond with real-life money, if they are buying it with in-game gold, they support the system. I will showcase several Reddit comments by players discussing Bonds to show my findings. The first comment is by /u/_Kaimbe who says:

/u/_Kaimbe
Yup, its good. Just ditched os for it a month ago and having a blast. Really don't get the distain I see for it in 2007scape. Its a different game, but its not the same as the release of eoc. Yes there's a bit of mtx, but its 100% not required to be competitive. And both games have the biggest mtx, bonds...
5/7/2022, 3:27:22 PM

Figure 67: Reddit user /u/_Kaimbe, comment, and time of comment

The start of Kaimbe's comment is about another topic, but the other half is how they believe there is more MTX in RuneScape 3 compared to Old School RuneScape but using MTX is not 100% required to be competitive. However, their last statement is how both games have the biggest MTX, Bonds. It is difficult to put a line on how big an MTX Bond is. I would argue that it is not the biggest MTX since it involves no gambling as Treasure Hunter does, but Bonds give players access to buy several different benefits, including Treasure Hunter keys if they want. The user /u/PieBandito says the same:

/u/PieBandito

I believe bonds are set as MTX but I don't remember if that was an official statement or not. Keep in mind in rs3 bonds are not just for membership, so it would make sense for them to be labelled as MTX.

8/15/2022, 9:39:22 PM

Figure 68: Reddit user /u/PieBandito, comment, and time of comment

PieBandito believes Bonds are MTX since, in RuneScape 3, it is used for membership and other benefits, so it makes sense for them to be labeled MTX. Then the question is, what are these other benefits that Bonds give?

The first figure shows a list of what Bonds can always be used for in RuneScape 3, and this excludes when related events are active where Bonds get other uses, while the other figure shows Old School RuneScape's Bonds:

Figure 69: List of uses for Bonds in RuneScape 3 (Screenshot from Wikipedia of RuneScape 3 https://runescape.wiki/w/Bond)

Figure 70: List of uses for Bonds in Old School RuneScape (Screenshot from Wikipedia of Old School RuneScape https://oldschool.runescape.wiki/w/Old_school_bond)

As seen in Old School RuneScape, Bonds have only two notable uses, to redeem for membership or to use for changing the display name. While RuneScape 3 has nine other uses besides membership and display name change. Arguably, what makes Bonds MTX is that players can buy 15 Treasure Hunter keys from it, making it a part of the Treasure Hunter mechanic. So _Kaimbe is not wrong that it is MTX, but it is not the biggest MTX; it is contributing to the biggest MTX, Treasure Hunter.

The following comment is a short one by /u/4percent4, who says:

/u/4percent4
Bond prices aren't sky high because of membership. They're sky high because every 3-6 months they make a new MTX update for bonds.
11/22/2022, 10:07:00 AM

Figure 71: Reddit user /u/_4percent4, comment, and time of comment

Since the players control a Bond's price in-game, it depends on its benefits and other factors, such as what a Bond's in-game price will cost. 4percent4 says that it is not because of membership but because every 3-6 months, Jagex adds a new MTX update for Bonds. By that, I presume they mean the other list of Bonds uses, which come and go depending on the active event in RuneScape. The figure below shows the event-exclusive benefits of Bonds:

Furthermore, the following time-limited options are available whenever a corresponding event is active:

Merchandise	Description	Bond cost	Availability
Premier Pass	Unlocks the Premier prize track for the active Yak Track event.	2	During Yak Track
Task Skip Tokens x 4	Provides 4 Yak Track task skip tokens.	1	During Yak Track
Task Skip Tokens x 10	Provides 10 Yak Track task skip tokens.	2	During Yak Track
5,000 time-limited event currency		1	During time-limited events.
10,000 time-limited event currency		2	During time-limited events.
20,000 time-limited event currency		3	During time-limited events.
Meditation bundle	Cloak of Meditation, Banner of Meditation, Stone of Meditation, 10 advanced pulse cores, 5 cinder cores, 5 medium portable skilling packs, 5 large protean packs	1	During the Mental Health Awareness Week (2021)
Skilling bundle	10 Pulse Cores, 10 Cinder Cores, 3 Medium Protean Packs, 5 Portable Packs, 5 Combat Dummies, 2 Large Skilling Dummy Crates, 1 Box of Clues, 1 Aura Refresh, and 1 Life Refresh.	1	6 September to 25 September 2021
Large skilling bundle	30 Pulse Cores, 30 Cinder Cores, 3 Large Protean Packs, 15 Portable Packs, 15 Combat Dummies, 6 Large Skilling Dummy Crates, 3 Box of Clues, 5 Aura Refresh, 5 Life Refresh, 5 Slayer VIP Coupons, 5 Daily Resets, 2 Weekly Resets, 1 Monthly Reset, 1 Deathtouched Dart, and 5 Overloads.	3	6 September to 25 September 2021
Well-being Bundle	Stone of Meditation, 15 advanced pulse cores, 15 cinder cores, 5 medium protean packs, 10 protean powerups, 10 combat training dummies, 3 large skill training dummy crates, and Deathtouched dart.	1	4 October to 31 October 2021
DXP Care Package	15 advanced pulse cores, 15 cinder cores, 5 medium protean packs, 12 protean powerups, 5 medium portable skilling packs, 5 combat training dummies, 4 large skill training dummy crates, Large dwarven toolbox, and 3 aura refreshes. Maximum of five packages may be purchased.	1	8 November 2021 to 30 November 2021
Aura Bundle	Purchase the Mahjarrat, Desert Pantheon and Dwarven Intinct auras. 2 Bonds cheaper than buying individually! Package availble[95] until the 4th of December 2022	5	21 November 2022 to 4 December 2022
Callista Pet Bundle	Purchase the legendary pet Callista and 2x growth surge. Package availble[96] until the 4th of December 2022	6	21 November 2022 to 4 December 2022
TzTot-Ak Pet Bundle	Purchase the legendary pet TzTot-Ak and 2x growth surge. Package availble[97] until the 4th of December 2022	6	21 November 2022 to 4 December 2022
Cosmetic Bundle	Purchase 2x keepsake keys, 1x chameleon extract and 1x prismatic dye. Package availble[98] until the 4th of December 2022	1	21 November 2022 to 4 December 2022

Figure 72: List of uses for Bonds in RuneScape 3 when a corresponding event is active (Screenshot from Wikipedia of RuneScape 3 https://runescape.wiki/w/Bond)

This is another reason Bonds can be seen as MTX since there are so many benefits a player can buy with Bonds, which also makes the price of Bonds fluctuate in-game. To add to this topic of limited-time event Bonds functions, /u/andydapandabear write the following:

/u/andydapandabear
Well the rich players are the ones who would presumably be the one buying the most bonds and keeping the price of bonds high, and high bond price would drive mtx bond purchases where someone wouldn't pay the cost of a bond through mtx if a bond was worth 5m If we could see the number of bonds mtx during the Christmas event when the cost reached approx 60m I would imagine it's way higher than the rest of the year
3/28/2022, 3:58:11 AM

Figure 73: Reddit user /u/_andydapandabear, comment, and time of comment

Andydapandabear explains how the rich players are the ones that buy the most amount of Bonds, which makes the price of Bonds high, and where a high Bond price would drive MTX Bond purchases where someone would not pay the cost of a Bond through MTX if a Bond were much cheaper. Then they explain how in the Christmas event if they could see the number of bonds used for MTX (Treasure Hunter Keys, for example), they would imagine how Bonds are much higher in price at that time compared to other times of the year. This goes with the reasoning of the comment 4percent4 that the price goes up so much because of the event's exclusive times. Maybe Bonds should not be part of event-exclusive benefits, so they are not seen so much as MTX?

The two following comments discuss why Bonds are MTX, and the following is said:

/u/CutLonzosHair2017
But you're buy gold from other players not Jagex. Jagex is selling membership. Bond have other uses too but they're allotted to MTX when used for those purposes.
4/6/2022, 6:29:24 PM
/u/Dank_Lord_Santa
How is it not MTX? Lets take TH keys: I buy keys and that gets me a reward of exp, money etc. I buy a bond, that gets me a reward of money. If you're buying bonds with GP that's great, but you're still the other half of a MTX transaction, one guys buying the bond to sell for gp and you're the one providing that gp.
2/10/2022, 5:40:56 PM

Figure 74: Reddit user /u/CutLonzosHair2017 and Dank_Lord_Santa, comment, and time of comment

CutLonzosHair2017, in short, says how Bond has other uses too, but they are allotted to MTX when used for those purposes, such as buying Treasure Hunter keys. Then there is Dank_Lord_Santa, who asks how Bonds are not MTX in response to another user. First, they give the example of Treasure Hunter keys; the player buys them and gets rewarded. Then instead

of a player buying a Bond with real-life money, they get in-game money from it. They say buying a Bond with in-game money is excellent, but the player doing so is the other half of an MTX transaction, where one guy buys the Bond with real-life money to sell for in-game money, and another buys it from them. Again, the problem of Bonds then comes in how it affects other parts of the game benefits; if Bonds were like Old School RuneScape, where it could be used only for buying a membership and changing in-game display name, would it have been seen as such of a big problem and MTX?

Finally, there is the comment by /u/LegendDota, who see Bonds as a positive addition to the game:

/u/LegendDota
Even if you include the negative impact of bonds they are still a major net positive, th for example isnt, solomons is probably the best mtx in spirit because it has the least gameplay impact. Everytime osrs gets popular releases their bonds go down in price, this implies more people are buying bonds and means jagex make more money when they make better updates, that is an incredibly healthy dynamic to have, on rs3 bonds are much more powerful so their prices are tied more to th promos than actual updates and jagex knows this, but the problem isnt the bonds it's th.
9/14/2022, 9:17:51 AM

Figure 75: Reddit user /u/LegendDota, comment, and time of comment

LegendDota explains how even if one includes the negative impact of Bonds, they are still a significant net positive, while Treasure Hunter is not. Solomons General Store also discussed in a previous chapter of the thesis, is probably the best MTX in the game because it has the most negligible gameplay impact. LegendDota explains how in Old School RuneScape, Bond prices go down when the game gets popular, implying that people are buying Bonds and that Jagex is earning money for better updates, which is an incredibly healthy dynamic to have. While in RuneScape 3, Bonds are much more potent since their price is tied to Treasure Hunter promotions and events rather than actual updates, and Jagex is aware of this. However, in the end, LegendDota says Bonds are not the problem, but Treasure Hunter is.

There is much to take from LegendDota; as previously explained about Bonds, they were introduced first to combat gold farming, which was a net positive to the game. However, they are still positive since Jagex earns the real-life money bought from Bonds to update their game, this being truer to Old School RuneScape. However, in RuneScape 3, since it is tied to Treasure

Hunter, it changes things a little bit, and in the end, Treasure Hunter is the one causing the central problem of Bonds in RuneScape 3.

7.2.4 Users with several comments on "MTX" for RuneScape

This section discusses and shows some of the gathered comments by users between 21-213 comments, with the term "MTX" in the /r/runescape subreddit. What makes some of the comments by these top users different from those that had commented once? Investigation of these comments shows that some players see MTX, such as Treasure Hunter, as a net positive to the game, making it earn a good amount of revenue to support the game. These users, with several comments, can be seen as veterans of the game, and some of them are reassuring new players that the MTX is not that daunting or necessary to use to progress through the game. However, findings show this is incorrect. There are ways to influence one's gameplay by spending real-life money to increase the player's accessibility of the game, making players feel pressured to spend real-life money for better accessibility. Starting this section, I would like to draw attention to /u/Legal_Evil, who has 213 comments from 1/10/2022 to 9/9/2022. Having the most comments on the MTX topic, it can be assumed that the player is a game veteran. Twenty-four of their comments are about Bonds. Some of these comments on Bonds are as follows:

/u/Legal_Evil
It's gambling. MTX is gambling. PvP isn't because it takes skill. Bonds are not gambling because what you exchange for them is 100% certainty.
1/10/2022, 8:27:43 AM
> the majority of players you see with partyhats and expensive dyed items have purchased a significant amount of gold via bonds, spent tons on Treasure Hunter keys, and potentially, allegedly, engaged in rwt. Does Jagex refuse to ban known scammers and RWTers because they are also whales who buy MTX, so they are sharing their RWT profits with Jagex?
10/11/2022, 11:59:07 PM
Most players left at that era because of EoC, not MTX. Not a lot of players left when SoF spins were made buyable. And the latest financial report has proven MTX is growing way to make money while OSRS that only has bonds as MTX, has dropped by 7% in revenue.
11/2/2022, 10:54:53 PM
If MTX items can only be bought via irl money, poor players would not be able to buy them via gp. It's the same reason why bonds can be bought with gp for membership, and not just irl money.
11/21/2022, 7:52:59 PM
That's still buying with MTX since someone else needs to be buy the bonds first before I can buy them with gp.
5/10/2022, 1:09:51 AM

Figure 76: Reddit user /u/Legal_Evil, several comments, and time of comment

The first comment is how MTX is gambling; PvP is not because it requires skill, and Bonds are not gambling since it gives a direct payout. While Legal_Evil is correct, as mentioned before, Bonds allow the player to acquire Treasure Hunter keys, meaning it indirectly supports the MTX Treasure Hunter. Their second comment touches on the rarest items in the game. They explain how most players with rare items, such as partyhats and expensive dyed items, have purchased much gold using Bonds and Treasure Hunter keys and potentially/allegedly engaged in RWT, which stands for "Real World Trading." Then Legal_Evil questions if Jagex refuses to ban scammers and RWTers because they spend money on the game (MTX) and share their RWT profits with Jagex. Legal_Evil is stating then that the players that spend much money on the game, whether through legal or illegal ways, these players are prioritized then players that do not do so, which is challenging to say. Their third comment explains how players left the game as it was transitioning to RuneScape 3, not because of MTX but because of EoC (Evolution of Combat), which revamped most of the combat system of the game and was one of the reasons for Old School RuneScape's revival. They explain how few players left when SoF (Squeal of Fortune) spins were made buyable, where SoF was Treasure Hunter before RuneScape 3. Then they explain how the financial report has shown that MTX is making money in RuneScape 3, while Old School RuneScape, with only bonds, has dropped 7% in revenue.

It seems then that Legal_Evil believes MTX is good for the game and does not affect players leaving RuneScape much. Their fourth comment explains how if MTX items could only be bought with real-life money, poor players would not be able to buy them with in-game money, and it is the same reason Bonds can be bought with both in-game and real-life money. Their fifth comment explains how buying Bonds with in-game money is still buying MTX, as someone has to purchase the Bond with real-life money and put it on the auction house for other players to buy it with in-game money, meaning they are one part of the interaction of Bonds.

The subsequent comments are by /u/Paranub, with 25 comments in total. Their first comment says the following:

/u/Paranub

I can see how for someone who hasnt played any games recently that RS3 mtx might look scary, but its important to look at what mtx is needed, if any, to play the game. Many games that have MTX have things that are almost required to play the game "fully" unlockable pets, bag space, cosmetics with stat boosts. VIP systems. None of which RS3 has.

11/15/2022, 10:02:18 AM

Figure 77: Reddit user /u/Paranub, comment, and time of comment

Their first comment explains how they can see that if a player has not played many games recently, the MTX in RuneScape 3 can look daunting; however, it is essential to look at the perspective that MTX is not necessary to play the game. They explain how many other games require the player to interact with MTX, such as having pets, more bag space, cosmetics with stat boosts, and even VIP systems, which RuneScape 3 does not have. However, Paranub is slightly incorrect, as RuneScape 3 does have potential MTX that players might interact with at some point, that is, the increase of bank space. Whereas in other games, there is more bag space, as Paranub explained, they forgot to mention that in RuneScape 3, the player has a set amount of bank space, another inventory to hold items. However, the player can increase their bank space, and there are several ways to do so, one being by spending Bonds, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 78: Using seven Bonds to buy a "Large Bank Booster," giving an additional 250 bank slots (Screenshot from Wikipedia of RuneScape 3 https://runescape.wiki/w/Bond)

It is also possible to buy "Bank Booster +50" instead from Solomon's General Store, which increases bank space by 50 each time. If the player were to buy all of them with RuneCoins (without sale), it would cost $85 to max bank space out with 700 extra slots.

Figure 79: "Bank Booster +50" information on Wikipedia (Screenshot from Wikipedia of RuneScape 3 https://runescape.wiki/w/Bank_Booster_%2B50)

A dedicated subscribed player to the game will, at some point, find out that the default 590 spaces for storage are too small for them, and they might decide to increase it up to 700 more.

This means RuneScape 3 has MTX that players will interact with, as bank space is a big part of the gameplay of RuneScape 3. Furthermore, this also affects Ironman players, who might be escaping Treasure Hunter; they might not be able to escape interacting with MTX at some point to increase their bank space. In the end, Paranub might have had an oversight, but it is essential to acknowledge that RuneScape 3 has MTX that can affect the gameplay by bank space.

Then, there is their second comment, which is the following:

/u/Paranub

RS3 has 1 mtx thing. Treasure hunter, it isnt constantly asking you to spend money on packs or "spins" every hour you're online with huge popups like in most games. You dont need to unlock bagspace, you dont need to unlock area loot or costumes that give bonus XP or a pet that collects your drops. Yes, we get a few keys free after quests. I honestly think you need to check out BDO, Tower of fantasy, Genshin impact as to how required MTX is in those games.. You hit points where you cant do anything without dropping money in the store.

11/15/2022, 9:43:24 AM

Figure 80: Reddit user /u/Paranub, comment, and time of comment

Paranub is defending RuneScape 3 by explaining that there is only one MTX system, Treasure Hunter. They explain how Treasure Hunter does not constantly tell the player to spend money every hour they are online or get huge popups like in most games. Moreover, they explain how there is no unlock of more bag space, unlock of area loot (an in-game system), costumes that give bonus experience, and pet that collects the player's drops. They say how the game gives the player free keys after doing quests, but they honestly think that players should look at how other games require MTX, where players hit points that make them have to drop money on the game.

Again, Paranub is wrong in their comment, as Treasure Hunter is not the only MTX system of the game; it might be the core one, but not the only one. They also say that Treasure Hunter is not annoying, but that is, in fact, not true; as previously explained, logging in prompts the player that they have free keys to spend, and at times, discounts do pop up for the player. And then, they touch upon free keys from quests, which I have, at this point, not discussed. When the player completes any quest in the game, which RuneScape 3 has a total of 303 quests at the time of the writing, they are always rewarded with 2 Treasure Hunter keys, as seen in the figure below. Ironman accounts, of course, do not get Treasure Hunter keys as a reward.
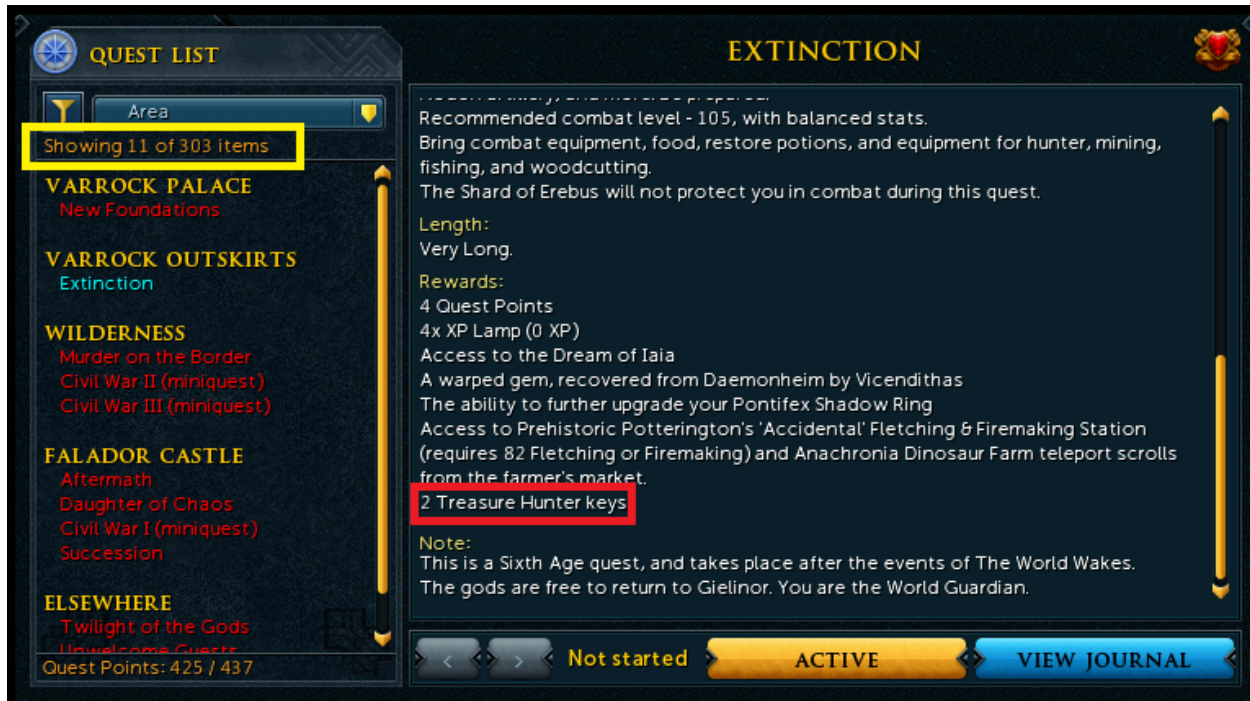
Figure 81: My own account's quest list. In the yellow box, how many quests are shown (11 out of the 303 in total), and in the red box, the "2 Treasure Hunter keys" reward, which is for each quest (Screenshot from in-game)

Paranub acknowledges that free Treasure Hunter keys from quests are an element of the game, but they explain how other games have it much worse. However, it is not essential to compare it to other games; it is important to compare the integrity of the game. Having 303 quests in total, with 2 Treasure Hunter keys each, means the player will, in the end, acquire 606 Treasure Hunter keys by completing quests. It will be difficult for the player to ignore all those keys, and the issue arises that Treasure Hunter keys are associated with the gameplay and the quests. This is another reason for players to create an Ironman account instead, to avoid quests giving keys, which is frustrating.

7.3 Summary of Chapter 7

Chapter 7 analyzed, discussed, and showcased comments by players of the respective games from the Reddit social media platform. For both games, three statistics were shown, showing the number of comments gathered, how many with more than two comments, and the top users to showcase that several players are discussing the topics related to pay-to-win and microtransaction. For Lost Ark, the comments on gems were discussed, as gems are a crucial

gameplay aspect of what makes the player's character fully optimized and how there should be a way to make gems equal between classes. Then, players' comment on Yoz's Jar was discussed, how players would like to get the skins in some shape and form and how Yoz's Jar was exaggerated to be too much P2W. Third, comments on the Crystalline Aura were discussed, specifically, how it is necessary if players want to repair their gear, and not having it would complicate the player's gameplay. Lastly, for Lost Ark, some comments by the top users were discussed, where the commonality between the three users was that P2W is not as big of an issue as players make it out to be. For RuneScape, comments on Treasure Hunter were discussed, as how some players believe that what Treasure Hunter offers is not that detrimental to RuneScape's gameplay. Then, comments on Ironman mode and its relation to MTX were discussed, how players see Ironman mode players as the real players of the game, and a solution to escape from MTX, but without regard to the players that do not like Ironman mode. Third, the comments on Bonds were discussed, and how Bonds are MTX, as it offers the player Treasure Hunter Keys one of its several benefits. Lastly, the comments by some top users were discussed, where the first user does not think MTX is a bad addition to the game. The second user discussed how players do not need to interact with MTX, but they forgot about the increase of bank spaces, which can become necessary at some point. They brought up the topic of Treasure Hunter keys as a reward for completing quests, which I discussed.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has showcased two significant answers regarding players not hating monetization systems because they are wrong but instead because of poor implementation and being intertwined with the gameplay aspect of games. The first is that game companies deliberately create monetization models for their games to earn revenue, but at times, the scope of how it might affect the gameplay can be unclear. Game companies, like Amazon Game Studios, can initiate changes, such as not adding the same monetization systems as in the Korean Lost Ark to the Western Lost Ark or changing it up differently to suit the other player base. To showcase that, the predatory monetization system Yoz's Jar was discussed, which was decided not to be added to the Western version of Lost Ark. Yoz's Jar was not added as both the

developers and players knew that it would be a highly pay-to-win system, because of stats being associated to the cosmetics. However, a solution to add cosmetics for players that seek cosmetics only has not been found, as it would have implications such as the Korean player base would get angry that the Western player base would get the cosmetics more quickly than they did. Other than Yoz's Jar, the Crystalline Aura and the Pet System was discussed, as how Amazon Game Studios changed up its monetization system to feature less gambling and make them purchasable with in-game gold, and bundle up several systems into one. However, there can be game companies that do not do as well, such as Jagex and Treasure Hunter, where the way they handled controversies was not a suitable method. All this entails that game companies and developers can care for monetization models that should not be added to their games, with player feedback as well, as developers interact with players on Reddit/forums. Moreover, if they do not do so or make the wrong move, there can be the opportunity to acknowledge the issues with monetization.

The second is how players' problem with monetization is how it affects the gameplay elements, not necessarily that they hate how much it costs or how random it can be to get a virtual item. Findings showed several examples from gameplay systems that were tied to monetization. In the gem system in Lost Ark, players' complaint is how some classes need fewer gems to function as they are intended, and this should be equalized between classes since if a player decides to buy gems with real-life money if some classes require more gems, it will cost them more, while some have the luxury to need few fewer gems. This directly affects the gameplay for some players, as a class without correct gems will not work as intended.

For Yoz's Jar even though players were inevitably happy to hear Yoz's Jar not coming to the West, some players are now impatient and would want the cosmetics added to the game somehow. Players say that the cosmetics should not have been tied to combat stats, and some players conclude that having combat stats is not as big of an issue, as players would forget the matter over time.

When monetization goes as far as all players needing to buy Crystalline Aura in Lost Ark to repair their gear, that concerns terrible game design because of monetization; such gameplay elements should not be tied to monetization, according to players. Alternatively, at the least, it should be a secondary benefit, not a main benefit, for example, having a different way to repair

gear in activities without going into the city or having Crystalline Aura. There are also some players in Lost Ark who believe much of what is said regarding pay-to-win is exaggerated, and as long as the game is fun for them, they do not care how monetization is built in the game.

Furthermore, in RuneScape, some players argue that Treasure Hunter is not as bad as it can be to ruin the integrity of the game, as it does not offer benefits such as skipping core pillars of the game. However, it is possible to skip leveling up with Treasure Hunter, an issue relating to how players progress through the game and how some gameplay elements can be skipped. Concerning Treasure Hunter, Ironman mode was showcased as a way to escape from Treasure Hunter. Although, players should not have to use Ironman mode as escapism, which means there is an apparent problem with players and MTX. Having a way to disable the notification that the player has free keys to use, or disabling getting discounts for buying keys, can all be ways to reduce the hate Treasure Hunter gets and potentially make players not have to create an Ironman account, to escape from Treasure Hunter. For now, players believe that Ironman is the pure way to play, and if the player is not playing that mode, they have, at some point, interacted with MTX.

Players' opinion on Bonds was also discussed, how Bonds are not the same as they once were, it has much more benefits added to them, such as buying Treasure Hunter keys with it, which is seen as an indirect way of supporting Treasure Hunter, and with that MTX. However, some players see Bonds as a sound revenue system for the game and that Bonds are one part of the bigger picture. Some players believe the MTX in RuneScape is optional and can be ignored; however, there are methods implemented that make it not so, such as being able to use Bonds to increase the player's item storage or that quests give the player free Treasure Hunter keys, meaning that Jagex wants the player to interact with MTX as much as possible.

8.1 Strengths of the Thesis

Thanks to the amount of data gathered from Reddit, this thesis was able to show several examples from players' perspectives on monetization and gameplay, which has proven helpful in answering the main research question. The games for the thesis with different versions have proved useful to strengthen and showcase how even if the games are slightly or very much

different between them, developers can and will change how the monetization models work between versions, mainly because the player culture will be different.

8.2 Limitations of the Thesis

While having been able to showcase many Reddit comments, my hope of showcasing players that specifically have left the subreddit due to their growing concern about monetization became a scratched idea for the thesis. This was the idea of the "exit interview" comments, but there was not enough time. There would be several nuances to consider, such as what if the player came back at a later point in the game, or if the data that was gathered with the search terms, the player would still interact and comment on the subreddit but without the specific search term, these would not then be exit-interview comments, as players would still be interacting with the subreddit, and then potentially with the game as well.

The further limitation comes from how in Lost Ark, on 12 April 2023, Amazon Game Studios released a new update to the Western version, containing a new monetization model named "Sidereal Weapons," that players thought would not come because of the backlash it had from the Korean version. However, due to the new update being this late into the thesis, I decided not to discuss this monetization model due to time constraints. For it also to have been a practical matter to discuss, I would have to wait a few weeks for players to add new comments and gather those discussing Sidereal Weapons, which would take much time.

8.3 Future Research

Future research would hope to find the "exit-interview" comments, to see players that indeed have left the game due to their growing concern on monetization, and that way, have a much better showcase and proof of players' ideas on monetization. Conducting interviews or surveys can also be much helpful in strengthening players' ideas without relying only on their comments. Future research could also use other games besides the MMORPG genre, as there can be the possibility of showcasing players' concerns better in other games than just MMORPGs.

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RuneScape is an MMORPG developed by the game company Jagex in the UK. It came out in early 2000 and has changed drastically since its launch. Currently, two versions of the game, the primary one called RuneScape 3 and an old version called Old School RuneScape, have been brought back due to players missing how the old version was. The game is F2P; however, much of the game is behind a paywall and subscription. Buying a subscription gives the player access to both versions of the game with all its content. RuneScape 3 is the version that has loot boxes and a premium pass, making that version the controversial one. However, both games also have Bonds, purchasable items with real-life money that can be used to get in-game currency. There is also a store where one can buy cosmetics for the RuneScape 3 version.

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Lost Ark is an MMORPG developed by the game company Smilegate RPG in Korea. Lost Ark came out new to the Western audience on 11.02.2022, published by Amazon Games. This means Lost Ark, in some way, has two versions of the game, the Korean version is the most UpToDate, and the Western version is behind in updates. The game is completely F2P; however,

it has been controversial because of its P2W/Paywall features since coming to the Western audience. The game features a different loot box system, a premium pass, a super-premium version, and currency that can be bought with real-life money.

List of Figures: