Value obfuscation in video games

Or; is this magical dagger actually worth five bucks?

What is the value of something I created on my computer? I did not pay a single penny for the tools (Atom, for example) and the product, a basic program let’s say, can be infinitely reproduced, copied, and modified. I might go through the trouble of hiding the source code to hinder such tampering, but what exactly does that change? It seems that no money was paid on neither tools, nor publishing, so all there is left, presumably, is the price I put on my own labor. I do not know the first thing about economics, but these are compelling questions, I believe. In my paper I want to examine questions regarding the value of software artifacts and whether (or how) there is a great deal of obfuscation going on. Specifically, I want to tackle these difficult questions with regards to video games.

Questions (or controversy) regarding the inclusion of microtransactions in video games is not exactly new, though recent releases have garnered significant amounts of negative attention. Games such as Middle-earth: Shadow of War, Star Wars: Battlefront 2 and Metal Gear Survive have all received criticism for not just the inclusion, but also the particular implementation of microtransactions. The price of video games can vary widely, but typically games released by major publishers are priced at $60. However, despite this relatively high price point, many such games feature options for making additional in-game purchases of various elements: extra pieces of equipment, whether purely ‘cosmetic’ in nature or uniquely powerful; skin-packs; modifications of core game elements, and so on. In extreme cases, an additional fee is even required to unlock content already present in the game-as-purchased.

It is easy, and perhaps justifiable, to harshly criticize such business practices. I believe such criticism is interesting, though perhaps beyond the scope of this paper. What seems to lie at the heart of the issue – or perhaps not the heart, but some major artery that if ruptured, will kill the whole damn thing – is a degree of value obfuscation. It is not at all easy to pinpoint the value of specific components. A game for sixty bucks? Well, okay. But five dollars for a new set of armor? That seems unreasonable, at least if scaling the price point of the particular component to the game as a whole (eg, surely twelve pieces of armor is not worth the same price as the entire game?).

**Possibilities**

Okay, so with that expository prelude out of the way, what do I actually intend to write about and what are my options in terms of relevant literature? Richard Stallman and questions regarding the nature of software openness, come to mind. General considerations about author- and ownership also seem poignant. Additionally, anything related to obfuscation of any kind. Here are some directions, broadly speaking, that I could take the page in:

* The value of software in general: Does it make a difference if you are selling a software piecemeal or in totality? Pitfalls: unanswerable questions regarding the specific nature or identity of particular software(s). Is the magical dagger somehow its own software entity or is it indistinguishable from the product within which it is contained? Interestingly, the suffix ‘ware’ seems to imply some kind of goods or commodity.
* The procedural nature of (some) software: some games may sell a carefully crafted component, like an extra level or an expansion pack. Other games, like Shadow of War, sell procedurally generated pieces of content. Meaning, the exact nature of the purchase is unknown. At that point, it seems the buyer is paying, not for a particular, predetermined piece of content, but the generative algorithms underlying said content. Is this a more extreme case of value obfuscation?
* Randomness in microtransactions: as a continuation of the above, what are the rules regarding procedurally generated (and commodified) content? Should the consumer be allowed a greater degree of transparency with regards to such purchases – even if the overall environment, the game, is equally opaque?
* Free labor and creative control: lots of people spend a significant amount of time creating content for various games. They earn nothing from this, although their contributions may play a vital role for the success and survival of the game itself. Whazzup with dat?

**Problems**

So yeah, lots of things to talk or write about, but also no shortage of dangerous pitfalls. I need to narrow things down obviously and pick a particular angle. I also need to identity more specifically relevant literature – whatever ‘specific’ ends up specifying. Should I emphasize *how* the value of software is obfuscated? Or rather focus on the consequences and ramifications of the fact that it *is* being obfuscated. What might relevant sources be for such an investigation? Unhappy customers expressing themselves on the internet? Developers trying to publicly justify their decisions? The decisions are being justified, after all, suggesting that there is *something* to justify in the first place.

These are my thoughts concerning my paper at this point in time. I know I am only two pages in, but if you want to get technical, I actually typed out more than 4800 characters, so academically speaking, I am legally safe. Shit, as I typed out that final sentence, Word made a line-break into the third page. Still, the point stands.