

# The Sydney Morning Herald

## Turning gamers into gamblers

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Developer Blizzard has launched its real money auction house for Diablo III, enabling players to buy and sell virtual items with real cash.

Guides to help players make money by playing the game are already being posted across the web, including advice that sounds very similar to gambling on the stock exchange.

Meanwhile, long-running online game Runescape is being widely criticised for encouraging youngsters to gamble.



*Runescape's Squeal of Fortune.*

Australian gamer, parent and former gambling addict Jakob Gamertsfelder is a veteran Runescape player but is now one of many actively protesting about the game's new direction - what he describes as "an online casino aimed at children".

Most of the complaints are directed at Squeal of Fortune, which was added early this year and allows players to "buy spins" to a virtual wheel of fortune to win prizes.

Jakob says Squeal of Fortune is "marketing aimed at habituating and incentivising gambling, directly aimed at kids".

"My motivation comes not just from the good memories of spending time with my kids in Runescape but also from remembering what it feels like to be caught up in a gambling addiction, which I was for some years."

Jakob says he "performed some spectacular life-wrecking stunts" when addicted to gambling.

"It was a miserable time. If I can do something to help others avoid that, then that's a good thing to do."

Last year a gambling industry veteran [urged sports betting agencies to target video gamers](#), while [a study suggested](#) teenager game players had brains "like gambling addicts". Meanwhile, [research in 2009](#) suggested teenagers who regularly play video games are more likely to develop anti-social behaviour that can lead to problem gambling.

Jakob Gamertsfelder is particularly angry that Runescape's new owners Jagex changed the terms and conditions of Runescape around the same time as launching Squeal of Fortune. The changes ensure the company is not liable if a player uses someone else's credit card. He says this seems to have been done because Jagex expects kids to use their parent's cards without permission.

"The timing indicates the intent," Jakob says. "It annoys the crap out of me that Jagex does something this malicious and then fobs off responsibility to parents."

Runescape made its debut way back in 2001 and has enjoyed over 200 million accounts. It has been recognised by Guinness World Records as the world's most popular free massively multiplayer online role playing game.

But many long-time players of Runescape are particularly aggrieved that new players can essentially buy their way to success via an officially sanctioned activity, compromising the integrity of the game's economy.

Jagex CEO Mark Gerhard had previously branded microtransactions "a stealth tax", leading to many describing Squeal of Fortune as a "betrayal".

David Facer, a gamer with a disability, posted on the [Develop website](#) said the changes to the game "bely description".

"Runescape has always been based on 'reward through effort applied' - ie - work hard to develop your character to get rewards," David wrote. "The Squeal of Fortune and Runespan require no effort and no skill - yet the rewards can be astronomical. How is this not gambling?"

For many years now some players of massively multiplayer games have sought to gain advantage by employing the services of "gold farmers", typically very low-paid workers from developing nations.

The success of Blizzard's World of Warcraft in particular led to a significant underground gold farming industry, but most game operators expressly ban the practice of selling in-game currency for real-world cash.

Diablo III is the first mainstream game to officially enable and encourage players to trade virtual goods for real-world currency.

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