FARMING FOR ‘GOLD’ ONLINE

Gaming groups play for items to sell but some hack into accounts to steal

COMPUTER gaming enthusiasts are making real money off virtual currencies in massively multiplayer online (MMO) games – with the shadow industry worth an estimated US$600 million (S$740.8 million) globally a year, more than the GDP of Timor Leste or Samoa.

These gold farmers, as they are commonly known, carry out the transactions like a business operation.

Many own glossy websites, advertise their services in the games they cater to and have a front-end of sales representatives and a back-end comprising servers of games playing the game round the clock.

The back-end group accumulates virtual gold or equipment and gains online, which the front-end resells for cold hard cash. Other gold farmers, however, turn to criminal means – hacking into accounts to steal valuable virtual gold and equipment to sell.

The shady world of gold farming was brought up recently at a security conference, when Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs Ho Peng Kee noted how some gold farmers have turned to hacking into game accounts to get the virtual gold and equipment they trade for real-life cash.

"Many criminals have found efficient ways of profiting from cyberspace. For example, black-market economies have already been formed in many MMO games, where hackers sell their virtual gold and items for real-life cash," he said.

Between 2003 and 2005, the police received at least 25 reports about gaming accounts being hacked. Contacted last week, a police spokesman said since then, there has been a rising trend, but declined to reveal the exact number of reports.

While hacking is a clear crime, gold farmers believe their practices is not, although academics and lawyers think it could lead to further complications which the real-world authorities would have to confront.

"The concept of our virtual currency – money – belongs to us. It is our intellectual property and gamers shouldn’t make money out of it. Besides, prices of virtual items are related to gold farming – spoiling the game for everyone," said the Astalsco spokesman.

In Warhammer Online, the game’s creator – Mythic Entertainment – banned 4,600 accounts believed to belong to gold farms within weeks of its launch last month. To date, close to 10,000 accounts worldwide have been shut down.

A check on the Internet showed that gold farmers are flourishing, with different companies offering competitive rates for their services.

For example, Moogold, an online virtual gold trader, lists its services for over 20 games, including Warhammer Online and World Of Warcraft, with 100 units of gold going for US$375.

The Straits Times posed as a customer buying gold from Singapore site Mono Gaming, which started in May. Two Singapore mobile numbers were listed on the site, with the option of interbank transfers to DBS Bank or OCBC Bank accounts or even a face-to-face service.

The seller was a recent graduate who revealed he earns more than US$1,000 a month being part of the gold-farming operation. The site offers services for six games. According to the seller, each game has a three- or four-man team doing advertising and administrative work to facilitate the virtual gold transactions.

There is even a live online chat open for interested customers who wish to talk to sellers, from noon to 2am daily.

When contacted by The Straits Times, another seller on Mono Gaming said his boss told them never to talk about the business with others, but he was not sure why. "I don’t think I’m doing anything wrong, just helping others," he said.

Gold farming can certainly be lucrative – a recent study by the University of Manchester estimated the shadow industry to be worth at least US$500 million annually on the back of popular MMO games. Professor Richard Heeks, who conducted the study, found that the industry employs about 400,000 – 80 per cent of whom are in China.

Local gamers are split on whether gold provides a service.

Gamer Terence Tan, 21, who has spent $100 on virtual gold, said: "To be the best player, you need to be at the highest level, logged in the best possible equipment. That takes a lot of time to acquire and on top of that, it is very repetitive and boring... so why not get someone to get that for you? It’s more efficient."

Polytechnic lecturer Leroy Tan, 35, who has been playing online games for five years, said he would "never buy anything" from gold farmers.

"It’s a waste of money, and what bragging rights do you have when you get others to play the game and you do not work to get the gear you receive?"

The creator of Warhammer Online has closed about 10,000 accounts worldwide since the game’s launch last month. Many of them are said to belong to gold farms.