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Pay-to-Win Power: Chinese Gold Farming and the Trend of Game Monetisation

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ABSTRACT:
This paper examines the structure of Chinese gold farming studios, the detailed process of gold farming, and the industry's impact. The popularity of online games has driven the rise of global gold farming, and China has produced mature industrial gold farming that influences the global game industry. While much of this influence is viewed negatively, the industry has also created substantial profits and employment opportunities, contributing to the Chinese economy and becoming a vital foundation of its gaming sector. Understanding this industry is therefore essential, particularly in terms of how it might be regulated to mitigate its potential impact on the global gaming ecosystem. Drawing on interviews with multiple gold farming participants and integrating existing research, this paper outlines the industrial mechanics of gold farming in China. It adopts both a macro-level perspective on the industry's structure and a grounded, participant-centred view of gold farming experience to interpret the broader, irreversible trend of game monetisation in China. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive picture of this industry, offer a close look into its operation model and inspire future studies.

KEY WORDS:
Chinese game industry, digital games, game companies, gold farming, government, grinding, monetisation, real-money trading.

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Introduction

As an emerging medium genre, the digital game industry has its own special cultures and communities, and its existence provides a foundation for related industries and subcultures. Due to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the rise of the Chinese digital game industry was delayed until the 1990s. This situation prompted China to skip the golden age of arcade games and move directly into the age of computer games. However, China was still poor, and most families could not afford a personal computer. According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, China's computer penetration rate was 5.649% in 2006, whereas in the U.S. it had reached 80.328% ("13-17 Personal computer", n.d.). This meant that 94% of Chinese people could not afford a personal computer at that time. Thus, Internet cafés, where people could spend very little money to rent computers for a certain time for gaming or working, became popular in China. As a result, Internet cafés are the backbone of the Chinese gaming industry, supporting the popularity of online games, and also contributing to many subcultures, such as the gamer and esports communities (Zheng, 2025).[1]

1 Remark by the author: It is important to clarify the gaming terminology used in the study: *gold* refers to in-game currency; *farming* (more generally known as *grinding*) denotes the repetition of certain actions, often to accumulate resources or experience; *carry* describes the powerful assistance provided by one player to others; *dungeons* are cooperative challenges typically requiring a five-player team, whereas *raids* involve larger groups of 10 or 25 players; *auction houses* are in-game marketplaces where players trade items with others.

Gold farming, an emergent industry that relies on online games, has also become popular in China. Moreover, it has developed a mature industrial structure and culture. Gold farmers usually trade in-game currency with players for real money. Moreover, games without a currency mechanic can also be monetised by selling services, such as gear farming, power levelling, and achievement grinding. Indeed, this action goes against the rules of game companies and is punished if discovered. This paper examines the gold farming industry and explores its role in the Chinese gaming industry. It is based on interviews with four Chinese gold farmers from *World of Warcraft Classic* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2019) in North America. The interviews were conducted via WeChat, one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. They included questions designed to elicit perspective data, with all items phrased neutrally to ensure accuracy. For example, one question asked participants about their strategies for selling in-game currency, while another explored their responses after being caught by game companies. All data are stored in a password-protected folder on the researcher's computer. The personal information of these gold farmers are not disclosed in order to maintain their anonymity. To do so, they are called Shizizuo (the owner of a gold farming studio), Joker (a worker at a gold farming studio), Rou (an owner of a digital hardware shop who works as a solo gold farmer for spare money), and Tian (a customer service representative at a large gold farming company).[2]

This paper's topics covers the structure of gold farming in China, including its industrial process, benefits, and problems. Here, the term 'gold farmers' refers to players who operate in-game avatars to farm gold, not those who use scripts or cheats. This paper analyses the structure of gold farming studios, the detailed process of gold farming, and its impact. It aims to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1: What is the Chinese gold farming industry?
- RQ2: What impact does gold farming create in China?

Literature Review

Multiple scholars have stated that online games have dominated the Chinese game industry for decades (Feng et al., 2023; Zhang & Fung, 2013; Kshetri, 2009). This domination provided a stable foundation for the development of Chinese gold farming. Some scholars noted that gold farming in online games had become a significant support for the Chinese gaming industry (Yu, 2018; Jin, 2006; Heeks, 2008; Tai & Hu, 2018). Most research viewed gold farming as a critical issue for the global gaming industry. Still, it has failed to comprehensively examine the structure of gold farming and understand the root of this situation.

Heeks (2008) provided a detailed analysis of the global gold farming industry and offers valuable models to analyse it. His research interpreted this industry structure in general, with some cases from China, and defined the game monetisation caused by gold farming. Although his research did not delve deeply into the details of this industry in China, it inspired the research adaptation and direction of this paper. Thirteen years later, Fickle (2021) pointed out that:

> Reinserting gold farming into the picture is, however, stymied somewhat by the limited amount of reliable, English-language scholarly work on the topic, exacerbated by the false perception of gold farming as a brief and bizarre blip that died out by 2010. (Fickle, 2021, para. 5)

2 Remark by the author: All interviewees have provided their permission for the content of the interviews, including quotations, to be published in an open-access scientific journal, while maintaining their anonymity.

Fickle (2021) discovered that gold farming has become a core aspect of promoting Chinese eSports and is deeply ingrained in Chinese society. Though she viewed this issue too negatively, neglecting its positive significance to Chinese society, her discovery shows the need to further investigate and interpret the rapidly expanding Chinese gold farming industry in order to offer academia a comprehensive model to resolve the issue of limited amount of reliable scholarly work on the topic.

The above research takes a top-down view of the industry, so it cannot offer an objective interpretation of the industry. For example, Internet cafés offer a great place for solo gold farmers, and Heeks (2008) stated that small gold farming studios usually relied on Internet cafés. This statement was not accurate because small studios were becoming more commercial and formal as Fickle (2021) presented. One key reason was that the IP address bans of game companies could significantly impact Internet cafés. Heeks (2008) said to IP banning that "companies may block logins from certain IP addresses they believe have been associated with prohibited actions" (p. 48). It was logically in conflict with the operating model of Internet cafés. Thus, it is important to understand the experience of gold farmers to comprehend the gold farming industry, especially since some data can only be represented from the participants' perspective. Zhu presented how the people at the bottom in Sanhe lived by doing day-pay jobs and gold farming in Internet cafés (eMuseTV | EMUSE PICTURES, 2018), and Hou (2024) also described the hard life these people lead. Dibbell (2007) took a close look at gold farmers through interviews and offered vivid descriptions of their working processes. Chew (2022) provided a comprehensive summary of research on Chinese gold farming, reiterating its significance to Chinese society. Zhang and Fung (2013) also stated that Chinese gold farming was a naturally occurring phenomenon in the current Chinese social environment and criticized the lack of research on gold farmers. This paper aims to integrate previous research, outline the industrial process of Chinese gold farming, and resolve the research gap mentioned by Fickle (2021). Based on interviews with various gold farming participants, this paper employs both a comprehensive perspective to analyse the industrial structure and an objective perspective on the gold farming experience of participants, to confirm and interpret the significance of this structure to both the Chinese gaming industry and society.

The Introduction of Gold Farming Studios

In 1995, the first Chinese Internet café opened in Shanghai, marking the beginning of an era in which computers became an integral part of people's lives as a form of universal entertainment. Even though people needed very little money to play digital games in Internet cafés, some teenagers still could not afford the price. However, this situation created an initial opportunity for gold farming. According to the interview, Rou mentioned that although they did not have enough money to rent a computer, they often went to Internet cafés and watched others play games. Sometimes, they would be hired by players to grind gold, gears, or levels. He said this kind of deal was very common in Internet cafés, and many of their friends were doing it to earn some money. This experience made them realize that they could make money by playing games for other players, inspiring them to pursue it as a career.

At the start of the 2000s, online games became popular globally, and gold farming, which relied on online games, also emerged. Heeks (2008) stated "this activity has been

large enough to call an economic sub-sector – employing tens of thousands in developing countries and with global trade worth hundreds of millions of dollars – since at least 2003" (p. 7). The rise of gold farming was not an accident. It provided more income, jobs, and skills to help develop the global gaming industry. China, in particular, developed a mature industrial gold farming sector, which has had a significant influence on the global gaming industry. Jin (2006) notes that although multiple countries have gold farming industries, none approach the scope and scale of China's. This raises questions about the general structure of industrial gold farming within the Chinese gaming industry.

Heeks (2008) defines the internal value chain model of gold farming as consisting of marketing, customer handling, operations, delivery, and after-sales service. This is the model most gold farmers follow. The Chinese gold farming industry generally consists of three scales: solo gold farmers, small private businesses, and large *real-money trading* (hereinafter referred to as RMT) companies. Solo gold farmers work independently. They must manage the entire chain model on their own and have no insurance to support them. These farmers can work anywhere with a computer, but many cannot afford one. Therefore, the low cost of Internet cafés provides a great space for gold farming. Reports on Chinese gold farmers and Internet cafés described the difficult living conditions of solo farmers, and Internet cafés were noted as one of their primary workplaces (Jou, 2012; "Gaming in China", 2022).

Small private gold farming studios are more organized. The owner assigns work to employees. According to Shizizuo, his studio has five employees. He supervises employees and is also responsible for finding customers, making deals, providing customer service, and farming gold when available. Many small studios are in small apartments, where employees can eat and sleep if they choose, but they are responsible for covering their own living costs. Shizizuo does not provide computers for his employees, so they must bring their own laptops.

Job divisions are more detailed in large RMT companies. Tian works in customer service for an RMT company. It is a business with more than 20 employees. A recent job posting by a similar company is seeking office clerks responsible for human resources, financial affairs, and administration, offering a monthly wage of 1,000-1,500 USD ("Xiamen Zhengchen", 2020). As a registered business, the company has a tightly organized structure and specific job roles for each node of the value chain. It has office and workspaces in a commercial building and provides the necessary equipment. Some RMT companies even run their own websites, such as Eldorado.gg and PLS173.com. Thus, regardless of size, gold farming studios in China operate with structures and job divisions that resemble those of standard businesses, following the same chain model.

Interestingly, the educational backgrounds of gold farmers do not seem to affect their participation in the industry. Rou and Shizizuo hold junior high school degrees, while Joker has a college degree. Dibbell (2007) describes Wang Huachen, a 22-year-old *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) gold farmer, who completed his university course in law but chose to farm gold instead. Yu (2018) also stated:

> A closer look at the profile of Chinese gold farmers will find that they are educated and well-off (college graduates and university students from middle-class families). They play online games (typically WoW) full-time or part-time to get paid for selling virtual goods to Chinese and Korean markets more than the Western ones. (Yu, 2018, p. 9)

According to the interviews, Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker chose this job because they love playing games, and gold farming allows them to earn money while doing so. Joker reports a monthly wage of around 480-950 USD, while Rou and Shizuo earn around 1,300 USD. Data from the Chinese employment website 58.com indicates that the average

wage for *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) gold farmers ranges from 700 to 1,000 USD ("Zhengzhou film", n.d.). According to the official report, the national average monthly wage is 500 USD ("Residents' income", 2025). Gold farmers, therefore, earn significantly more than the national average. Because the industry requires only a computer and can be operated from any low-cost city, gold farming presents a low-barrier, potentially profitable career path. As such, it opens the door for many Chinese workers to enter the gold farming industry.

The Operation of Gold Farming Studios

a) Customer acquisition

Finding customers is the first goal gold farming studios need to consider. The final goal of gold farming studios is profit, so if farming gold cannot earn enough profit, the entire industrial process becomes meaningless. As Keynes' Law states, demand creates supply because changes in aggregate demand cause changes in real GDP and employment ("Keynes' Law", n.d.). From this point, a sufficient customer base that demands gold will guarantee profits and motivate gold farmers to work on the gold supply.

The approaches to finding customers may vary based on the size of the studios. Solo farmers must post information in game chats to find customers, because they lack an organization to provide customer resources, and it is challenging for them to build trust. Rou says that solo gold farmers sometimes choose the Marketer's methods to find customers, but they prefer selling gold to RMT websites for safety because they do not have enough funds to afford the risk of being banned. Small studios have an advantage as they can connect with frequent visitors. Being a small organization, they can also provide some insurance for the trade. For example, Shizizuo's small studio only works on one North American server of *World of Warcraft Classic*, and its target customers are Chinese players and Chinese guilds on that server. Shizizuo and his employees will create many characters and separately join different Chinese guilds to find customers. Then they will look for potential customers who may want to buy gold, and message them. If Shizizuo is familiar with the masters of guilds, his studio may be able to cooperate directly with these guilds, and some masters may offer help. Zhang and Fung (2013) present that some guilds in online games have become formal gold farming guilds.

Large RMT companies do not need to handle those details. Because large gold farming companies and RMT websites do not focus on only one server, they usually create plenty of low-level characters as Marketers to advertise their gold farming businesses to random players. However, this approach is risky because these marketers risk being reported for harassment or RMT, so their accounts are easily banned, but it is considered a necessary cost.

b) Gold farming process

The methods of gold farming are diverse, and farmers must be skilled enough to earn gold efficiently. However, not every gold farming studio produces gold itself, as they can outsource the gold farming process to solo farmers. Large RMT companies often take this approach, acting as middlemen to profit from the difference between purchasing gold from farmers and selling it to customers (Heeks, 2008). RMT companies usually cover a wide range of games, and each game often includes multiple servers. This makes the cost

of hiring workers to farm gold or provide services on all servers too high. Therefore, cooperating with solo gold farmers, who typically have limited customer sources, becomes a win-win situation for both RMT companies and those farmers. As mentioned earlier, gold farmers' roles may vary based on customer demand, so the farming approaches can be classified according to service types:

- *Gathering loot and materials for sale.* Gold farmers spend significant time killing and looting NPC mobs and usually gather manufacturing materials. They then sell what they collect for gold. For example, Joker says his avatar can command a pet to kill mobs while he gathers herbs nearby. The advantage of this approach is that the profit is proportional to the amount of time spent farming. As long as the farmers work hard, the profit tends to be relatively stable.
- *Power-levelling service*. Gold farmers use high-level characters to carry customers' low-level characters through dungeons, repeatedly killing mobs to help them level up. Customers pay them gold in return, meaning that gold is essentially being farmed from other players. Like material gatherers, these farmers' profits are often proportional to their time investment; however, customer demand also plays a significant role in determining their profits. To avoid a lack of customers, these farmers must be skilled at running multiple dungeons, enabling them to quickly switch based on shifting demand. Therefore, although both loot/material gatherers and level boosters perform mechanical labour, the latter requires more operational skill.
- *Gear-boosting service.* This service involves customers acquiring valuable equipment during the carry process. To satisfy customer demand, gold farmers must be skilled enough to complete a dungeon or raid that the customer cannot finish alone. This makes the activity more difficult. Moreover, raids in *World of Warcraft* typically require at least ten players, which makes it nearly impossible for small studios to offer this service. For instance, Shizizuo's studio, which serves over 200 customers on his server, only consists of six members, making raid organization infeasible. As a result, this service is usually offered by large RMT companies. However, it is less common because it requires specific conditions. If customers want this service, it usually means they lack the skills to obtain certain gear on their own. If they lack time, the next service applies instead.
- *Substitute service.* Gold farming studios offer substitute services when customers lack time. Farmers temporarily take over customers' accounts to improve their avatars, either for gold or real money. This service can include level boosting and gear boosting, as gold farmers are familiar with the most efficient methods to complete such tasks by operating the accounts directly. However, this service is costly because it requires full attention to a specific account rather than using optimized methods for gold farming. It is also risky, as customers must share their login credentials. Consequently, substitute services are less popular than the others.
- *Producer and middleman.* This gold farming model differs from the previous methods because these farmers do not interact directly with customers. They will buy raw materials, craft them into goods, and sell the final products for gold. Some gold farmers even manipulate in-game economies. They monitor prices in the auction house and buy goods when prices drop due to oversupply or weak demand. Once cheap items are purchased and removed from the market, scarcity drives prices back up, and they resell for profit. These gold farmers rely heavily on economic knowledge and the Law of Supply and Demand. Although this approach is complex, it does not involve intense mechanical gameplay, making it appealing to strategically skilled farmers.

In general, gold farming methods fall into two categories: farming gold from the game or farming gold from other players. Regardless of the approach, both require labourers to invest time and energy into the process.

c) Providing service, selling gold

After finding customers and securing a gold supply, the next step gold farmers must consider is how to complete the transaction. It is essential to clarify the ultimate goal of gold farmers before continuing, i.e. converting in-game currency, resources, or services into real money. To achieve this, gold farmers employ multiple approaches:

- *Selling gold for real money.* The method of selling gold varies depending on the size of the gold farming operation. For small studios or solo farmers, direct trade is the most common approach. Customers looking to buy in-game currency, such as gold in *World of Warcraft*, contact gold farmers directly and negotiate unit prices. As Joker, Rou, and Shizizuo noted, the unit price is typically determined by the rates listed on RMT websites. These platforms dynamically update gold prices on a per-server and per-game basis by tracking the supply from gold farmers and demand from customers. Robischon (2007) describes how Sony Online Entertainment's Station Exchange system formalized this kind of real-money transaction. This reliance on RMT websites means that small gold farming studios and solo farmers generally follow the same pricing model. Once the price is set, customers use digital payment platforms such as WeChat, PayPal, or Alipay to transfer real money. Afterward, the gold farmers deliver the in-game currency directly to the customers through a trade in the game. This method, however, is impractical for large RMT companies, as they do not have dedicated gold farmers on every server for every game. Instead, they act as intermediaries, sourcing gold from numerous solo farmers. Customers place orders through a company's website and pay via digital payment systems. Once payment is confirmed, the company contacts solo gold farmers offering the best rates and instructs them to fulfil the order. In this process, large RMT companies operate as formal online marketplaces, overseeing the transaction to prevent fraud and ensure customer satisfaction. For example, Tian notes that the Zhengchen Company uses the mobile app Remitly for handling international trades. Though large RMT companies take a commission from each order, this model benefits all parties involved: customers gain a secure way to purchase gold, solo farmers access a reliable customer base, and companies generate revenue to sustain operations.
- *Selling services for real money*. Despite the term 'gold farmer,' many such workers provide services rather than just gold. The payment process for services – whether through solo farmers, small studios, or RMT companies – is similar to that of gold sales, with one key difference: in-game currency is not used as a medium of exchange. Instead, customers pay directly for services like power levelling or substitute services through digital payment platforms. Customers may deal directly with individual farmers or small studios, or they may place orders with large RMT companies. In the latter case, the company assigns tasks to appropriate gold farmers and monitors the process to ensure secure and successful service delivery. Heeks (2008) explains this through the example of power-levelling:

  > Payment is again made via a website but this time the gold farming firm is provided with the purchaser's game username and password. Their staff then 'play' the purchaser's character in the game, building up its levels (of combat or other skills). Once the character has reached the agreed level, it is handed back to the purchaser. (Heeks, 2008, p. 5)

Because no in-game currency is exchanged, such service-based transactions are harder for game companies and game masters to detect, making them relatively safer for both gold farmers and players.

d) Risks and after-sales service

The risks associated with the gold farming industry primarily stem from two sources: enforcement by game companies and the potential for fraud. Game companies view gold farming as a significant threat because it distorts in-game economies and disrupts the gameplay experience of regular players. As a result, they actively seek to suppress these activities. One common enforcement tactic is tracking suspicious in-game currency transfers, especially large transactions that lack a clear, legitimate purpose. However, gold farmers often evade detection through techniques such as using in-game auction houses to 'launder' gold by selling low-value items at inflated prices, which allows them to pay a cut to the system via auction house fees. This mirrors real-world money laundering tactics: "Buyers are often paid in small amounts, possibly to reduce the risks of detection, just as drug dealers pay lots of small amounts into legitimate bank accounts to avoid detection" (Bell, 2006, as cited in Heeks, 2008, p. 60). Moreover, the popularity of Internet cafés in China further complicates enforcement. Chinese solo gold farmers can operate from the cafés, where they can constantly rotate IP addresses and accounts. This makes it more difficult for game companies to issue effective bans, especially compared to their success in suppressing gold farming in other countries.

Fraud is another persistent risk within the gold farming ecosystem. Customers may not receive the gold they paid for, and gold farmers themselves are frequent targets of scams. For example, Shizizuo shared that he once lost 230 USD after delivering gold to a customer who immediately logged off without completing payment. Fraud targeting gold farmers is not unusual. Heeks (2008) mentions that Aiken discusses cases in which individuals boast about defrauding multiple gold farming firms. While large studios can reduce the risk of fraud by acting as trusted intermediaries, complete protection is impossible. Large RMT companies mitigate fraud by leveraging their informational advantages. As intermediaries, they coordinate transactions between buyers and sellers, manage risks, and ensure smoother operations. Their reputations also lend credibility, reducing perceived risk for customers and solo gold farmers alike. These centralized systems reduce the need for individual parties to perform extensive background checks or price comparisons.

In this situation, small studios and solo gold farmers who sell gold directly to customers place significant importance on personal reputation. As Shizizuo noted, he is willing to refund money if a customer cancels a deal. Rou similarly offers discounts to returning customers. This emphasis on trust and customer loyalty is essential for sustaining business in a highly competitive and risky environment. On the other hand, large studios and the solo farmers who sell gold to them generally lack such personal connections with end customers. Their services are facilitated through RMT platforms like PLS173.com and Eldorado.gg, which typically offer basic protections and standardized return policies. These platforms clearly state that they do not offer refunds if a customer's game account is banned following a transaction, emphasizing that they are only intermediaries ensuring a secure process. As Heeks (2008) notes, their after-sales service usually consists of limited follow-up, typically just checking in to see whether the client is interested in making another purchase.

Gold Farming, Game Industry, and the Government

a) Competition

Competition among gold farmers is inevitable. Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker all noted that they initially learned gold farming techniques through publicly accessible resources, such as videos or live streams. The low barriers to entry and relatively easy training process encourage more individuals to join the gold farming industry. However, this influx of new labourers contributes to intensified competition, and gold farming studios have little power to reverse this broader industry trend. As a result, studios are forced to improve service quality and lower their prices to remain competitive.

In addition to healthy competition among human-operated gold farming operations, a more controversial method exists that significantly harms both traditional gold farmers and game developers: the use of script-controlled robots. Joker described frequently encountering bot-controlled avatars farming in the same locations as him. Similarly, Rou and Shizizuo reported that their businesses had been negatively impacted by these automated players. Heeks (2008) mentions that bot use is common in the industry, particularly in the contexts of gold farming and power levelling.

Human gold farmers typically view these bots as harmful competitors. Unlike human players, bots can operate continuously without rest, drastically increasing the supply of in-game currency. This artificial inflation devalues gold and reduces profits for human-operated studios. Interestingly, this shared opposition to bots unites game companies and human gold farmers. While game developers seek to eliminate bots to preserve game balance and user experience, human gold farmers oppose them to protect their livelihoods. Reflecting this mutual interest, Rou, Shizizuo, and Joker all stated that they routinely report suspected bot users to game administrators. This act of whistleblowing underscores an unusual alignment between gold farming studios and the companies whose rules they routinely bypass, as both groups attempt to curb the influence of automated farming systems.

b) Game companies' methods

Because RMT can negatively impact the in-game economies and overall player experiences in online games, many game companies actively attempt to suppress gold farming. One common approach is account banning. Solo gold farmers, however, often mitigate this risk by working from Internet cafés. Heeks (2008) explains that "companies may block logins from certain IP addresses they believe have been associated with prohibited actions" (p. 4). This means that once an account is banned, any subsequent accounts logging in from the same IP address may also be flagged and banned. Solo gold farmers working from Internet cafés can circumvent this issue by simply moving to a different cafe, leaving the consequences of the IP ban to the previous establishment. Moreover, Internet cafés offer essential infrastructure for gold farming – multiple computers, food and beverage services, and comfortable seating – making them ideal environments for solo gold farmers.

In contrast, small gold farming studios are more vulnerable to punishment. These studios typically operate out of centralized locations, such as apartments, where multiple accounts share the same IP. When an IP ban is issued, all associated accounts are at risk. Shizizuo shared that his studio recently experienced such a ban, resulting in the loss of six accounts – a direct financial setback. In addition to these account losses, studios

must secure new IP addresses to resume operations, halting work in the interim. This increased operational risk highlights the precarious position of small studios. Heeks' suggestion that many Internet cafés double as small gold farming studios is therefore not entirely accurate. When cafes functioned in this way, the risk of IP bans jeopardized their core business: renting computers to customers. If a ban were issued, all customers, many of whom were not involved in gold farming, might also face account suspensions, which would harm the cafe's reputation and revenue. Consequently, modern Internet cafés are less likely to allow sizeable gold farming on their premises. However, Internet cafés cannot effectively monitor every customer's gameplay, particularly when solo gold farmers behave indistinguishably from regular players while mechanically repeating farming tasks.

Gold farmers rarely appeal their bans. Unlike regular players who might appeal wrongful punishments, gold farmers recognize that they have violated the game's terms of service and assume that any appeals will be denied. Similarly, when fraud occurs – either to customers or gold farmers themselves – there is usually no effort to report it, as both parties were engaged in unauthorized RMT activities. In contrast, large RMT companies and platforms are rarely impacted by game company punishments. Because they function as intermediaries and do not typically use in-game accounts to farm gold themselves, they offload the risk of being banned onto the solo gold farmers who supply them. As a result, unless formal legal action is taken, these companies remain largely untouched by in-game enforcement efforts.

Another tactic employed by game developers to curb RMT is the implementation of official in-game purchase systems, designed to redirect transactions away from gold farmers and toward the companies themselves. For example, *Fantasy Westward Journey* (NetEase, 2001) introduced non-player character traders who exchange gold with players, and *World of Warcraft* offers the WoW Token as a sanctioned way to purchase gold. While these systems can suppress RMT activity, they do not completely eliminate it. As long as there is a financial incentive, gold farmers are likely to undercut official pricing and continue offering services. Some companies have responded by removing player-to-player trading systems entirely from their newer games, effectively eliminating any openings for RMT. For instance, *Genshin Impact* (miHoYo, 2020) monetises through gacha mechanics for rare characters and items, while *Dungeon Fighter Online* (Neople, 2005) agented by Tencent, sells legendary gear directly via in-game purchases. This design shift transforms game companies into the most prominent participants in RMT themselves, reorienting RMT from an illicit activity to a built-in, profit-driven game mechanic. Ironically, this trend has worsened the very problem companies originally sought to eliminate, introducing pay-to-win systems that arguably erode the player experience more than traditional gold farming.

c) Government support and impact

According to multiple studies and media reports, Internet cafés in China have served as both living spaces and workplaces for gold farmers. When Internet cafés first appeared in the 1990s, China was undergoing massive layoffs. Following Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms, most government-owned work units were dismantled, pushing millions into the open labour market. Between 1997 and 2000 alone, 21 million workers lost their jobs (Moskowitz, 2013). These cafes became informal hubs for the unemployed, and the low barrier to entry in the gold farming industry motivated some of them to join the industry. Besides, gold farming heavily relies on labour rather than means of production, so it does not compete much for resources with existing industries. This implicit connection benefits both Internet cafés and gold farmers. The rise of gold farming thus helped ease the burden of unemployment, and the government passively supported its expansion. As a result, the Chinese government recognized gold farming as a legitimate profession.

As Jin (2006) explains, "this industry has developed to such a level that the Chinese government is looking for ways to tax and regulate it" (para. 3). With tacit approval, gold farming flourished rapidly. Chew (2022) states that gold farming helps alleviate poverty among Chinese people. Some digital companies, such as the Zhengchen Company, were registered specifically to provide RMT services. Consequently, the government's attitude has left game companies to tackle this issue independently.

The push and pull between gold farmers and game companies, regardless of which side profits more, often overlooks the most essential stakeholders: the players. For both gold farmers and game developers, profit is the main concern, which discourages addressing this issue. From the perspective of RMT users, the seller's identity is irrelevant as long as the price is reasonable and the transaction is secure. For many players, purchasing in-game currency or services has become a normalized part of gameplay. The Ministry of Culture and Tourism once reported that "7.4% of middle school students strongly agree that 'real life is just like in games – as long as you spend money, you can get things done'" ("China Internet cafés," 2008). This kind of RMT-centred gameplay undermines the experiences of ordinary players.

These regular players seek to enjoy the content of games, such as grinding for gear or currency, as a form of relaxation and personal achievement. However, RMT allows others to bypass these efforts entirely, diminishing the value of in-game accomplishments. In competitive games like *CrossFire* (Smilegate Entertainment, 2007), normal players often feel compelled to engage in RMT themselves just to stay competitive. At the same time, game companies benefit financially from this system. In 2024, an indie game titled *Chinese Online Games* (648 Studio, 2024) satirized the negative consequences of RMT and its overwhelming impact on the lives of Chinese players. Nevertheless, RMT-based monetisation has become a dominant business model in China. This pay-to-win paradigm not only distorts the gaming experience but also stifles market diversity. Even more, strict censorship and poor localisation prevent many high-quality foreign games from entering the Chinese market. This leaves players with few alternatives, indirectly supports the gold farming ecosystem and makes normal players familiar with RMTs. Thus, within this web of mutual interests, the government, gold farmers, some game companies, and RMT players all derive benefits, while ordinary players and the broader game market suffer. Enabled by governmental tolerance and fuelled by RMT-focused game design, the Chinese gold farming industry continues to generate significant profits and exert growing influence on the global gaming landscape. Additionally, the industry has given rise to new service branches.

The Playmate service is a recent evolution of gold farming, emerging in response to the growing desire among Chinese gamers for companionship during online gameplay. Rather than selling in-game currency, this service monetises social interaction itself, becoming a new core of the RMT process. Players can hire gaming partners through voice chat platforms. Hired playmates follow the client's instructions to play specific games while engaging in real-time conversation. The service generally caters to two main types of consumer demand: some customers seek emotional companionship, while others are looking for highly skilled players to help them overcome difficult in-game challenges. Regardless of the motivation, the goal is to provide an enhanced gaming experience through paid companionship. This service gets rid of the reliance on and potential risk of in-game currency systems, so many gold farmers have switched their service type to it, which expand the popularity of RMT atmosphere in the Chinese game market. As the most popular 2025 game in China, *Delta Force: Hawk Ops* (Team Jade, 2025) has reached 20 million daily active players, and 42% players have chosen to purchase the playmate service ("Bixin App releases", 2025; Delta Force project team, 2025). Thus, the Chinese game market and players have been deeply influenced by the RMT atmosphere.

Much like traditional gold farming, entry into the playmate industry requires minimal qualifications. Companies rarely demand formal education, professional training, or even proven gaming skills. Instead, they provide a platform where customers browse and select playmates based on profiles or advertised capabilities. These companies function primarily as intermediaries, profiting from service fees and platform usage without directly managing the playmates themselves. As a result, the industry is poorly regulated. Despite being marketed as a form of in-game companionship, the lack of oversight allows employees to offer a broad and ambiguous range of services to satisfy customer demands. This regulatory gap poses risks to social stability and has attracted growing scrutiny. Chew (2022) mentions that female playmates sometimes flirt with their male customers. Chinese state media have raised concerns about the darker sides of the playmate industry. *Xinhuanet* reported that certain playmate services were involved in illegal activities, and *People's Daily* exposed Bixin – the largest playmate service provider in China – for allegedly facilitating prostitution under the pretence of late-night companionship services. Following these revelations, the government ordered Bixin to suspend operations for internal rectification (Han & Wang, 2023; Liu & Chen, 2020).

Although both gold farming and playmate services fall under the umbrella of RMT, they are treated very differently by the Chinese government. While gold farming is detrimental to the gaming industry, it does not directly conflict with the state's broader goals of promoting social harmony and public morality. In contrast, playmate services – especially when they cross over into inappropriate or illicit activities – pose a more visible threat to these values. As a result, companion services are subject to much stricter regulation and enforcement than gold farming, despite sharing a similar foundation in RMT within the digital economy.

Finally, gold farming remains an inherently unstable profession. Its survival is tethered to the lifespan of the online games it exploits. When a game's popularity declines or it is shut down, the accompanying gold farming economy collapses. Solo gold farmers and small studios are disproportionately affected in such cases. As customer demand diminishes, these workers are forced to abandon their accounts, discard the game-specific skills they have developed, and search for new opportunities, often starting from scratch. In contrast, large RMT companies and websites are not as vulnerable. Because they act as intermediaries rather than direct participants in the farming process, their operations are not tied to any single game. When a game becomes unprofitable, they simply remove it from their platforms and shift focus to emerging titles, recruiting new suppliers and customers as needed.

Conclusion

This paper outlines the industrial mechanics of gold farming in China. It adopts both a macro-level perspective on the industry's structure and a grounded, participant-centred view of the gold farming experience to interpret the broader, irreversible trend of game monetisation in China. This paper provides a comprehensive picture of this industry, offers a close look into its operation model and inspires future studies. Although the gold farming industry can significantly undermine both the profits of game companies and the gaming experiences of regular players, its societal value remains considerable. In China, the industry generates substantial economic benefits by creating employment opportunities, offering competitive average wages, requiring minimal educational credentials, and demanding only basic training. Despite existing within a regulatory 'grey' zone of the Chinese

gaming industry, gold farming has evolved into an indispensable foundation of that ecosystem. However, individual gold farmers and small studios must work hard and contend with significant risks, whereas large RMT studios benefit from the industry while remaining largely insulated from these challenges. This capital model appears across many different markets, making Chinese gold farming a useful case for future interdisciplinary analysis.

From a global standpoint, the Chinese gold farming industry has reshaped the demographics of online gaming. Based on research by Woodcock (2008) and Kushner (2007), of 50 million online game players worldwide, 20 million participate in monthly subscription-based games, and approximately 1 million of these are gold farmers. This means that gold farmers account for 5% of the subscription-based player base. Over the past two decades, this proportion has likely grown as gold farmers have expanded their services beyond currency farming to include substitute services and playmate offerings, targeting a wider range of games, including those without traditional currency systems. However, the lack of quantitative research and statistics on the contemporary market requires future data collection and analysis.

Gold farming has become an irreplaceable sub-sector of the global game economy. Lehtiniemi (2007) estimated that gold farming generated approximately 1.6 billion USD in gross revenue. Although there is a lack of updated data beyond the report, the 42% of Chinese players currently engaged in the RMT industry has proved its value. The elimination of gold farming would consequently result in the loss of a significant economic engine, making its removal highly unlikely. This prediction suggests a valuable future research direction that requires greater attention to data collection.

As game monetisation continues to evolve as an irreversible trend, the global gaming industry now faces a critical challenge: how to effectively regulate gold farming while mitigating its harmful effects and preserving its economic benefits. Developing a regulatory framework that addresses this tension will be a crucial next step for both policymakers and game developers worldwide.

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