

Work, Play, and “The Working Day”: On Marx and (Digital) Games

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I have no personal affinity for gaming. It’s just part of my nature to dislike things at which I do not excel. I don’t like to struggle! Especially not in unreal worlds! However, I’m also a fervent subscriber of Marx and as he proclaims in the opening of the Communist Manifesto, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”. If we accept this, it would seem that merely being part of society envelopes one in some sort of inherited struggle. Games are predicated on struggle: aiming a ball through a net, manipulating pieces on a board within a set of constraints, rescuing a princess from a nefarious turtle, or even just traversing a constructed space. What makes a game is the action of overcoming, achieving, or acquiring. One of my primary inspirations during the course of this project, an independent game designer by the moniker “Molleindustria”, has a delightful definition-generator for the word “game”, one of which being “a dynamic medium that involves a structured conflict toward a trivial goal”(Pendercini, 2017). Per Jamie Woodcock, the application “pokes fun at the tensions, highlighting the difficulty in where to draw the line”(Woodcock, 2019). Games are even a struggle to define. What does this have to with class struggle?

Woodcock said it well: “Instead of setting up an imaginary barrier around play, we need to understand *how both play and games are rooted within the economic and social relations of society*”(ibid, emphasis mine). Games occupy major cultural real-estate; this much is self-evident. In his “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular’”, Stuart Hall writes,

Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture - already fully formed - might be simply “expressed”. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it. (Hall, 1981)

Hall's piece provokes questions regarding the relation between corporate-produced culture and the notion of popular culture as 'belonging to the masses', which become especially relevant when considering games (particularly digital games) as commodities and examining the game development industry within the value chains and networks of capitalism. Games are an especially interesting commodity form in that they are metabolized through the act of play, which itself is often simultaneously a form of consumption and an act of production.

In this paper, I hope to explore a handful of the various (sometimes simultaneous) functions of games, which I contest exist at the nexus of work and play. To follow Marx's argument, if labor-time is commodity and the nature of capitalist production is to stretch each commodity to the fullest and then beyond (Capital Ch.10), then we can understand how alluring the extractability of our leisure (that time which is not spent laboring) is to the capitalist. A game becomes a site of production where some value is extracted from the commodified player. Cultures of overwork and casualisation deny and degrade our natural impulses to rest. "Hustle culture", perhaps just the extension of Weber's Protestant work ethic thesis, "conflate(s) leisure with idleness and idleness with immorality"(Woodcock, 2019). In this way, we're invited to view gameplay as waste, as subversion to the "productivity" imperative. However, all media and cultural forms have their own features and biases. As Paolo Pedercini writes "the act of playing (games), especially a computer-assisted, cybernetically-biased variety, can cultivate the capitalist mindset and value system"(Pendercini, 2017) even implicitly, by their very construction. In this way, games also can constitute a space of reproduction of ideology via play.

Games as production:

I observe a kind of constant alchemic transformation between play and work. In *Reality Is Broken*, Game designer and futurist Jane McGonigal suggests that successful games mimic the feelings of accomplishment we get when we do fulfilling work, going so far as to tout the introduction of extrinsic motivators (reward mechanisms which account for part of the "addictive" nature of gaming) into real-world tasks as a way to influence behavior and augment human productivity (McGonigal, 2011). This is

the forward transformation: turning work into play. “Gamification” is now a corporate buzzword. In “Gamification Is Bullshit”(2011), Ian Bogost coins the alternate term: exploitationware, framing this use of game mechanics as a gimmick to 1.) induce workers to do something off of which corporations make money and be rewarded with “badges” (material or otherwise) or 2.) to induce some kind of consumption pattern (think reward cards). Gamification is just capital’s deployment of the “most superficial”(ibid) features of games; to “play” is to serve a role to somebody else’s material gain.

Similarly, Dallas Smythe pioneered the concept of “audience commodity”(Smythe, 1977), arguing that under capitalism all non-sleeping time is work time. He defines “Work time” as being that which is devoted to the production of commodities (typical work), producing and reproducing labour power (replenishing one’s ability to work). His argument follows the Marxist understanding of labor time as commodity and extends it such that the “buyers” of our non-asleep time away from formal work are consumer product corporations, who buy our attention as commodity via advertising. Where we used to “leisure”, we actually were providing our consciousness as an input in marketing functions. We work at work and we also work at the metaphysical firm for the reproduction of our own labour power via resting/regenerating. Smythe’s piece was prescient in that the commodification of human attention has only intensified with the rise of social media, digital gaming, and social games. Where before we may have passively consumed product placements, now we’re entreated to in-game ads, while having our every click surveilled. Companies are now employing incentive systems, including that of the “social game” wherein we release personal information for free in order to “play”, reveal our social networks, and part with not only our time but also some petty cash for in-game microtransactions. Bogost satirizes this with his game *Cow Clicker*; a Wired profile describes this game (and indeed the genre) as “nothing more than a collection of cheap ruses, blatantly designed to get players to keep coming back, exploit their friends, and part with their money” (Tanz, 2011). Where “work as play” became gamification, “play as work” becomes monetization.

Games as waste/subversion:

In *Marx at the Arcade*, Jamie Woodcock writes “Atari was able to channel the “refusal of work” that came out of the student movements of 1968 ... Atari promised “play as work” as an alternative to the restrictive conditions of industrial or office-based Fordism”(Woodcock, 2019). And so a creative tradition bourne of hacking, misuse of equipment, and desire to escape from ‘real’ work (ibid) is subsumed. In many ways, gaming/play appears to be pure frivolous energy expenditure and a refutation of the kind of productivity espoused by neoliberalism. French sociologist Roger Caillois wrote of play that it is “an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money”(Caillois, 2001). Woodcock mediates Caillois through a Marxist lens:

(gameplay begins) from a separation, not from reality, but “from everyday work, separate from the production tools owned not by the worker but by the employer, the capitalist.” The process of play can therefore be a “means for the worker to cease being a worker, for a limited time, and to become, in a surrealist sense, ‘something else’ than a slave in the bounds of the capitalist” (2019)

Subversive praxis is present in gaming subcultures today, but I’m not sure the class characteristics of these interests. I’m referring to forms of metagaming like speedrunning, “griefing”, and other ways of gameplay which run counter to the (increasingly corporate) designer’s intentions. There’s an argument here which I’m not capable of weaving yet and it goes something like this: as capitalism overtook and professionalized the production of games and merely “playing correctly” became overly compliant or commodifiable in a way that just wasn’t cutting it for people who (I conjecture) are using games as a space of recovery from capitalist work. Hence, we see the development of methods of play which undermine certain “inherent ideological constructions of “good” gameplay and the role of a “good” user”(Beale, et al, 2016). Some compulsion towards uncommodifiability(?) which to the capitalist is waste, until he develops the means to properly extract value from it, leads to the generation of new modes of play.

Games as re-production:

In “What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy”, James Paul Gee contests that games possess a unique ability to encourage players *to become* “producers (people who can actually engage in a social practice)” (Gee, 2003), effectively training players for action in the arena of reality. In this way, games become sites of social/ideological reproduction. David Golumbia carries this argument through: not only do games often resemble real-world employment tasks; they directly reproduce and indeed *train* players in their own relationships to capital (Golumbia, 2009).

One of Michael Clune’s lines I cannot shake off is “Games are a way for people to get what they want from computers”. Scholarship suggests perhaps games are also a way for the ideological state apparatus to get what it wants from us. Returning to the previous quotation from Pendercini, games have unique rhetoric by their very construction. Bogost calls this “procedural rhetoric” and he ties it to “the core affordances of computers: running processes and executing rule-based symbolic manipulation”(Bogost, 2007). I sense connection between this and Paolo Pendercini’s thesis that computer games are the aesthetic manifestation of rationalization. Rationalization is a sociological term coming from Weber which refers to “a process of replacement of traditions, customs and emotions as motivators of human conduct in favor of quantification and calculation”(Pendercini’s definition). He argues “The verbs characterizing players’ action, when not related to direct violence, belong to the arsenal of rationalization: solving, clearing, managing, upgrading, collecting, estimating and so on”(ibid). The very act of play within a game requires the acceptance of some set of assumptions (inextricable from values) or a way of acting/being in order to achieve the victory condition. Rationalization is the language of priming us for operation within capitalism.

My game:

So far, I’ve been attempting to apply bits of Marx to games; why not apply games to Marx? The act of building a game is itself a dissolution of the work/play boundaries. What I’ve built is a little html game using Bitsy. I chose Bitsy because it’s easiest for me to learn and work within and I’ve also enjoyed

the poetic simplicity of other 8-bit games I've played, like Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* and Molleindustria's *A Prison Strike*. Considering games, struggle, work, and leisure, I was reminded of the seemingly-irresolvable leftist discourse about the accessibility of theory, specifically works like Marx's *Capital*. Self-study of theoretical texts is something a significant subset of self-identified leftists undertake, but it presents difficulties from the prose to the density.

Amusingly, after I finished my game, I came across this bit from Pendercini: "In the past some writers started to see books as limiting and inherently hierarchical. So they proposed hypertexts as a way to empower the reader"(Pendercini, 2017). I hope my bitsy-mediated Marx chapter achieves some semblance of that. In my game, I use Marx's words directly so as not to "dumb down" the literature, remembering Lenin's opposition to the creation of simplified 'worker' newspapers which he thought to "perpetuate the absurd division into a worker movement and an [intelligentsia] movement (a division created in the first place by the myopia of certain [socialist intellectuals])"(Lih, 2008). I merely picked the pieces of text I found most central to the message of the tenth chapter. I chose the tenth chapter because it's got the best metaphors, in my opinion. The game's conclusion is arbitrary. It's merely like a chapter end. There is no "win" condition in my Bitsy, but we do have a world to win.

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