

Framing Fairness

Player Discourse and Microtransaction Models in Live Service PC Games

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How do PC game communities frame different microtransaction models as fair or exploitative, and how do these framings relate to observable engagement patterns?

METHOD

FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis, adapted from Fairclough; fairness treated as something communities construct, not a fixed property of the monetisation system.

CASES

Three structurally distinct live-service economies: Diablo IV (cosmetic store and battle pass), Destiny 2 (expansion and seasonal pass), Counter-Strike CS:GO/CS2 (loot box and marketplace, one continuous economy). Warframe as an "ethical" comparative referent.

CORPUS

Ninety coded items of naturally occurring player discourse (Steam reviews, Reddit threads, official forums), coded against a purpose-built codebook.

ENGAGEMENT DATA

Concurrent-player metrics read contextually, to situate moments of contestation, not to claim causation.

FINDINGS

1 Fairness is made, not built in.

The structure of a monetisation system supplies the vocabulary of judgement (the cosmetic boundary, the ownership question, the gambling classification), but community interpretation decides the verdict. The same loot box can be legible as fair or as exploitative.

2 Communication is part of the price.

How a decision is announced (its timing, register and respect for the audience) is itself judged. Communicative failures can constitute exploitation even where the underlying commercial decision might have been accommodated.

3 Communities remember.

Players judge the present against franchise legacy and multi-year cumulative spend. Live-service games generate a longitudinal accountability that the discrete-purchase model never faced.

4 Critique does not equal leverage.

Whether discursive resistance translates into engagement decline depends on the engagement architecture: Diablo IV's critique tracked decline, while Counter-Strike's competitive structure insulated it almost entirely.

CONTRIBUTION

The study extends the monetisation taxonomies of Saffar (2024) and Petrovskaya and Zendle (2022) by showing how their categories are activated and contested in live community usage, and extends platform-capitalism accounts of player labour (Kücklich, 2005; Andrejevic, 2007; Ardit, 2024) by treating community discourse as a site where those logics are made visible and negotiated. For designers and publishers, the practical implication is that monetisation is received as a relationship rather than a catalogue: structure, communication and history are judged together.