



DIABLO IMMORTAL

BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

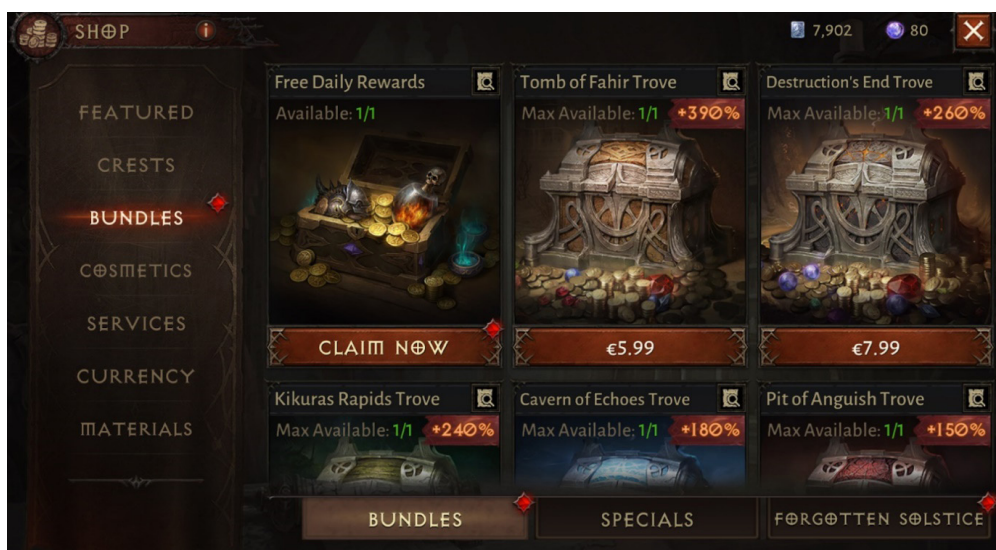
Tomáš Svetlík

Diablo Immortal is a digital game released in 2022 on smartphones and PC, and since its announcement it faced many problems. 6 years has passed since the release of the last game of the series, *Diablo III*, and during that time Blizzard was completely silent about the future of the franchise. After an announcement that *Diablo Immortal* will be released only on smartphones and is almost identical to the last game, the wave of critique hit the company. In fact, reaction was so bad that to this day the *Diablo Immortal* Announcement video on YouTube is the worst rated video in the history of the company² (only 4% out of 830 thousand people rated the video positively). One month before the release of *Diablo Immortal*, Blizzard said that they will port the game for the PC, but the game was banned in Belgium and the Netherlands because of 'predatory' monetisation.³ The vast majority of the playerbase could not access the game yet, so they had no idea what can possibly appear in the game.

The game starts like the ones before, with the class and name selection and after that, the player is thrown right into the intro of the story. It is needed to say, that even after initial fears of insufficient quality, *Diablo Immortal* plays like *Diablo III*, but simplified. There is still an emphasis on fast, regular and adrenaline-pumped combat with enemies that drop many items. Gameplaywise the game is really good and it seems that developers took a good amount of care in making the experience on smartphones good. After finishing the intro sequence that takes around 20 minutes, the game will create its first offer for players to buy a cache for real money. These offers shows up after every dungeon, around twice per chapter and always offer caches that contain certain amounts of in-game currency, items or cosmetic skins. Near every cache is the number of value those items will make and how much a player can save by buying it. The first offer is very cheap (around 1 EUR), but prices are going up as players progress through the game. The last cache costs around 50 EUR. By doing this, Blizzard can make a feeling for players that they can buy small caches for cheap prices and give a player a sunk cost fallacy. P. C. Loshe defined it as a state where players who already spend money in a game, will continue doing that, just because they do not want to risk losing it.⁴ They can be led into a quick trap and endless loop, where players will spend money until they get what they want and the amount of money they spend is much higher than the actual worth of the item. The game does not even tell a player if the caches will stay in the shop permanently, or they will disappear after a while. Players are then under

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- 1 BLIZZARD TEAM 3: *Diablo III*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2012.
 - 2 *Diablo Immortal Cinematic Trailer*. Released on 2nd November 2018. [online]. [2022-11-29]. Available at: <<https://youtu.be/RtSmAwpVHsA>>.
 - 3 SMITH, D.: *Diablo Immortal Won't Launch In Countries That Have Outlawed Loot Boxes*. Released on 26th May 2022. [online]. [2022-12-08]. Available at: <<https://www.kotaku.com.au/2022/05/diablo-immortal-wont-launch-in-countries-that-have-outlawed-loot-boxes/>>.
 - 4 For more information, see: LOHSE, P. C.: How Instability in Virtual Economies of mobile digital games drives and ruins profit. In *EAI Endorsed Transactions on Context-aware Systems and Applications*, 2019, Vol. 6, No. 18, p. 1-7. [online]. [2022-12-08]. Available at: <<https://eudl.eu/pdf/10.4108/eai.13-7-2018.162632>>.

a permanent *FOMO* (fear of missing out) effect, because they do not know if the cache will disappear and they will miss out on a good offer. This effect is strengthened by the fact, that player gets free daily caches. If they want to claim them in the in-game shop, they need to go right where those offers exist so that they are constantly influenced by them (Picture 1).



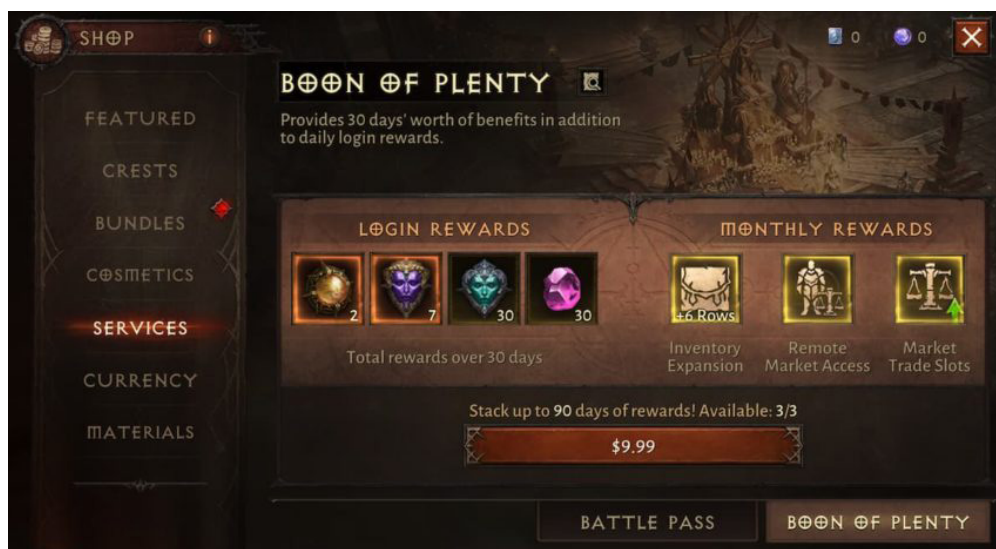
Picture 1: *Diablo Immortal's* in-game shop

Source: author's screenshot; BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

During the playthrough, the player is introduced to a system called *Elder Rift*. Those Rifts are the main source for players to get good items and, at the same time, the main reason why the monetisation in this game is considered predatory. *Elder Rift* is a time challenge, where a player is sent to a randomly generated dungeon with randomly generated enemies. After killing those enemies, the player fills up the bar. Once the bar is filled, the final boss is spawned and after he is defeated, the items will drop. The problem is not with *Elder Rift* as a whole but what happens before entering. Before the player can enter *Elder Rift*, they can upgrade the Rift with Crests. They can insert only three crests at a time and there are two types of Crests. Rare Crests that players can buy for in-game currency or doing quests in the world – those increase the number of items that the final boss will drop at the end of the Rift. The second and much more controversial one is the *Legendary Crest*. Those can be bought for in-game currency, but it is very strict (only one per month) or with real money. After completing *Elder Rift* with *Legendary Crests*, the player will get a *legendary gem* that is the main source of power for them. Those gems drop randomly, and they can be randomly strong. That means if a player pays for those gems, there is no guarantee that they will get what they want or that the gem will be as powerful as they want. Players who do not pay, need to do quests every day and play the game often just for the one-per-month chance of getting a gem, that they might not even use or sell. Alternatively, they can pay 20 EUR and skip 6 months of playing every day. However, the game will psychologically push the player even when they insert the crests. If they place three *legendary crests* in the Rift, the crest slot will extend up to 10 from the previous three. Those slots are not visible until three *legendary crests* are inserted and are not visible for *Rare Crests* altogether. This is the system of '10 pulls' usually found in *gacha games*. G. Rentia defined those games where the main source of monetisation comes from

lootboxes.⁵ After the player opens the box, they will get a random item from different qualities. The main system is basically a series of slot machines, where players can pull once, or 10-times in a row. A fatal difference between gacha games, such as *Genshin Impact*⁶, is that in *Genshin Impact* the player can earn enough currency to make a pull once every day. In *Diablo Immortal*, the player has to wait for an entire month just to have a chance to have one pull. In addition, the player cannot see the chances of getting a stronger gem, because gems are rewards for completing a challenge, so it is technically not gambling anymore, even though it clearly is. This fact is confirmed when they lose a rift. If players somehow lose a rift (which is hard because the difficulty is set low by design), the Legendary Crests will not be destroyed and just return to their inventory for another try, so players cannot lose their reward. By doing this Blizzard has bypassed regulations about gambling in games, where companies are obligated to show percentages of chance in those systems. The in-game shop is also built around giving players more offers. One Legendary Crest costs 160 Eternal Orbs (in-game currency that can be bought for real money), approximately 3 EUR. The shop only offers 320 or 1500 orbs. If the player wants to buy two Crests, it costs exactly 320 orbs, but if they want to do 10 pulls, they will be 100 orbs short. It means they need to buy more orbs, which they might not even spend.

Another strategy that forces players to pay is the system *Boon of Plenty*. Basically this is a subscription service for 12 EUR per month, within which player's daily rewards will be empowered for the next 30 days (Picture 2). The game shows which rewards the player will get over 30 days. However, those rewards are for cumulative login days. If the player misses even one day out of 30, they miss the reward at the end, until they pay for another *Boon of Plenty*. The player is actually paying for 30 days due to the FOMO effect, because if they forget to log in for one day, they will permanently miss the chance of getting all the rewards, and *Legendary Crests* (the most valuable rewards) are tied just to those last rewards.



Picture 2: *Diablo Immortal's* the *Boon of Plenty* offer

Source: author's screenshot; BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT, NETEASE: *Diablo Immortal*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2022.

- 5 See also: RENTIA, G.-G., KARASEVA, A.: *What Aspect of Gacha Games Keep the Players Engaged?*. [Bachelor's Thesis]. Uppsala : Uppsala University, 2022. [online]. [2022-12-02]. Available at: <<http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1665022/FULLTEXT01.pdf>>.
- 6 MIHOYO: *Genshin Impact*. [digital game]. Shanghai : miHoYo, 2020.

If the player still thinks they can play the entire game without paying once, it is true, but only to a degree. After completing the game on normal difficulty, the game will open harder difficulties, where better loot drops. However, those harder difficulties require a certain amount of power from the player's Legendary Crest gems. If the player does not have them and enters the higher difficulty, the game will let them but warn them that their power is insufficient. That causes a *debuff* – every enemy deals 175% more damage to a player, and a player deals 75% less damage. This creates a wall, letting the player see the higher difficulty, but sets the enemies so unfairly above the player that they basically have no chance until they pay. The systems that support microtransactions are more in this game, but the mentioned ones seem to belong to the most criticised and negatively perceived. In addition, until very recently, all those systems that players paid for, all cosmetic and other items were tied to a single character. If the player wanted to try a new character or different class, they needed to pay for everything all over again. This feature was recently removed, but there still remain many questionable systems in the game.

In conclusion, *Diablo Immortal* could be a great game. The gameplay is good, the story is exciting and the classes are fun to play. On smartphones, gameplaywise, one would hardly find a game like this. It even has the polish of older Blizzard games. But the game is heavily damaged by the predatory monetisation designs that only require players to pay as much as possible. Those systems significantly interfere with any good experience from the game. Although predatory systems are currently quite common in mobile games, there are not many games that would do it in so over the top a manner as *Diablo Immortal*. It indicates this game crossed the line of what developers can ask from a player.

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