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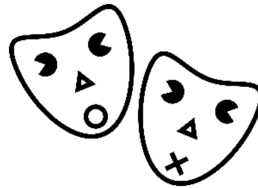

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Editorial

Rachel Gorden

We are once again proud to present another issue of the *Play/Write Student Journal*, this time including six papers on the subject 'Capitalism at Play'. Four of the papers published in this issue stem from students of the Game Studies and Engineering master's program at the University of Klagenfurt. Additionally, we are thrilled to present the work of two authors not affiliated with the program, as we also welcome external contributions to our journal. Since the publication of our last issue, we were happy to welcome our fellow student Ylva Schütz into our editorial team. The cover for this issue has once again been created by Nikolay Markozov.

This issue's topic – capitalism and video games – has been chosen to critically reflect both on games themselves and on the context(s) of their production and consumption. As cultural products, video games are inevitably shaped by the underlying ideologies of the cultures surrounding them. The six papers in this issue present a plethora of perspectives on this, for example by analysing the influence of profit-orientation on game design and industry practices, the difficulties emerging from the integration of game economies with real-world economies, or how games can transport capitalist ideology by letting players 'play capitalism'. Through this issue, we therefore wish to give a platform to perspectives that scrutinise the games industry and its inherent cultural hegemonies on a scholarly level. As always, this issue also serves the purpose of promoting and showcasing the work of students, and of demonstrating that their works are valuable.

Starting with "Boosting Culture in MMORPGs: Enabling Player-Driven Microtransactions", Mano Marichal offers an in-depth analysis of the practice of boosting in MMORPGs. His paper gives a detailed account of how the design of MMORPGs and its surrounding culture encourage the practice, its rising accessibility and possible problems connected to this.

In "Why Isn't it Gambling? The Value of Digital Goods and its Effects on Gambling Legislation and Perception", Konstantin Gitschthaler and Luca Braun re-evaluate the use of loot boxes and surprise mechanics, and argue that they should be understood as gambling to ensure better consumer protection.

Turning to how capitalism shapes game design choices, Ylva Schütz critically examines the 'gay button' as a practice of avoiding queer representation in video games by looking at its

use across different games in their paper "Representations of Non-Heterosexuality and the Gay Button in Video Games".

In a similar vein, Elias René Mohamed Chraïbi scrutinises the depiction of US-American prepper culture and how this depiction has been depoliticised in *Far Cry 5* while showing that the game nevertheless carries political meanings in "The Depoliticization of *Far Cry 5*".

Miriam Scuderi offers a critical reading of *The Sims 4* in "The Doll House Dream: Simulation, Ideology and the Good Life in *The Sims 4*". Her analysis shows how the game reproduces the ultimately capitalist ideologies of the American Dream through its formal elements.

Lastly, with a critical look into the history of video game development, Manuel Günther traces the production of computer role-playing games and their changing position between counterculture and commercialised mass media products in his paper "The Switch from Resistance to Drudgery in the Creation of Computer Role-playing Games". The paper is a re-worked version of a chapter of his master's thesis in media studies.

Again, we would like to thank everyone who contributed to this issue. Without further ado: Enjoy reading!

Boosting Culture in MMORPGs: Enabling Player-Driven Microtransactions

Mano Marichal

keywords: MMORPG, player behaviour, game design, multiplayer

Introduction

In June 2017, a law was proposed in South Korea targeting an upcoming phenomenon that was harming the competitive integrity of video games. The law, which was passed in late 2018, meant that people found guilty of "boosting", which is helping other players progress in a game in exchange for money, would have to pay fines of up to 18000 US dollars or even serve two years in jail (Carpenter 2018). The law mainly targeted competitive games such as *League of Legends* (Riot Games 2009) and *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment 2016), in which boosting was becoming increasingly common.

Competitive games strive to be balanced and offer fair gameplay, and boosting can disrupt that; having one or more boosters on the opposing team or previously boosted players playing above their rank on your team means almost a guaranteed loss. The companies behind many games in which a market for boosting exists therefore blanket ban all practices related to boosting. However, in MMORPGs (Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) boosting has ingrained itself over the years. Trading commodities between players, including player services, is part of these games. For some players, obtaining a coveted reward gained by completing a hard challenge, through earning enough capital to pay other players to complete it for them, is just another way to experience the game.

Over the years, selling boosting services in MMORPGs has grown to a multi-million dollar industry, which players and even the companies owning these games profit from. The goal of this essay is to shed light on the different factors driving this market, as this is an area that has yet to be explored in videogame research. This paper will look at the scale of the market behind boosting and who profits from this, and analyze some of the motivations players might have to buy a boost. Finally, it will look at how the way specifically MMORPGs are structured incentivizes players to buy boosts.

The Industry behind Boosting

In many MMORPGs, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), *Lost Ark* (Tripod Studio and Smilegate 2022), and *Guild Wars 2* (Arenanet 2012), players are allowed to exchange money for virtual currencies instead of having to engage with the game to obtain them. Hence, in these games, boosting for money is legal, even in South Korea, as players convert their money to virtual currency and pay with that. This contributed to the formation of a market for boosting. In a video investigating this, YouTuber Michael Bell estimates that the boosting market generates over 10 million dollars of revenue a year (Bellular Warcraft 2021, 9:21). This is a lot of money, and not only the players providing boosts that profit from it. When buying the game's main virtual currency with money is allowed, boosting can become a profitable microtransaction. Boosts tend to be expensive, so players might spend money to buy virtual currency to afford them, which game companies profit from. Instead of banning the practice, companies ban the purchase of currency through third-party websites, forcing players to do so through their stores. For example, NCSOFT, publisher of *Guild Wars 2*, states in their Code of Conduct that "selling anything for real money, be it digital items, services, or physical products is not allowed" (NCSOFT 2021). On the other hand, the Guild Wars 2 policy states that "our official stance is that the selling or buying of runs is completely acceptable" (Arenanet, n.d.). Players can therefore buy boosts as long as they do it through the store.

When the so-called Gallywix *World of Warcraft* boosting community was banned in 2020, they lost an estimated 5.6 billion gold (Taylor 2020b), which translates to roughly 1 million US dollars. Part of this gold was bought by customers with money through the in-game store. While hard numbers on how much game companies earn through incentivizing boosting are hard to obtain, this example shows that the monetary scale of boosting is quite big.

Boosting to Obtain Gaming Capital

In *Cheating: Gaining Advantage in Videogames*, Consalvo introduces a term called gaming capital, which describes a quantifiable value that a player has in their respective community, such as knowledge, player power, rank, etc. She describes how players may feel inclined to cheat to obtain or maintain this gaming capital (Consalvo 2007, 184), which is exactly what boosting can provide. As Josh Bury explains in his video *What is Boosting? The Twisted Motivations Behind Cheating the Elo Ladder*, matchmaking systems are prone to create insecurities; players may think they belong to a higher rank and feel frustrated about being unable to get there (theScore Esports 2021, 0:49), which can result in them buying a boost to get to their desired rank. The

social aspect contributes as well, as in most of these games, players can show off their ranking to friends and other players.

A parallel can be drawn to MMORPGs, in many of which the game is structured around players gaining special rewards for completing challenges, such as a powerful item, a special mount or unique cosmetics. These communicate a player's gaming capital to their peers; if a character is carrying a certain weapon that can only be obtained through beating a tough challenge, other players may recognize it and compliment them or ask for their help.

As noted by Micheal Bell, "once the desire for reward outweighs the desire to do the content, there will be a market for those who want the reward without the work" (Bellular Warcraft 2021, 3:32), and boosting allows players to do this without risking a ban. These goal-oriented players form the main target audience of boosting services, and with many modern MMORPGs catering to this type of player, the target audience forms a sizable part of the player base. The same goes for most competitive games in which many players play to improve and reach a certain rank as their goal. However, in MMORPGs there are more reasons to buy boosts besides cheating to obtain or maintain your gaming capital.

Player Motivations for Boosting in MMORPGs

Most MMORPGs have activities that require players to play in a group, which introduces a level of organizational overhead into playing the game. Some challenges require groups to meet specific requirements; needing a certain number of players, specific types of players, in-game items and more. For example, a popular group composition in *World of Warcraft* for groups attempting a raid is two "tanks" (players that taunt enemies), four "healers" (players who can heal their allies), and fourteen "damage dealers" (players that deal heavy damage to enemies). This amounts to 20 players who have to gather and work together. There is also no guarantee that the group will complete the challenge, be it due to someone having to leave halfway through or a lack of player skill. There is an increasingly large group of players who either do not want to deal with this organizational overhead or simply do not have the time to do so, while still wanting the rewards. Boosting allows them to skip this.

Another possible motivation for purchasing boosts is the fear of missing out. The most recently released content in an MMORPG is most popular among players and for many also where the most fun is to be had, as this is where players are still exploring, while other content has already been solved and become "stale". The problem is how this interacts with the vertical progression systems found in many MMORPGs. These feature a gameplay loop revolving around growing player characters stronger through various challenges, which, in turn, allows

players to take up extra challenges. Usually, the most recent content finds itself at the top of these structures, and climbing them can take a long time. Players may want to buy a boost to be able to join in on the fun before the newly released content becomes old.

Thirdly, some MMORPGs may feature content that players are incentivized or required to participate in to grow their character, and if this content is not engaging, players may want to pay someone else to do it for them. An example for this is "bussing culture" in *Lost Ark*, which refers to paying a strong player, called a "driver" to boost weaker characters through challenges (akin to a bus driver bringing passengers safely to their destination). The game incentivizes players to beat a set of challenges weekly. Instead of replaying the same challenges every week, players pay part of the gold received from the challenge to the driver, so they can do something else in the meantime. Bussing culture is so popular that some players have been vocal about not finding enough players to play a regular game with, as a large portion engages in bussing instead (NekoEye 2023).

One important difference to the previously mentioned competitive games is that these motivations are not ill-intended; *Lost Ark*'s bussing culture is the player's way to deal with the game incentivizing them to repeat the same fights repeatedly. This is known and understood by the community, which is why the "boosting equals cheating" stigma around the practice (many people compare boosting in MMORPGs to boosting in other competitive games where it is regarded as cheating), is fading away.

Profits of Boosting for Players

For the people who provide boosting, it is by far the most profitable activity in the game. They can not only receive in-game rewards from challenges but also large sums of in-game currency as well as money. Three years ago, the *World of Warcraft* organization Complexity-Limit went into debt for around 257 million gold to buy items that helped them in the race to clear a newly released raid first worldwide. They managed to repay this debt in just seven weeks through offering boosting services, which translates to a little less than €600 per day (Taylor 2020a). Of course, this is at the top level and done by many players, but even €5 per hour is more than the minimum wage in some countries, which can be earned while playing a game. This makes boosting very desirable for reward-oriented players, as it is often the most efficient activity in the game, which keeps the supply going.

Accessibility of Boosting

Before the introduction of exchanging money for virtual currency, obtaining enough capital to afford boosts was hard and time-consuming, and not reasonable for the average player. The only other way to afford them was illegally buying currency from third-party sources with money, which is bannable. This kept the demand low. However, allowing exchanging money for virtual currency made boosts way more accessible, as you can now just buy the necessary currency. This kickstarted growth for the boosting industry.

Today, there are many boosting organizations that offer perks such as refunds, review systems for boosters, low wait times, and safe payment options. Most importantly, there is no risk of being banned as long as the payment is done through virtual currency. If a player wants to buy a boost, they contact one of the advertisers either in-game, through a website, or a social media platform, who then puts out a call for a boosting group. This also goes for the players providing boosts, as they can now enroll in these large organizations and do not have to spend their time advertising for themselves, which also eliminates the risk of getting scammed by clients. This shift in how boosting works and how it is perceived eventually contributes to more people buying boosts, and a positive feedback loop is created.

Conclusion

In contrast to boosting for money being a bannable offense in other games such as *League of Legends*, with the introduction of trading virtual currency for money, it became a legal practice in MMORPGs. Together with the motivations players have to buy boosts caused by the structure of MMORPGs, boosting eventually grew into the multi-million dollar industry we see today. What used to be an inaccessible peer-to-peer service with a high risk of getting scammed is becoming an increasingly professional and transactional service that is safe, easy to access, and quick. This paper has provided some insight on the current scale of the boosting market, but more importantly that it is growing, and how the structure of MMORPGs is enabling this. The impact of the boosting industry on the genre, as well as how companies can manage it fall outside of the scope of this paper. However, with the current scale of boosting, there is a need to be critical of this growing practice.

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Why Isn't it Gambling? The Value of Digital Goods and its Effects on Gambling Legislation and Perception

Luca Braun and Konstantin Gitschthaler

keywords: microtransactions, loot boxes, surprise mechanics, digital goods, gambling, consumer protection

Introduction

> If you go to (…) a store that sells a lot of toys and you do a search for surprise toys. What you'll find is that this is something people enjoy; they enjoy surprises. (…) We do think the way that we have implemented these mechanics (…) is actually quite ethical and quite fun. (Hopkins 2019, 15:44:06 - 15:44:45)

Loot boxes are a common form of monetisation in games that has risen in popularity over the last few years. The player opens these virtual containers by paying real money and is rewarded with a random digital item of varying rarity.

Game companies defend its use as an ethical way to generate income, walking the fine line between surprise mechanics, as loot boxes have been called by EA Games Vice President Kerry Hopkins in 2019, and gambling.

While loot boxes have a lot in common with gambling, the primary difference used to justify it as a surprise mechanic safe for children is the defining criterion for gambling. This criterion – the use of real money and potential loss of it - is circumvented in the game industry by rewarding digital goods.

This paper will investigate the value of digital goods as well as the psychological effects of gambling that surprise mechanics use. Based on this, we will conclusively argue why loot boxes (and surprise mechanics) should be recognised as gambling and that the legal definition of gambling should be adjusted for better consumer protection.

The Value of Digital Goods

To say digital goods in video games have no value would be inaccurate because many games even have their own in-game economy, which inherently grants an item in-context value based for example on the hours spent obtaining it or its rarity. In addition, digital distribution services like Steam allow in-game items to be traded between games and, in the case of Steam, even

sold to other players for *Steam Funds* on the community market up to a price of 1800$ (Valve 2023). While these Steam funds cannot be cashed out (via direct or official means), they can be spent on any game or item in the store or community market.

This has led to the emergence of third-party sites all over the internet that allow the sale of and gambling with these digital goods. Through these third-party sites, the value of some select items of the game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (Valve & Hidden Path Entertainment 2012) have reached prices in the thousands on these third-party sites (CS Virtual Trade Ltd. 2022). The most expensive *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* item to date was sold for 100,000$. Since then, the buyer has received multiple offers for the item, one exceeding 1.4 million dollars (Minjares 2022).

Such third-party sites allow real money trades for many, if not all, MMORPGs on the market (iGVault Limited 2022). This is unavoidable because trading between players, a crucial feature of this genre, allows the transfer of items within the game based on money transferred outside of the game.

In games that do not allow items to be traded on the community market or not at all, it could be argued that there is no real monetary value behind the items, but this does not mean they are worthless to the player. After all, they are supposed to pay money for the opportunity to win them. This is what we call the no-value-fallacy: the assertion that digital goods are subjectively worthless if they are not exchangeable for money.

However, what is subjective worth if it is not monetary? According to Cleghorn and Griffiths, different social and psychological aspects influence the purchase behaviour of gamers regarding microtransactions, including item exclusivity, self-expression, and psychological reward (2015, 102-112).

Item exclusivity has been used in real-world fashion for some time now. Brands such as Supreme artificially limit their stock to induce buyers' fear of missing out (Ng 2020). The same effect can be achieved with digital goods (e.g. microtransactions) by artificially limiting their availability. Timed exclusivity is already present in most multiplayer games of recent years in the form of seasonal offers or battle passes. Still, stock-based exclusivity has already seen some use as well and is even the fundamental driving force behind some NFT games like *CryptoKitties* (Dapper Labs 2017).

Another aspect of value is the psychological or emotional reward felt when purchasing digital goods. This psychological value can manifest as a feeling of pride, accomplishment or superiority because you own a specific exclusive item. A subject of the survey conducted by Cleghorn and Griffiths said the following: "If I feel good and I know that most other players

do not have it, it makes me feel better about myself" (2015, 108). Through this, it becomes evident that exclusivity can even yield a psychological reward for some players. It is also stated that self-expression is an important factor for players. They see their avatar as an "extension of the self" (Cleghorn and Griffiths 2015, 110). This is further supported by the findings of Li, Phang, and Ling, who state, "(...) individuals are motivated to purchase digital items in VCs (virtual communities) as a way to reduce the gaps between their 'actual self' and their 'ideal self' (mediated by self-esteem), making themselves 'more complete' symbolically" (2019, 1620). While the reason why an item is seen as valuable might differ if you ask different players about it, frequently, just one of the many aspects needs to apply to a player to justify a purchase.

This value is so real that given the opportunity of selling items for real money, select in-game items have reached a high monetary value as already mentioned in detail. Taking away this opportunity does not remove the subjective value from these items. It just removes the monetary value. For this reason, it is false to assert that digital goods have no value.

Gambling vs Surprise Mechanics

As we have seen so far, value is frequently assigned to digital goods by players. Based on this, we will now re-evaluate the argumentation frequently used in the game industry that loot boxes are not gambling as they are only tied to digital goods without value.

Gambling has varying (legal) definitions. Still, at the core, they are the same, defining gambling as "The act of wagering or betting money or something of value on an event with an uncertain outcome with the intent to win more money or things of value than was wagered." (Ramachandran 2012, 18, see also TheFreeDictionary 2023; YGAM 2020).

Different emphasis is put on various parts of this definition. Organisations such as the ESRB (Entertainment Software Ratings Board) have interpreted that loot boxes are not considered gambling, citing that you will always receive something from the loot box, similar to collectable card games (Schreier 2017), while the organisation ANJ (Autorité Nationale des Jeux) has deemed loot boxes not to be gambling, as digital goods such as skins have no real-world value (Chalk 2018).

Looking at the definition of gambling, losing your money without getting anything in return is not required to fit the definition. Nevertheless, it is often listed as the main differentiator between gambling and surprise mechanics (YGAM 2020). Even if we consider this, it is still possible to lose some money on a subjective and objective level with loot boxes due to the goods perceived value and their relative value compared to other goods in the same loot box.

Looking at the comparison to collectable card games, using *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 1993) as an example, we can see that while you get something with every purchase, you will lose money on average, as the chances of gaining high-value cards are low. A booster pack, a sealed physical pack of random cards, sells for 5$ on newer sets (MTGGoldfish 2023), while the value of the cards gained from such a booster pack averages around 3$ (MTGStocks 2022). As a real-world example, a slot machine that costs 1€ to play but will always guarantee you back 1 cent, would not qualify as gambling if we applied the same reasoning as ESRB applies to loot boxes.

It is often pointed out that the use of real money or something of real value, both as the stake and payout, is also necessary for gambling to be called such (Chalk 2019). This is especially prevalent in the gaming industry as the no-value-fallacy of digital goods is often used to justify loot boxes and other surprise mechanics not to be gambling.

This creates an interesting contradiction, where loot boxes are supposedly not gambling because you always get something that apparently has value; otherwise, it would not matter if you got something. On the other hand, that something must not have any real monetary value, as it would be gambling if it had.

Using collectable card games as a comparison is no accident, though, as they have been legally unrestricted and not classified as gambling, although they would fit the definition as well. The problems with loot boxes are linked to the development of problem gambling, that is, when gambling starts to show negative consequences for the gambler, most commonly social and economic consequences (National Research Council 1999, 18-21). Problem gambling in vulnerable groups has been identified in collectable card games as well, although less severe, particularly due to its physical nature, making it a slower, less exciting process to "spin the wheel" when opening a booster. Compared to this, digital loot boxes are designed to be fast and exciting, aiming for gambling characteristics (Zendle et al. 2021, n.p.; Griffiths & Parke 2007, n.p.).

One key observation regarding the psychological similarities to gambling in loot boxes was made in a study by Zendle et al., which concluded that the key factor in enabling problem gambling was not found in the type of price won but in the stakes (2020, 190). Loot boxes that cost money scored much higher on measures of problem gambling than loot boxes that could be opened without spending money, and the higher the monetary stakes, the stronger this effect became.

Conclusion

The reasons that give a digital item subjective value differ from person to person. This does not change the fact that they are treasured by players. They are used to express themselves. They are collected, traded, sold in- and out of game, thus there is a demand, hence also value. Therefore, loot boxes not only share elements with gambling but by applying the definition of gambling, they are. Legally, this argument is often deflected by using comparisons to similar, yet legally unrestricted, products, such as collectable card games, as well as invoking the no-value-fallacy. Both cannot be applied at once, and both can also be extended to avoid considering, as gambling, activities that clearly are.

By not acknowledging that loot boxes and other surprise mechanics are gambling, we effectively create something even worse than gambling, as it has the same effect on vulnerable groups. However, there is no legal protection for those groups. Putting monetisation above safety and providing a precedent for avoiding the label of gambling on products that are, in fact, gambling is a danger that needs to be acknowledged.

Overall, this leads to the question of whether the legal definition used for gambling is still adequate for today's highly digitalised environments, where it is easier than ever to prey on the vulnerable.

We would argue no, as only a few countries have addressed the issue by recognising the change in the gambling landscape (Isa 2022).

> (…) if a product looks like gambling and feels like gambling, it should be regulated as gambling. (House of Lords 2020)

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Representations of Non-Heterosexuality and the Gay Button in Video Games

Ylva Schütz

keywords: queer representation, Gay Button, capitalism in design, non-heteronormativity

Introduction

More and more recent video games feature queer[1] characters, which elicits various reactions from their players, ranging from joy about the representation of parts of themselves to resistance (Heritage 2021) and complaints about "forced diversity" (Boredpanda 2019). All these audiences are valuable customers to gaming companies, which is why a lot of these companies use various strategies to still cater to as many audiences as possible at the same time. One of these strategies can be found in 'Tokenism' (Chang 2017, 228): including a character of a marginalized community, for example black, lesbian, or disabled, to be able to claim being inclusive, without normalizing said attribute nor focusing on this character in the main plot. Another strategy is the 'Gay Button', a concept coined by Anna Anthropy (Østby 2016, 15). To focus on this concept, I need to explore how bi- and homosexuality have been portrayed in video games first, and what the reasons may be for their scarce visibility. Afterwards, I will explain the concept of the Gay Button and examine how it has been utilized in five different video games from 2014 to 2018. Based on this examination, I will argue why the Gay Button is a discriminatory practice that is ultimately shaped by capitalism.

The Lack of Queer Representation in Video Games

Generally, the media industry shows a lack of queer representation or outright homophobia (Woods 2021, 2), even in more recent years, when more and more studios and directors acknowledge and show the existence of queer characters. The next section will consider some of these games. As mentioned, inclusion of queer content in games can lead to resistance from players, particularly "from those sectors of games culture dominated by white, straight, cisgender men and boys" (Ruberg 2018, n.p.), who are still often catered to as the audience

[1] In this text, 'queer' is used as a descriptor for people of the LGBTQIA+ community and the concept of 'heteronormativity' as a perspective on society that sees heterosexuality as the norm for everyone and the current systems of oppression as intrinsic to and right for human society. This perspective relies on: Warner, Michael. 2004. *Fear of a queer planet: queer politics and social theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

for video games and therefore the 'gamer default' (Chang 2018, 228). This perceived gamer default is related to what Mia Consalvo has described as "toxic gamer culture," in which "misogynistic… patriarchal privilege attempt[s] to (re)assert its position" over marginalized people (Consalvo 2012, n.p.).

Among other minorities, these 'outsiders' are queer people, against whom this toxic gamer culture has lashed out. One reason for this is the gamer identity itself being fundamentally tied to straightness. As Megan Condis argues in her work on fan responses to LGBTQ+ content in BioWare games: "True gamers and fans are assumed to be straight… or, if they are queer, it is assumed that they will remain in the closet" while participating in gamer community spaces (Condis 2015, 199). This explains at least partly the lack of queer representation.

However, there are exceptions. Game series such as *Dragon Age* (BioWare 2009), *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007) or *The Sims* (Maxis 2014) allowed and sometimes encouraged deeper, non-heterosexual relationships, if initiated by players. There are games that offer to build or show more superficial homosexual relationships or characters, such as seen in the action RPG *Fable III* (Lionhead Studios 2010), where players can choose to play a prince or a princess and marry men or women. Another example is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011), in which players can choose between playing a man or a woman and, again, marry men and women. In *Borderlands 2*, the character Axton was supposed to only flirt with women when reviving them but because of an oversight, he ended up flirting with women as well as men (verilybitchie 2021, 43:55–44:30). Interestingly, the possibility to marry men and women in *Fable* (Lionhead Studios 2010) was a coding error as well. Furthermore, the choice in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) does not really impact anything; no other character talks to the main character about their romantic interests – which is what would happen in a utopic world – but seeing as the population in *Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) is heterosexual, this amounts to only superficial non-heterosexual representation.[2]

Nowadays, there are more queer characters in more games, even in AAA titles like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog 2020), *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014) as well as in popular indie titles like *Stardew Valley* (ConcernedApe. 2016) or *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020).

[2] If looking into it extensively, players can find three characters that are gay or may be bisexual in mostly implicit environmental design clues. See Camelworks 2017.

The Gay Button in Video Games

The representation these titles offer is different from game to game, and this difference can be explained with the 'Gay Button'.

As mentioned in the beginning, the Gay Button is a term coined by trans game designer Anna Anthropy. It describes how queer content is handled in mainstream media: as optional. Most of the games mentioned allow players to experience queer content, but at the same time, most of these games do not 'force' them. Queerness or queer characters are avoidable and sometimes only achievable if players know what they are looking for and explicitly follow the goal of queering the game (Østby 2016, 15). This makes queer representation a tricky topic because some audiences are aware of it while others are not, within the same game.

In the action RPG *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018), players can choose between the siblings Alexios or Kassandra. Any bi- or homosexual interactions between the player character and NPCs can easily be avoided by not selecting flirtatious options. Even if players choose to build a gay or lesbian relationship, in the DLC *Legacy of the First Blade* (Ubisoft 2018–2019), the protagonist is going to have a baby through a heterosexual marriage, so the player's choices and romantic inclinations do not matter.

Stardew Valley (ConcernedApe 2016) is beloved by a lot of queer players for offering a relaxed farming simulation where players can choose between playing a girl or a boy and romancing 12 single characters, men and women – meaning that all of them are bisexual, as players can choose between a man or woman at the start of the game. Leah, a female NPC, has an ex-girlfriend. Therefore, if someone plays as a guy and romances her, they can see bisexuality within the game – or they should. However, Leah has an ex-girlfriend if the player chose a female character and Leah has an ex-boyfriend if the player chose a male character (verilybitchie 2021, 0:20–0:30). Again, queer representation is partially hidden. There exists a playthrough of the game that is perfectly heteronormative, which means queerness can be evaded if the Gay Button is ignored. Furthermore, if players do enter a same-sex relationship, a lot of the characters will comment on them not expecting to fall in love with a person of the same gender. They were not inherently gay or bisexual – players made them. By pressing buttons.

The Sims (Maxis 2000) is a game series which initially also included bisexuality by mistake (Parkin 2014) but was one of the very few games that did not only allow gay or lesbian kisses or romances but also marriages.

The latest version, *The Sims 4* (Maxis 2014), started off with a stereotypical character creation in which men could dress masculinely, have a masculine body type and could father children,

while women could dress femininely, have a feminine body type and could mother children. Although, with a free update in 2016 (Conditt 2016), the character creation was reworked into picking which elements players wanted for their character.

Additionally, NPC sims already inhabiting the game-world may be married in same-sex relationships, as for example the gay couple (Brent and Brant) in the expansion pack *The Sims 4: Cats & Dogs* (Maxis 2017). In more and more trailers for the expansion packs, queer characters appear. Some of the smaller DLCs Maxis creates are produced in cooperation with queer and activist people, for example with Drag Queen Pabblo Vittar (Nightingale 2022). And yet, there is a possible playthrough of this game that is perfectly heteronormative. It is getting harder and harder to evade the queerness in *The Sims 4* though, nearly harder than experiencing it.

The Last of Us II (Naughty Dog 2020) is a bit different, as it is not a simulation or an RPG where players get a choice about whom to date. The main character Ellie was lesbian in the DLC to the first part, she still is during the game, and she will be lesbian in its epilogue. There is no button uncovering this, and players cannot play the game without seeing her being herself and developing her queer relationship. This may explain the backlash the game initially received for what non-approving players called 'pushing a SJW [Social Justice Warrior] agenda' (Trumbore 2021). Without its DLC, *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) can be seen as heteronormative with its heterosexual, male protagonist – and therefore, it likely attracted a lot of players fitting the 'gamer default'. Not only playing as a woman, but a queer woman, not by choice within the game but partly designed around this experience was new for such a big and anticipated title.

One of the latest examples offering non-heteronormative representation is *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020). To develop relationships to NPCs, the protagonist Zagreus needs to gift them Ambrosia, found while fighting his way to the surface of Hell again and again. One could argue the Gay Button still is in play here – players may stop playing this rogue-like before reaching more romantic stages of their relationships or they could just choose to stop gifting Ambrosia. Alternatively, they can still turn down the gay romance option (Thanatos) and go with the seemingly heteronormative one (Megaera). But even if players chose to do so, there is a significant side quest revolving around bringing two other men together (Achilles and Patroclus) that are depressed about spending eternity away from each other (James Somerton, 41:03–41:12). Moreover, the game is set in an ancient Greek setting in which homophobia does not exist – there are no negative comments made about two men being lovers when discussing their relationship with other NPCs. Additionally, the 'true ending' of this game

requires this side quest to be finished and the player has a way to be bisexual and polysexual, so I am inclined to consider *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) as not trying to make the queer representation optional to appeal to more players.

Conclusion

As shown, the Gay Button is used in many video games, in ways often overlooked by unsuspecting players. While it is nice to have the option to be queer in a game, it is also important that queer people are seen within video games, in a way nobody can opt out. As Adrienne Shaw explains: "If the player needs to push a 'gay button' (…) to see same-sex relationship in games, then anyone who doesn't know or is unaware that the button exists can continue to consume the heteronormative-dominated texts" (Shaw 2014, 34). Because "if the purpose of representation is to normalize fringe identities, then confrontation is necessary" (James Somerton 2021, 33:45–33:50). Only offering queer experiences for queer people and heteronormative experiences for heteronormative-thinking people is problematic. Not seeing something in media leads to the assumption that these things do not exist in real life or at least have nothing to do with the people consuming the media.

It is telling how the focus of the developers and publishers in many cases is not on values, but profit. Tying back to the question why queer representation has been lacking for a long time: Even if queer games had been released by AAA studios, they would likely not have sold well. This shows how capitalism can shape and perpetuate dominant views and paradigms and therefore marginalization and discrimination. If video games truly intend to offer proper queer representation, they need to stop abusing the Gay Button, even if that may potentially lead to the loss of certain audiences.

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The Depoliticisation of *Far Cry 5*

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keywords: depoliticisation, prepper culture, far-right movement

Introduction

In 2018, the year after Donald Trump's inauguration, *Far Cry 5* (Ubisoft Montreal 2018), the first opus of the series taking place in the United States, was released.

In *Far Cry 5*, the player character is a junior deputy sent to New Hope's County to protect its population and get rid of Eden's Gate, an evangelical militarised sect led by Joseph Seed. The people depicted in the game have strong similarities to real-world political groups, especially the prepper community which has ideological similarities to the Tea Party and is the player's main ally in the game's world.

Even though some game critics considered the game too political by watching the game's advertisements (Plante 2017), others found that by wanting to not get political, the whole message of the game has been reduced to nothing (Kuchera 2018). Indeed, none of the characters of the game display any strong political opinions. Questions of race, gender, or class are never addressed throughout the game. The disturbing thing in those articles is that they never mention the real-world counterparts of the characters of *Far Cry 5* and do not analyse how they are depoliticised. Moreover, during 30 hours of gameplay[1], completing the main story line, some sidequests, listening to dialogues with over twelve story-driving NPCs, and watching nearly three hours of cutscenes, the game does not fall into being empty.

In the first part of the essay, I will analyse how the game depoliticises its characters, focusing on prepper culture. In the second part, I will focus on an alternative understanding of the game's narration.

The Preppers of the Game and their Real-world Counterparts

Ubisoft Montréal already has a standardised process for the depoliticization of religion that came from its experience with the *Assassin's Creed* series, in which religious topics were marketed to largely "secular demographics" (Wildt and Aupers 2023). *Far Cry 5* is the studio's first game since the first instalment of *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal 2007) which portrays

[1] Average completion time for "main story + extras" according to *How Long to Beat*, with 1.3k players polled.

Christians as the main enemies. In *Far Cry 5,* the main enemies are part of an apocalyptic sect, whose ideas are mainly based on the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. In real life, the Waco Siege of the Branch Davidians is a clear inspiration for Eden's Gate. Branch Davidians is also an apocalyptic sect, which was led - at the time of the siege - by David Koresh who shares some similarities with one of *Far Cry 5*'s main antagonists, John Seed, both in their look and leading roles in the sect. Without elaborating too long on the resemblances and differences between the two of them, a depoliticisation of Branch Davidians and David Koresh was not necessary since their ideas were not directly linked to far-right ideologies but only triggered a reaction from right-wing extremism (Kingdon 2019).

However, the process of depoliticisation in *Far Cry 5* is interestingly applied to prepper culture, a movement focusing on the preparation for catastrophes by stockpiling food and weapons, and living in a bunker.

If at first glance prepping does not seem to have any predetermined political side, some elements allow one to see their link to far-right groups and their ideological overlap. In *Obamageddon: Fear, the Far Right, and the Rise of 'Doomsday'* (Mills 2021), Michael Mills brings us to the Prepper Fest of Arizona, the population of which is dominated by far-right people, moved by an anti-Obama ideology. The people invited to this event are partially representative of prepper culture. These include Steven Anderson, a white supremacist preacher, Richard Mack, a former member of a far-right militia, and the Tea Party. Mills argues that the ideological overlap between preppers and the Tea Party is partly due to their shared reliance on fear rhetoric: "... the particularly acute crisis-laden framing of the transition between the George W. Bush and Obama administrations is already recognized as undergirding the broad rise of the Tea Party and its popular support. What we see here, however, is not only that such fear has contributed to the rise of this vociferous, fear-based political movement. Rather, the growth of prepping as a revival of American survivalist interest here clearly emerges as an overspill of these same developments." (Mills 2021, 363) This fear is the politically legitimate counterpart of the apocalyptic fear of the preppers.

Targeted advertising on preppers is done on right-wing media and personalities like Fox News and Ben Shapiro (Mills 2021, 362) but prepping companies are also using far-right rhetoric for their advertising. Indeed if we look at the Vivos website (VIVOS 2022), we can see in their presentation videos all the risks that could end the world as we know it. These risks include some of the common US far-right rhetorics such as the holy war in the middle east, immigration invasion, or militarization of some non-NATO members.

Although the discourse of the preppers is not focused on racism, but instead on fear of Obama and left-leaning economic decisions, it would be wrong to oversimplify prepper culture; "With the stereotype of the survivalist white supremacist, religious fanatic, and extreme antigovernment ideologue offering a poor fit with many in the expo crowds and ethnographic sample, it thus became evident that existing reflections have failed to capture and engage with the nuances of many preppers' anti-Obama fear" (Mills 2021, 351).

The main allies players have in the game are the preppers of New Hope's County. The first one players meet waking up in his bunker is called Dutch. He rescued the player and maintains radio contact with the player throughout the game. When the players explore his bunker they discover his inclination for gun-right defence, cars, and USA flags (see Table 1). While this depiction is not unpolitical, it represents only the politically acceptable part of far-right rhetoric. Guns, cars, and USA flags are symbols of success and power in the game. Throughout the mission of constructing the resistance against Eden's Gate, players will meet other preppers like Dutch, all of whom have the same values and motivations.

Table 1: Screenshots from Dutch's Bunker

Dutch's map room with a US flag on the ceiling. Screenshot by me

Dutch's armoury. Screenshot by me

"Rancher" Car poster. Screenshot by me

As diverse as preppers are, they are not only the stereotypical gun and car aficionados depicted in the game but are also close to even more dangerous far-right ideologies that are found at the Prepper Fest, in the media that advertise for them or in the prepping advertisements themselves.

With all this information, the critics mentioned in the introduction fell into what they thought *Far Cry 5* did, not bringing any message by wanting to please everyone. The journalist did not even mention the preppers in his article, only focusing on the representation of Christian extremism. However, the main depoliticisation process was more applied to the preppers than to the Branch Davidians-inspired Eden's Gate.

An Alternative Analysis to *Far Cry 5*'s Narrative

But even keeping the game as it is, an alternative analysis of the game's story shows that the depoliticisation of the characters can be seen as a tool for another political message. As seen in the first part, preppers and far-right politicians have a common ground for their ideologies, and in parallel, in-games preppers and Eden's gate show some similitude and overlapping ideas. In this second part, I will argue that New Hope's preppers and Eden's Gate's members are built upon the same ideology, and have the same goal. As a starting point for this, I will use the notions of utopia and dystopia.

Utopia "carries with it the trappings of an elaborate thought experiment, a kind of parlor game for intellectuals who set themselves the task of designing a future society, a perfect society" and "Whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now"(Gordin, Tilley, and Prakash 2010, 2). In other words, a utopia designer builds the perfect future by suppressing the problems of the

present, and a dystopia designer builds the worst future by pushing the problems of the present to their limits.

As the preppers are the player's main allies and Eden's Gate's members the main enemies of *Far Cry 5*, I will consider them the utopian and dystopian parts of the game's world, respectively. Sören Schoppmeier explains how New Hope's County is an idealised, nostalgic space that uses the American conservative imagination (Schoppmeier 2022). He uses the concept of retrotopia, a distortion of utopia which is turned toward the past in the search of a "modicum of stability" reconciling "security with freedom", used in nationalist discourses (Bauman 2017, 8-9). With this concept, Bauman "theorizes the recent surge in populist, reactionary, and nationalist political movements in many Western democracies" (Schoppmeier 2022, 33). As Schoppmeier argues, New Hope overlaps with retrotopia in multiple aspects, like its reinterpretation of the frontier myth (conquering the wildness), or the "regeneration of local businesses" without any appearance of companies like Google or Amazon (ibid., 46). The utopian side of New Hope's County is the embodiment of right-wing political discourse without any realistic contradiction to it.

Even if the antagonists are depoliticised, Eden's Gate is not completely disconnected from Christian mythology and culture. References to Christianity, the Bible, and especially the Book of Revelation are explicit during the game (see Table 3). The apocalypse is the main motivation both for Eden's Gate and the preppers.

John Seed and his siblings (who are sub-antagonists of the game) can be read as representing the four horsemen of the apocalypse, by their colour and by their role in the destruction of New Hope (see Table 3). Also, the Preppers struggle to defend themselves against the Seeds, and at the end of the game, are all wiped out, whereas John Seed succeeds in protecting himself (and the player character) from the atomic bomb. Moreover, by ending the game with an atomic explosion, the designers made John Seed's prediction of the apocalypse right.

The parallel between the cult and the preppers becomes most obvious when comparing the first to the last scene inside Dutch's bunker (see Table 3). Their promises and their goal are the same: to reconstruct the world once the player character gets out of the bunker.

Table 2: Comparison of the first and last shots in Dutch's Bunker

Dutch's first appearance. Screenshot by me	*Final scene*. Screenshot by me

By constructing the character player's allies and enemies from the same ideological ground, the designers allow us to question stereotypical American moral values as they are embodied in the apocalyptical Seeds. Nevertheless, because the in-game preppers are depoliticised, the criticised values are harmless for far-right parties as racism or fear of immigration are erased from their discourse.

Conclusion

As studied for the *Assassin's Creed* series, it is common for Ubisoft Montreal to depoliticise their games to reach a larger audience (Wildt and Aupers 2023) which is already constituted by "young, Western, educated, and male" and " and overwhelmingly — representing 79% of Ubisoft's sales — from North-America and Europe" (Wildt and Aupers 2023, 66). Considering the past work with the *Assassin's Creed* games, the comparison between in-game preppers, their real-world counterpart, and their main audience, it does not sound extravagant to assume that *Far Cry 5* had to lower its political stands to the strict minimum (concerning religion and gun rights) for marketing reasons as their target audience could be antagonised otherwise. On one hand, this is an example of designers depoliticising their game in favour of the far right because of the capitalist production system. The value of the game is based only on how profitable it is, whether it has a political influence on its player or not, it has to be sold to the largest target audience.

On the other hand, it is also an example of capitalism producing its own inoffensive criticism. Even if at first glance, the game looks like a criticism of conservative America, it only poorly depicts prepper culture without taking any risk of offending the Tea Party or any other real-world influential conservative power. In this sense, the necessity of the designers to

negotiate their ideological stand with the market results in a cultural production that is no more than a reflection of the dominant ideology.

This phenomenon is increasingly common with, for example, series such as *Squid Game* (Hwang Dong-hyeok 2021) or *The Boys* (Eric Kripke 2019) produced by companies that look like they are criticising the system in which they are the winners.

As players, we must learn to distinguish between a game that supports the dominant ideology and a game that is against the ideology, and that it is impossible to find the latter category in the AAA industry.

Table 3: Table comparing passages of the Book of Revelation with their reference in Far Cry 5.

Book of Revelation	*Far Cry 5*
"(…) there before me was a white horse! Its rider held a bow, and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest." (Rev. 6:2, New International Version)	"There before me was a white horse" is tattooed on Joseph Seed's right arm.
"Then another horse came out, a fiery red one. Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and to make people kill each other. To him was given a large sword." (Rev. 6:4, New International Version)	Jacob Seed is a war veteran whose motto is "Cull the weak". His power is to condition people to kill when they hear a specific song. During the loading screens, Jacob Seed appears armed with a knife with a red handle and his main weapon is a red long rifle.
'I looked, and there before me was a black horse! (...) Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "Two pounds of wheat for a day's wages, and six pounds of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!"' (Rev. 6:5-6, New International Version)	John Seed is mainly depicted with a black suit and dark tone. He is responsible for the agricultural area of New Hope.
"I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth." (Rev. 6:8, New International Version)	Faith Seed matches the pale colour with green tones, she drugs and manipulates the sect members and the animals with "the bliss", a magical plant.
"(…) the stars in the sky fell to earth" (Rev. 6:13, New International Version)	An atomic bomb wipes out New Hope's County during the main ending of the game[2]
"There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet" (Rev. 17:13, New International Version)	In several cutscenes, Joseph Seed is lightened with purple, and the seven deadly sins are scarified on his body.

[2] I refer to it as the main ending because it is canonical for the sequel *Far Cry New Dawn* (Ubisoft Montréal 2019).

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The Doll House Dream: Simulation, Ideology and the Good Life in *The Sims 4*

Miriam Scuderi

keywords: capitalism, American Dream, simulation

Introduction

In Cruel Optimism, cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2011) describes the concept of the 'good life' as a fantasy "of enduring reciprocity in couples, families … institutions, markets and at work" (Berlant 2011, 2), a "fantasy that has become more fantasmatic, with less and less relation to how people can live" (Berlant 2011, 11). Berlant's book denotes a crack in the collective expectations of the fantasy of a good life within the liberal capitalist society in which upward mobility, job security and stable relationships are increasingly harder to access. The Sims 4 is a perfect encapsulation of the good life without the complications of lived reality. With hardly any defined goals or gameplay achievements, the game more closely resembles a digital version of a doll house. Instead, the main gameplay of The Sims 4 (Maxis 2014) revolves around the simulated freedom of the player to engage with the doll house and the paraphernalia of the good life: A good job, with career bonuses, a good house, a good partner, and children. In other words, it is the achievement of upward social mobility and financial success. It is in this formulation of the good life that the main gameplay elements are found. The intended design, from the inoffensive aesthetics of white picked fenced suburbia to the gamification of labour, presents a very particular simulation of life, one that invariably replicates the socio-economic narrative commonly referred as the American Dream and its ideological underpinnings.

Reproduced through the notion of simulacra and simulation as conceptualised by Jean Baudrillard (1994), the game establishes its formal elements (Fernandez-Vara 2015, 122) – such as the game dynamics, visual design, and control schemes concerning pathing – around concepts of the nuclear family, work and accumulation of wealth that are the hallmarks of middle-class and the good life. But the formulation of these concepts is so far removed from life and lived experience in a capitalist society that "it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever; it is its own pure simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994, 6). In specific, this simulacrum

is a repetition, and gamified simulation, of the American Dream myth which entails the accumulation of wealth and upward social mobility.

The Sims 4 encapsulates capitalist ideology and uncomplicates it for mass-market appeal through its procedural rhetoric which video games designer Ian Bogost explains as "the art of persuasion [executed through] processes … rule-based symbolic manipulations" (2007, IX). In this paper, I intend to complicate a child-friendly video game with broad audience appeal; a game that purposefully simplifies the complexity of life in easily digestible game mechanics. I posit that, owing to a variety of game design decisions, The Sims 4 is one of the purest conceptualisations of the American Dream. Therefore, I will examine the intended design, analysing the mechanics of labour, wealth, and house construction to delineate the rhetoric behind this type of life simulation.

The Formal Elements of the American Dream

The player begins the game by creating a Sim, a virtual doll, and moving them into a house with a set allowance of about 20000 simoleons. With this starting fund, the player can purchase a suburban house, and in later expansions rent an upscale apartment. As bills and amenities need to be paid, the player is encouraged to find a job through listings, accessed through the phone or the computer. The jobs are always available, always hiring and pay a fixed amount per hour. Bills are usually paid every three in-game days and a promotion can be easily obtained every two in-game days through a series of small tasks, like filing reports or practising a skill. It is possible to stagnate in a job position, but unless the player ignores the tasks, the Sim will inevitably get a promotion. Hard work, gamified as going to work in a good mood, 'working hard', completing tasks, results in the accumulation of wealth. Rarely does the game punish players for failing to complete the tasks. This reward system views labour as always compensated fairly, in stark contrast with the franchise predecessors, in which this view of labour was often mocked and losing a job was sometimes a whim of the boss or a missed workday away.

As entry level jobs can easily cover food and living expenses, the surplus money generated is usually reinvested into a bigger house or better furniture. The game incentivises spending on luxury goods by making everyday household objects better at higher prices: a cheap fridge is more likely to break, and it produces lower quality food; a cheap bed is uncomfortable, and it requires longer to fulfil the 'sleep' need of a Sim. This is part of the intended design which implicitly views luxury items as naturally better, more efficient and aesthetically pleasing. The more something costs the better it is. Houses, too, function

similarly. A small, crumped house simply cannot contain all the items required to fulfil the needs of a Sim and their A.I. pathing does not accommodate small environments. This design choice encourages players to expand their homes into bigger and better mansions. It is a natural progression to expand and upgrade the house, explicated through formal elements not immediately apparent to the player such as the type and form of construction materials used to create houses and the aesthetics of the furniture. The number of items accessible by players to build such houses are geared towards large, detached single family units: columns, large windows, chipboards painted as wood or stone, evoke images of perceived wealth. It is the aesthetic of middle-class Americana. The 'good life' becomes the steady accruement of wealth and possessions, a climb through the social ladder. There is no glass ceiling in The Sims 4. Poverty, then, seems almost a choice. Every aspect of the activities the Sims can engage with can be monetised. Every hobby, from painting to fishing, results in the generation of money and the longer the player builds those skills up, the more monetarily rewarding the activity will be. A Sim can live off their painting hobby, or musical compositions, as long as they spend enough time doing these activities or as long as they work hard enough for it.

As a gamified simulation of labour, this conception of work does away with concepts such as race, gender and sexuality and their intersection with institutional power structures. Rather, the game presents a world in which capitalism affords the player not only the possibility, but the guarantee of middle-class ascension. To do so, the game simplifies and uncomplicates life. Just like jobs, upward mobility and hobbies, love and relationships are also a matter of time and effort. If the player labours for their goals, they will inevitably succeed in their endeavours. This type of simulation is a form of hyperreal that has no relation to reality because it creates a simulacrum of idealised life. This uncomplicated view of life, this gamification and simulation of the good life is reminiscent of the narrative of the American Dream, a form of "dominant ideology [that entails] that anyone who is willing to work hard can achieve a middle-class life" (Starks 2003, 205).

Middle class status is not easily defined, yet as noted by Timothy Smeeding: "one thing it surely takes [to be middle-class] is wealth accumulation" (Smeeding 2010,1). If the American Dream is the ideology, or narrative, of accessing middle-class life through hard work, then The Sims 4 is less a simulation of life and more aptly a simulation of that Dream. When conceptualising the simulation of life and skimming its complex processes into a game, The Sims 4 imagines it as a version of life where the American Dream holds true to its promise, where anyone can truly make it. It is only a matter of hard work. No constraints are placed on the individual player, and as identity markers cease to make a difference, the result is

unfiltered neoliberal escapism. Embedded in the core gameplay of the game is the assumption that hard work results in success, wealth, and the achievement of middle-class life.

Ideologically, such a gameplay design points to a rhetorical pattern that views life as a simple oppositional binary of hard work on one hand, and lack of drive on the other, echoing the very toxic discourse of what constitutes as success and how to achieve it in our global capitalist order. Unwittingly, The Sims 4 renders the attainment of the American Dream as an entirely believable, and uncomplicated, reality of rewarded labour. When imagining the simulation of life, The Sims 4 conceptualises it within the paradigm of what Mark Fisher (2009) terms "capitalist realism", the "pervasive atmosphere [that conditions] not only the production of culture … [but acts] as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action" (Fisher 2009, 16). Through this lens, it stands to reason that a simulation of real life created under capitalism would not be a simulation of lived experience but is instead a reproduction of a capitalist narrative about life. It is a Baudrillardian simulacrum of life. Although additional content released for the game of later years have introduced fantastical elements such as magic, vampires and aliens, the core gameplay of The Sims 4 still revolves around the familial home and regimented hard work. Within the realms of the thinkable, the game imagines life as dominated by the ideology of the American Dream and enforced by a procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007, 3) geared towards the accumulation of the markers of middle-class life.

Conclusion

The mechanisms of the game, its intended design, and procedural rhetoric, imagine the world as a series of perfectly curated suburban environments, centred around the familial confines of the household. Hard work is always rewarded, incrementally, following the path of upward class mobility. In this sense, The Sims 4 is the simulation of Berlant's good life, the uncomplicated American Dream in its most totalising form, one that truly has removed all the barriers of identity from the equation. In a Baudrillardian sense, there is no purer form of simulation of life in capitalist America than The Sims 4. In fact, it might very well be "concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus [it is able to save] the reality principle" (Baudrillard 1994, 13), at least the reality principle of the American Dream. Ideologically, it is an American product reproducing a very old narrative through a doll house. And it remains incredibly popular, perhaps because it might just be the only type of upward mobility that most of its millennial and Gen-Z players can ever dream of obtaining.

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The Switch from Resistance to Drudgery in the Creation of Computer Role-playing Games

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keywords: Dungeons & Dragons, pen-and-paper role-playing, RPGs, CRPGs, MMORPGs, counterculture, economy, crunch

Introduction

One of the most economically successful game genres is that of computer role-playing games, in which defined characters heroically venture forth against the evils of the world. With this economic significance also comes the phenomenon of precarious working conditions in production, for which the entire industry is now notorious. However, since computer role-playing games are also one of the oldest computer game genres, their history reaches back to before any exploitation in the games industry took place. Therefore, it can be shown how the commercialization has led to an increased production and distribution of this kind of entertainment software, while reversing one of its main roles, namely that of the game designer. To this end, we will examine how the first examples of what are today shortly called CRPGs were created, threatened and defended. Afterwards, the text will show that tabletop role-playing games inspired their inception just as much as that of the first adventure games, another game genre that originated independently in a different place. Following a brief theory of why this particular incursion of such a peculiar hobby into early digital networks proved so productive, an examination of MMORPGs and current bestsellers is drawn to serve a comparison of CRPGs and their production conditions then and now. The conclusion utilizes a materialistic analysis of political economy to suggest a prospective solution for the present situation.

From Printed Ruleset to Program Code

Before there was a video game market, before there was any computer in anyone's home, tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs from here on) such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) were commercially distributed. These TTRPGs are based on the same logic of discrete decisions, computation, and incremental improvement that governs every computer game. They were particularly well-received in the remnants of the 1960s counterculture, an anti-establishment cultural movement developed in much of the Western world in the

preceding years. It grew in the United States with the civil rights movement there and peaked after the intensification of the Vietnam War. Throughout the 1960s, it took up several social tensions along generational lines: sexuality, women's rights, authority, anti-racism, drug use, and divergent ways of life. This counterculture differed from the anti-authoritarian movements of earlier eras not least in that a significant portion of its aesthetics and themes were quickly commodified and integrated into the cultural mainstream, even though members of the counterculture were in the minority within their respective national populations. Many of the early pioneers of personal computing were part of the counterculture on the West Coast of the United States. Numerous early computer and networking pioneers who tried LSD and roamed the campuses of UC Berkeley, Stanford, and MIT in the late 1960s and early 1970s came from this socially marginal milieu and shaped today's media culture, especially in Silicon Valley (Markoff 2005).

Mostly young men in US high school and college environments with connections to this counterculture have been conducting games with pen and paper since 1974. The remarkable step from continuously operating writing tools to discretely storing and processing data, from pen-and-paper to computer role-playing games, is therefore as easy to explain as it was short: Under the hands of ardent counterculture nerds, it took *Dungeons & Dragons* just one year from its initial publication on printed paper for its ruleset to become program code.

At the University of Illinois, where the mainframe network Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operation, or PLATO for short, was developed as one of the first digital learning systems ever, doctoral student Reginald “Rusty” Rutherford did coding work for physics professor Paul Handler, whose PLATO account he accessed even in his spare time (Dear 2017, 292). Because of the system's limited memory, each project was allocated set capacities. Handler's research on population and energy had been given the files pedit1, pedit2, pedit3, pedit4, and pedit5 for simulations of population dynamics. Rutherford knew that the last two were still free and started to visualize what he knew from his private *Dungeons & Dragons* game in the programming language TUTOR – in “these wonderful visuals (…) available on PLATO” (qtd. ibid.). pedit4 became the manual to his computer game, pedit5 the actual program – he did not change the names as it was customary in order not to draw attention to his illicit development (Barton 2008).

Digital Resistance against the Will to Destroy

After six weeks in the summer of 1975, his dungeon crawler was finished: a random character creation with name input, attribute and health points, monsters and treasures randomly

distributed in the game world, magic and weapons for combat, experience points for victorious encounters, and gradually increasing difficulty (Dear 2017, 293 f.). Furthermore, a game character could return to the eerie corridors with all of their achievements after surviving a game session. For TTRPG hobbyists, these were no absurd game mechanics, but in a computer game they were combined here for the first time. For the CRPG genre they are still standards. However, the ILLIAC mainframe on which PLATO ran had 1024 bits of memory and one single CPU for all computing operations on campus. This expensive processing power was zealously guarded against illegitimate graphics, so when it became the most popular program at the university, eager system administrators deleted *pedit5* as an inappropriate use of system resources (Brewer 2016). Just as public broadcasting of radio music had been considered an abuse of army equipment (Kittler 2002, 16 f.), computer role-playing games entered the world before any computer game marketing as an abuse of research equipment.

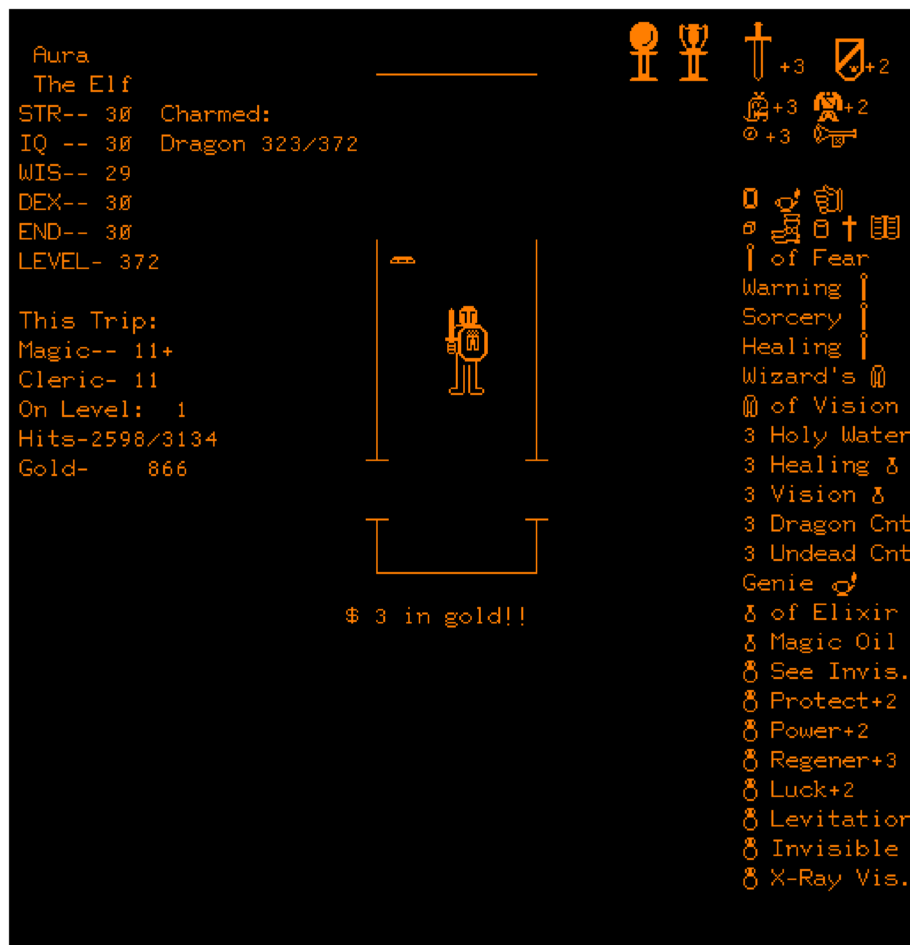

Figure 1. Screenshot of dnd, probably the first computer role-playing game that has endured to this day (image taken from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dnd8won.png).

In 1976, the university bureaucracy in Urbana-Champaign had to deploy its will to destroy against something that stubbornly claimed its place in the age of its digital reproduction. Before long, pedit5 was back. Students with access to the program code had apparently copied it and restored the fantasy adventure. The next deletion did not remain final either. As much as the random distribution of treasures and monsters in Rutherford's digital dungeon, it became unreliable whether and where the entire dungeon could be found on PLATO: "Then it would reappear, only to disappear again. The very existence of the game became a random, unreliable thing" (Dear 2017, 294). The students of a university well familiar with the anti-establishment protests of rebellious young people upgraded in this informatic cat-and-mouse game by programming successors of Rutherford's popular quest after his departure – partly developed from his source code. This led to *m199h*, *dnd*, *Oubliette*, *moria*, *avatar* and *Orthanc* as well as *Dungeon*, all before 1979 (Dear 2017, 298). The program *dnd* (see Figure 1) had the decisive selection advantage that its producers also held administrative rights for its files. Therefore, it is considered the first computer role-playing game whose code has been preserved to this day (Dear 2017, 295). In order for the heroic infiltration of the digital dungeon against its rulers to persist, the real infiltration of those who ruled over the university's digital resources was required.

A disclosure is owed to accuracy at this point: The account given here is based on a relatively sound, but inevitably inconsistent, reconstruction of the origin of computer role-playing games. Due to the frequent deletions and restorations, it is hardly possible to ensure whether every one of these games created on PLATO between 1975 and 1978 is at least known by name. Any documentation written at all was removed with the software, further records from the time are rare. Reliable creation times can hardly be assured from interviews conducted decades later, so even the sequence of projects is not clear beyond doubt. In particular, rumors suggest that *m199h* might have been programmed as early as 1974, before rather than after *pedit5*, and after 33 years, Rutherford recalled hearing about the unfinished work on *dnd* before he started his project. There is also speculation about other, purely text-based, computer games of a similar nature that may have been written previously on PLATO. In any case, what all of this has in common is that the beginning of each of these programming efforts after the release and under the influence of *Dungeons & Dragons* is beyond question. Complete clarity about the details will be just as impossible to establish as unnecessary for understanding the general events.

Rule-governed Worlds on Paper and in Computers

This unruly programming and gaming must be understood within the context that computer games were an underappreciated part of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s explained above. Most of them even emerged from the counterculture environment, before game development, as a result of dramatic failures, was integrated into a business model that gave rise to huge profit-driven companies (Dyer-Witheford 2009, 6). Yet not in competition but in cooperation lies the origin of still another development that started then and there: cooperative gaming. *pedit5*, *dnd*, and indeed most computer role-playing games produced in the 20th century – commercial or not – were games for one person at one computer. Even those, such as *pedit5*, that could store a multitude of game states for the enjoyment of multiple people always had one main character or group roaming the game world alone and controlled by a single person. This was overcome by *Dungeon* in 1975 and much more successfully by *Oubliette* in 1977, and by *moria* in 1978: Here, simultaneous players could see each other's characters and explore the game world together. Text inputs allowed agreements among one another as well as simple conversation. Mechanics created specifically for this purpose supported the formation of groups, and in fact battles were hardly winnable without cooperation in such groups (Dear 2017, 298). The multiplayer principle became very popular and found more and more implementations, among them *avatar* in the winter of 1979/1980, which allowed up to 60 players to play at once for the first time, making active moderation necessary for the occasionally overwhelming floods of text (Dear 2017, 301).

In California, also inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, Will Crowther and Don Woods developed *Colossal Cave Adventure* in 1975/1976 (Peterson 1983, 187 f.), which, not managing any statistics of the main character and insofar remaining a pure text adventure, spread over various universities in the USA via the still young ARPANET. It inspired not only several similar projects, but also a whole genre of computer games, which since then have simply been called adventure games. In 1979, the first ever commercially published home computer game clearly bore this ancestor in its title much in the way of a family name (Softwin Associates 1979). Similar to computer role-playing games, adventure games, with which they have a common predecessor in *Dungeons & Dragons* anyway, were programmed on university computers, whose use for this production of digital entertainment was simply misappropriation. This first conversion from TTRPG to software was quick, and it was virtually thrust upon many practiced hands, because processing numerical values on a character sheet with paper and pencil is already the processing of an array, a data field. Conceptually, TTRPGs have always been "permeated with the spirit of a computer program" (Turkle 1984, 78):

> In the early 1970s, fantasy gaming grew from cult to culture in the worlds around computer programmers. They found an affinity between the aesthetic of building a large complex program, with its treelike structure, its subprograms and sub-subprograms, and working one's way through a highly structured, constructed world of mazes and magic and secret, hidden rooms. They played the fantasy games, used their considerable talents to build ever more complex dungeons, and began to translate the idea into their own medium. Soon fantasy games with complex underground universes began to appear on large computer systems. (…)
> You can postulate anything, but once the rules of the system have been defined they must be adhered to scrupulously. Such are the rules for creating "rule-governed worlds." They are known to every computer programmer (…) (Turkle 1984, 78 ff.).

Because of this resemblance of essence, it would be wrong to write down a story of a hitherto unsung genius who invented one of the most important parts of computer game culture. A technology that comes to itself often does so at several points at the same time, as the genesis of the steam engine and also that of the computer show. Rather, something can be recognized here for which it is about time. University mainframe computers provide an affordance to program role-playing rules and adventures. This is why they were among the earliest computer game genres and may be why it was technophiles from the counterculture environment who kept on advancing both through the years.

Figure 2. Screenshot of a later port of Rogue for MS-DOS, showcasing a monster encounter in one section of the procedurally generated dungeon.

The Rise of an Industry

The further history of CRPGs is quickly summarized: In 1980, *Rogue* (A.I. Design 1980) was programmed on a VAX-11 mainframe at the University of California at Santa Cruz and published among its users. The mechanics of permanent death and procedurally generated "dungeons of doom" (see Figure 2) led to the subgenre of roguelikes, which influenced other types of computer role-playing games (Brewer 2016). One such subgenre, action computer role-playing games, was popularized beginning in the later 1980s by titles such as *Dungeon Master* (FTL Games 1987), *Ultima Underworld: The Stygian Abyss* (Blue Sky Productions 1992), and *Diablo* (Blizzard North 1997), and dominates the current role-playing game market. A mass commercial success in 1981, *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (California Pacific 1981) was the first in a series of *Ultima* games and introduced open-world gaming. Under the influence of PLATO games such as *Oubliette*, *Wizardry* (Sir-Tech Software 1981) was created, which was the beginning of a whole series, as were later *The Bard's Tale* (Interplay Productions 1985) and *Might and Magic* (New World Computing 1986). Continuations of these long series went on until 2014 and 2018, respectively. With an official license from Tactical Studies Rules, Wargame publisher Strategic Simulations produced *Neverwinter Nights* (Beyond Software, Inc. 1991), which defined from 1991 to 1997 what is now called the massively multiplayer online role-playing game, or MMORPG for short, after a suggestion by *Ultima* series creator Richard Garriott. It was played online by up to 115,000 people, with 2000 regularly playing simultaneously.

Figure 3. Screenshot of Neverwinter Nights with player characters in battle (image taken from http://www.bladekeep.com/nwn/screens/valkur.gif).

Since *Neverwinter Nights* (see Figure 3) did not take computing time from university machines, but required only freely available hardware and software, it never became the target of bureaucratic erasures. On the contrary – with the AOL server structure for this virtual world going online, something escalated that *Meridian 59* (Archetype Interactive 1996), *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems 1997), *Everquest* (Verant Interactive and 989 Studios 1999), *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) and all the others could only develop further, for which on the other hand the multiplayer computer role-playing games of the 1970s and the *multi-user dungeons* of the 1980s as well as all tabletop role-playing games had only been predecessors: 2000 people simultaneously playing one and the same game with each other had not only never been counted before, but had been unthinkable in 1975. That this only happened in 1991 and not before is due to human players not attracted by beautiful words alone, with which game masters describe their consensus fictions and text adventures do their virtual worlds, but wanting to see their game characters together with the fantasy they perambulate in wonderful visuals. However, all graphical CRPGs until then had been single-player games, and all online computer role-playing games or MUDs purely text-based (Games Press 2008).

From the rebellious student groups who resisted the university bureaucracy as valiantly as fantasy heroes resist the minions of sinister dungeons, an industry emerged that has since become one of the strongest in economic history. In 1997, when AOL put an end to all Neverwinter characters by shutting down the *Neverwinter Nights* servers (Wallis 2006), the hit title *Diablo* was released, followed three years later by its sequel *Diablo II* (Blizzard North 2000), which alone sold four million copies by 2001 (Bucek 2001). *World of Warcraft* from the same company issued its hundred millionth subscription in January 2014, and in October 2010 it reached a record twelve million running subscriptions (Peckham 2013). More recent single-player role-playing games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) and *The Witcher 3* (CD Projekt Red 2015) are among the best-selling software products on the market. The "anarchistic abuse" (Kittler 1999, 97) of university research equipment has become the industrial production of digital games for which resistance is merely entertaining content.

Virtual Worlds as a Matter of Capitalism

It has long been commonplace for larger development companies in this industry to force their workers to crunch in unpaid overtime to get the games done on time with their absolutely unrealistic deadlines and budgets. Even before low-wage clickworkers grind through virtual worlds on a daily basis for the benefit of the commercial trade in virtual items, workers crunch

to produce these virtual worlds. A recent study shows that the working conditions in the computer game production hardly improve, which under pandemic measures lead all the more to suffering psyches and destroyed relationships (Farokhmanesh 2022). Even though discourse on the subject has increased since the turn of the century and critical reporting on this industrial practice has become more frequent, it is nothing new. Computer role-playing games in particular provide ample examples of this. The last year of development of *Ultima VI* (Origin Systems 1990) – the first Ultima part designed as a team effort from the beginning – consisted of massive overtime, which was already planned in Austin at the end of the 1980s (Maher 2017). In the midst of *Ultima VII*'s (Origin Systems 1992) development, the 10 am to midnight workday was proclaimed as a relief – and soon canned again by overnight stays in the office to meet impossible deadlines (Maher 2019). Twenty years after its release, designer Brian Martin and writer Raymond Benson remembered how it was made by "people that worked the 12 hour days for months — programmers, artists, designers and QA — who didn't get the big money and the glory" (Kully 2012) after they had "stayed at the office all night, had bar-b-cues at midnight, and slept in a sleeping bag until noon." (Kully 2013) For *Ultima VIII* (Origin Systems 1994), an excruciating ten-month crunch was imposed on the staff, extreme even for this development studio. Producer Richard Garrriot may not be the most reliably neutral source on the topic, but even his 2017 memoir "Explore Create" (quoted in Maher 2021a) recalls:

> Many of our programmers had worked twelve hours a day, seven days a week for ten months. We would bring dinner in for them because we were afraid if they left, they might not come back. The last month or so we gave them every other Sunday off so, as one of them pointed out, they could see their family or do some laundry. The creative joy we'd once shared in developing a game had been replaced by the prosaic demands of running a business. It was hard to believe how much had changed; only a few years earlier our people would happily work all night and love every minute of it, and now we had become a sweatshop.

During the last months of the production of *Shannara* (Legend Entertainment 1995) the developers reportedly "coded like hell until the thirteenth of November. (...) Irreparable damage [was done] to the team. We have not worked together since." (qtd. in Maher 2021b) Similarly, *Diablo* required months of personal sacrifice that went beyond its planned release date (Handrahan 2020). As for the development of *Diablo II*, its project manager remembers that here, too, the announced deadline was not met. It was overwritten with an entire year of overtime:

> It cost everybody dearly. But it was what it was. We crunched. (…) Everybody was working on the weekends. (…) We would order meals, we would give people sleeping bags and toothbrushes, and some days people would sleep in the office... It was a terrible grind at the end of this project. We were working, and summer became fall, and it was pretty obvious that we were not going to make it. (qtd. ibid.)

As CRPGs have become a matter of capitalism, they too are subject to capitalism's recurring economic crises of trends and recessions. The periodic crunch, in which developers increasingly give up their lifetimes and ruin their bodies for diminishing hourly wages, even though it does not make the product better, represents a corporate internalization of these economic crises. To the same degree, there is a growing irony in that these workers, of all people, are the ones who create the most beautiful fantasy worlds – much more visually wonderful than in *pedit5* or *Neverwinter Nights* – and make stories of liberation struggles come alive. Not that the narratives of CRPGs stay unaffected by the historical inversion of defiant programming against the rulers to forced subordination under a siphoning regime: The politics of gameplay in *pedit5*, *moria*, *avatar*, and all the others before any video game market consisted of a confrontational liberation of the game world from monstrous threats, ending – as Rutherford's prologue text to *pedit5* put it – in fame and fortune. The *Diablo* games, on the other hand, narrate from their very beginning the corruption of all heroism and the unstoppable prevalence of evil. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* amounts to replacing one dragon's rule with another dragon's rule, as best possible outcome of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, a new ruler is installed over the serf population of Skellige or all of Nilfgaard. Hopeful tales of successfully overthrowing a system of oppression remain rare.

Computer role-playing games have come a long way since individual heroes won their fame with this repurposing of university technology against the academic establishment in 1975. Yet they remain recognizable successors to those early products of nocturnal impertinence. Their commercialization, beginning in the early 1980s, was a switch in production. Since the same is no longer unauthorized media use, no longer hacking, thousands of new titles have been released – an average of approximately ten per month[1]. This is precisely what brought about the entrepreneurial competitive pressure that forced a significant improvement in quality, but under which development is no longer a heroic upward struggle, but rather a mass drudgery at the expense of the health and social relationships of hired

[1] Taking the mobygames archive at face value, which lists 7569 RPG titles as of the time of this comment. Divided by the 520 months since the first commercial computer game release, this averages to about 14,6 games of this category per month (see Moby Games. 2023. https://www.mobygames.com/game/genre:role-playing-rpg/sort:date/)

command receivers. The joy of play is made possible by the suffering of labor. Neither the making nor the playing of computer role-playing games, however, is a system abuse; both are precisely the desired subordination (for a conception of how on the contrary, digitality might be twisted around in favor of solidary communal action, see Miyazaki 2023). This wheel can never be turned back: Companies that consistently enforce the eight-hour day and forgo any weekend work compete in the marketplace against industry giants that develop more cheaply and bring new features to market earlier. They are therefore under systemic pressure to radicalize exploitation. Workers who leave such companies or even the whole industry merely leave this radicalization to the profiteers. A return to the passionate small-scale projects that once angered the administration of the University of Illinois could hardly sustain ten new products per month, let alone at the standard now established. If a way out can be taken, it can only point forward. Heroines each pursue their individual happiness in adventure, henchmen resemble each other in obedience. Because they have a world to win, developers of all countries can take an example from the Vodeo Workers United and the Game Workers Alliance in the USA for the benefit of their software and even more for their own good: In the unruly struggle, not isolated as their predecessors once were in universities, but united as the masses they are today, lies the liberation from being abused and having their social lives overwritten by the crunch.

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