

Chinese workers make money playing games for Americans

by Peter Rowe

In a Shanghai office building, a visitor from San Diego encountered a roomful of young Chinese, working 12- to 18-hour days - playing online computer games.

"The thing it reminded me of was a factory," said Ge Jin. "But then you see the computer screens."

'NET INCOME - Ge Jin, a Ph.D. candidate at University of California San Diego, studies 'gold farms,' high-tech sweatshops where video gamers turn virtual 'gold' into actual cash. CNS Photo by Daryl Peveto. These are "gold farms," 21st century sweatshops without the perspiration - they are air-conditioned for the computers, not the people. Jin, who has toured dozens of these establishments while pursuing a communications Ph.D. through University of California San Diego, maintains they add a bizarre, high-tech twist to our understanding of the global economy.

Everyone knows that high-paying American jobs have been exported to low-wage workers abroad. But gold farms demonstrate that even our play can be outsourced. "Farmers" spend all day acquiring gold coins, weapons and powers - and then peddle these virtual items for actual currency, usually to gamers in the West.

"Exporting virtual items through the Internet is the same as transmitting Chinese labor to America," one Shanghai gold farm owner told Jin in a 2005 video interview.

Jin agreed: "They are almost like virtual immigrant workers."

And just like real immigrant workers, these virtual laborers arouse deep emotions.

"There's a lot of distrust of gold farmers," said Chad Newman, 28, a Lakeside, Calif., resident who plays "World of Warcraft" online four to five hours a day. "People see them as a bad influence."

Jin, 31, is a Shanghai native who came to the United States in 2000. He spent one year in New York City, earning a master's degree from Fordham, then headed west to UCSD. His research has turned the slight academic into a global expert on gold farming, his views sought by the BBC, MTV and The New York Times.

He's a natural, with Shanghai friends and family giving him entree into many of the city's gold farms - and free places to stay. But he retains an open mind toward this subject, its pros and cons. What happens when your mindless play becomes your underpaid work?

"Is that double exploitation?" he asked. "I don't think it is all one way or the other. It is a mixture. (But) it is a dead-end job. For these young people, if they have better opportunities, it will be better for them."

Jin began his research in 2003, as farms were popping up in several foreign locations including, briefly, Tijuana, Mexico. But most are in China, with its reliable Internet service and vast pool of young, unskilled, but computer-savvy workers.

"Honestly, I don't think my future is promising," a gold farmer named Lao Liu told Jin. "I didn't graduate from high school. To be good in business, you have to know English. And it's better if you have foreign connections, so you can directly trade with foreign gamers."

"Without all these, I can only work at the bottom of this industry."

This may be a low-paying job - farm hands earn roughly 30 cents an hour - but it has appeal. "We can play the best and newest games in the world," Lao Liu said.

"They are having fun," Jin noted.

In fact, after a long day on the farm, many players go to Internet cafes to play online games.

"Fun" is also cited by Americans who use the farmers' services. For the average gamer, "World of Warcraft" requires months of steady play to acquire advanced powers. But for a relatively minor sum, the same powers can be purchased.

"I am happy paying \$10.00 US dollars for 200 gold" pieces, reads one anonymous posting to Jin's web site. "It's better than spending 138 days doing this. Sorry, no moral problems here."

Other gamers disagree. It's unfair, they say, for players to buy their way to victory. "As a player, I don't want to do it," said Michael Nguyen, a recent Cal State San Marcos graduate who works at Mudd Club, a gamers' center in San Diego. "I want to try to earn stuff myself in the game."

Moreover, the farmers' frenetic activity has flooded the market with virtual coins, playing havoc with the online economy. "The price of virtual commodities fluctuates very much," Jin said.

For a lesson in online gaming economics, visit ige.com and mogs.com, described by Jin as "the Wal-Marts of virtual goods." Recently, ige.com's exchange rate was 200 gold coins for \$15.06. Prices were marginally lower

at mogs.com: 200 coins for \$14.77.

As MMORPGs - that's geekspeak for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games - become less like games and more like businesses, resentment rises against gold farmers. Blizzard, the company that makes "World of Warcraft," forbids players from using the game to make money. Newman frequently alerts the company's "game masters" to suspicious activity.

"I tell them, 'You may want to inspect these accounts.'"

Last year, Blizzard banned 50,000 Chinese accounts linked to gold farming.

Other players take direct action. Recently, Nguyen and several friends cornered a "boss," a monster in "World of Warcraft." By killing the creature, they would reap a bonanza in virtual coins. But as they battled the beast, they were surrounded by farmers.

"They were waiting for us to take out the boss and then kill us," Nguyen said. "And they did."

Nguyen revived his online character, gathered more friends and ambushed a single farmer. "Then we all ganged up and killed him. The whole point was payback."

Is virtual violence merely shrewd gamesmanship? Or are there moral issues here? "World of Warcraft" claims 8.5 million players around the globe; do their actions in a fantasy realm reflect their character in the real world?

"What they want to offer," Jin said of these online games, "is a virtual life. It's still a game. But it's a life game."

"What sort of virtual person do you want to be?"

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