



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

VIDEO GAMES: BEYOND ENTERTAINMENT

by  
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AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

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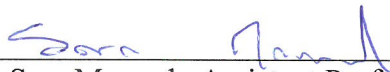
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# AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Wajih Ziad Hassan for Master of Arts  
Major: Sociology

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The purpose of this thesis is to study the reproduction of capitalist ideology in video games. The thesis grounds itself in the Marxist critique of ideology with a focus on Louis Althusser's theory of ideology as well as the psychoanalytic accounts of fantasy. To explain in detail the capitalist ideologies reproduced in video games the thesis employs participant observation in the analysis of Skyrim, Pharaoh, and BioShock. The thesis attempts to discern the potential utilization and influence of online gaming communities for imagining non-capitalist futures and it looks at the online gaming communities, the souls/borne community—that bring together players of Demon's Souls, Dark Souls 1,2, and 3, and Bloodborne. The thesis concludes with a study of the different 'community leaders' – content creators and live streamers on YouTube and on Twitch —of the souls/borne online gaming community using Weber's theories of charismatic leadership in order to pose the question: does a community founded on video games, with leaders of compelling charismatic qualities, and dedicated members have enough potential to reach a goal beyond just entertainment and maybe at some point to be used in visualizing a challenge to the dominant ideologies of capitalist relations that mediate social activity today?

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# CHAPTER I

## GETTING STARTED

### A. Introduction

Video gaming and gamers have usually been stigmatized and not really taken seriously: for many the domain of gaming mainly revolves around entertainment. Entertainment that has also been seen to be socially isolating, the video gamer is perceived as anti-social and none productive teen, one who is limited to the quarters of familial home<sup>1</sup>. But this is not always the case, although Shaw's findings are relatively recent there are other studies that show that since 2006 video gamers are connected to almost their entire social lives through their medium of play as the study about massive multiplayer online role-playing games explains<sup>2</sup>.

Today the gamer has become one of the most socially connected individual through the help of the Internet and the video games. It is no longer a waste of time to play video games since players can now be doing a multitude of things through video gaming besides playing the game solely for the sake of entertainment. To some, mainly content creators and live-streamers, "Play is no longer a counter to work. Play becomes work; work becomes play."<sup>3</sup> In this instance, play becomes different that what we're

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw, Adrienne. "Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity." *new media & society* 14, no. 1 (2012). P. 28-44.

<sup>2</sup> Ducheneaut, Nicolas, Nicholas Yee, Eric Nickell, and Robert J. Moore. "Alone together?: exploring the social dynamics of massively multiplayer online games." In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human Factors in computing systems*, pp. 407-416. ACM, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 16.

used to; it becomes serious work and necessary<sup>4</sup>. Work in today's society is inherently linked to the socioeconomic structure of capitalist ideology and so it's safe to assume that work involving video games and work inside and involving the virtual game worlds of these games also relies on capitalism. The world outside the video game, the 'real' world, and life in the 'real' world "appears as a vast accumulation of commodities and spectacles, of things wrapped in images and images sold as things."<sup>5</sup> The same goes to the virtual worlds of gaming when an in-game item is sold of either 'real' or virtual currency for it appears as an image on screen, a commodity in exchange, and as an item wanted, needed, used, and even exchanged again by the players.

One hundred and twenty three years ago the radio was invented and since then we've had television, Internet, and smartphones. Now we have video games consoles that could almost do everything across an Internet connection. The Play Station 4 for example not only connects players through all the different types of communication ranging from text to video chat but also is capable of letting people watch their favorite programs through streaming service applications, as well as making it easier for people to produce and upload content to YouTube from the Share Factory application. Players can even live-stream from the Play Station 4 and have their gaming experience broadcasted live and other players can watch through their own Play Station 4s. I could go on and on about the capabilities of current generation gaming consoles but this isn't the point. The point is that gaming will never die and video gaming with today's technology is a wonder to behold. "Games have storylines like the historical novel, which arc from beginning to end. Games have cinematic cut scenes, pure montages of

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<sup>4</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 6.

attraction. Games subsume the lines of television just as television subsumed cinema and cinema the novel. But they are something else as well.”<sup>6</sup>

Presently every video game or at least successful and widely available video games have some sort of fan following behind them. This following is mainly people who have played the games and eventually these people form what today is known as a gaming community. This community can exist either online, physically, virtually, or in these different states. A gaming community not only includes the fans and players of the games, but it also includes people who are now known as content creators and live-streamers and not to mention the obvious but also the game designers, developers, and publishers. These types of communities expose people to games they have played or haven't and allow them to experience the games through others either by watching content created on YouTube or through attending live streams over on Twitch. In these communities an active and charismatic content creator or live streamer could become largely popular, successful, and influential that the community followers would actually take into consideration what this person says about either the games they are playing or if they wanted to voice their opinion on some current social issue.

With video games today being a significant part of society it is important to take into consideration what these games spread and teach in society. Capitalism mediates much of our social worlds today and this includes video games. It is important to note that within the capitalist system money is essential and is also present in different forms in all the video games studied by this thesis. In the Marxist sense money serves as a measure of value, a means of circulation, which ultimately mediates exchange, and finally money becomes an independent embodiment of value. The thesis treats money

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<sup>6</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 67.

in different modes of exchange as will be later explained in the literature, but is then concerned more with the it's symbolic form in the game analysis since in these games money is completely virtual but it's symbolic form that helps reproduce capitalist ideology is present in all cases studied.

There are millions if not a billion players across the globe many of which are part of online gaming communities through which video games are increasingly easier to be exposed to. The wide spread availability of video games makes it a medium that could influence many in the world from children to adults and even sometimes the older generation. The thesis will 1- explore how Ideology, capitalism, video games, and the online gaming community are linked together, 2- question the possibility and capabilities of the online gaming communities for change.

## **B. Methodology**

The research was conducted based primarily on participant observation that has been used in a variety of disciplines to study people, processes, and cultures in qualitative research.<sup>7</sup> The Participant observer studies the daily life of a group or organization. He watches the people he is studying to see how they act and behave in their environments as well as in different situation they might find themselves in. He could also interact with these people in order to understand the events he has observed.<sup>8</sup>

The participant observation included directly playing all the games related to the thesis, which includes Skyrim, Pharaoh, BioShock, Demon's Souls, Dark Souls 1,2, and

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<sup>7</sup> Kawulich, Barbara B. "Participant observation as a data collection method." In *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol. 6, no. 2. 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Becker, Howard S. "Problems of inference and proof in participant observation." *American sociological review* 23, no. 6 (1958): 652-660.

3, and Bloodborne. BioShock, Demon's Souls, and Dark Souls 1 were played on the PlayStation 3, Dark Souls 2, 3, and Bloodborne on the PlayStation 4, and Pharaoh on the PC. The games were chosen because of the different game genres they belonged to. In short Skyrim is a massive open world role playing game, Pharaoh is a city building strategy game, BioShock is a first person shooter with a few role playing elements, and the souls-borne games are action role playing games but are now currently defined by the community as souls games and are believed to have created an entire new genre in the gaming community as other games have tried to imitate them and are consequently dubbed 'souls-like'.

There are more reasons as to why these particular games were chosen. Skyrim was chosen because it provided an actual virtual fantasy for players to get lost in meanwhile, as the thesis would claim the game has implicit reproductions of capitalist ideology. Moreover Skyrim since its release in 2011 on the PlayStation 3 has since then been re-released on several other different platforms including the PlayStation 4 and the Nintendo Switch while being redone for enhanced graphics to add to this it has been also released for virtual reality gameplay (in which a player puts on a head set that immerses them into the game world on a level never seen before). Because of Skyrim's massive size and because of its genre as an open game world it was important to not only play Skyrim while taking into account points of capitalist reproduction but it was extremely helpful to conduct an experiment which managed to show the points at which the game itself redirects you to engaging in commodity exchange whenever the player attempts to actively avoid such engagements.

Pharaoh was not studied by many especially not in relation to the reproduction of capitalism. It is the oldest game analyzed by the thesis but still remains relevant

today amongst strategy gamers. Growing up with this video game it never occurred to me how much it teaches capitalist ideals but after looking into the subject of this thesis I found it to be important when it came to implementing and reproducing capitalist ideology even if the setting is that of ancient Egypt. Pharaoh does not only entertain but teaches as well all the while rewarding accumulation, profitable trade and exchange, and achievement and success through prosperity.

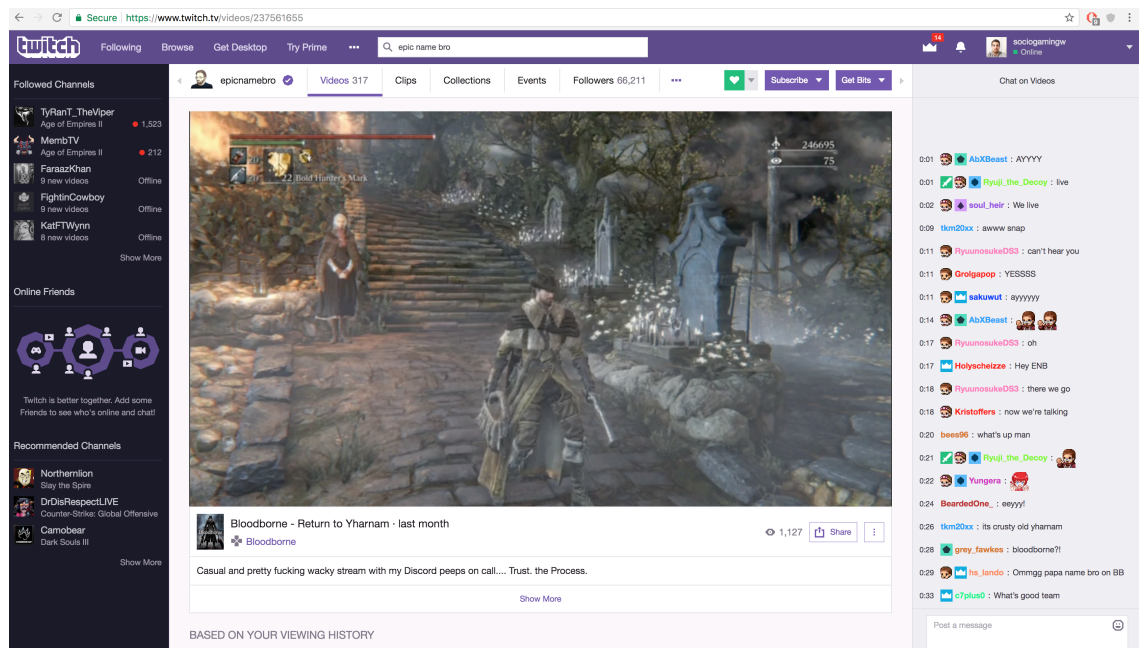
The souls/borne games such as Demon's Souls, Dark Souls 1-3, and Bloodborne had to be studied because they're the games that the Souls/Borne online gaming community is based on. These games in general have created a new dynamic to gaming and the involvement of the gaming community is one of a kind. The popularity of these games grew because of the community and the passion of the players invested in it. Certain community 'leaders' have gathered such a following making them rather influential. Moreover the games themselves all have certain capitalist traits that promote accumulation, exchange, avarice, and value.

BioShock although studied by others before it was important to the thesis in terms of the ideology the game grounds itself in. The amount of detail BioShock puts into its critique of capitalist ideology is fascinating to say the least. The lengths this game goes through to come up with a well rounded critique of capitalist ideology is remarkable from the environmental implications as the player traverses the underground city of Rapture to the more obvious and direct references to capitalist ideology. One cannot talk about capitalism in video games without experiencing BioShock first hand.

A close reading of several items of note in the games was also conducted such as for some items in the souls games as their in game descriptions were valuable to the point of the thesis as well as a close reading of the audio diaries of BioShock which



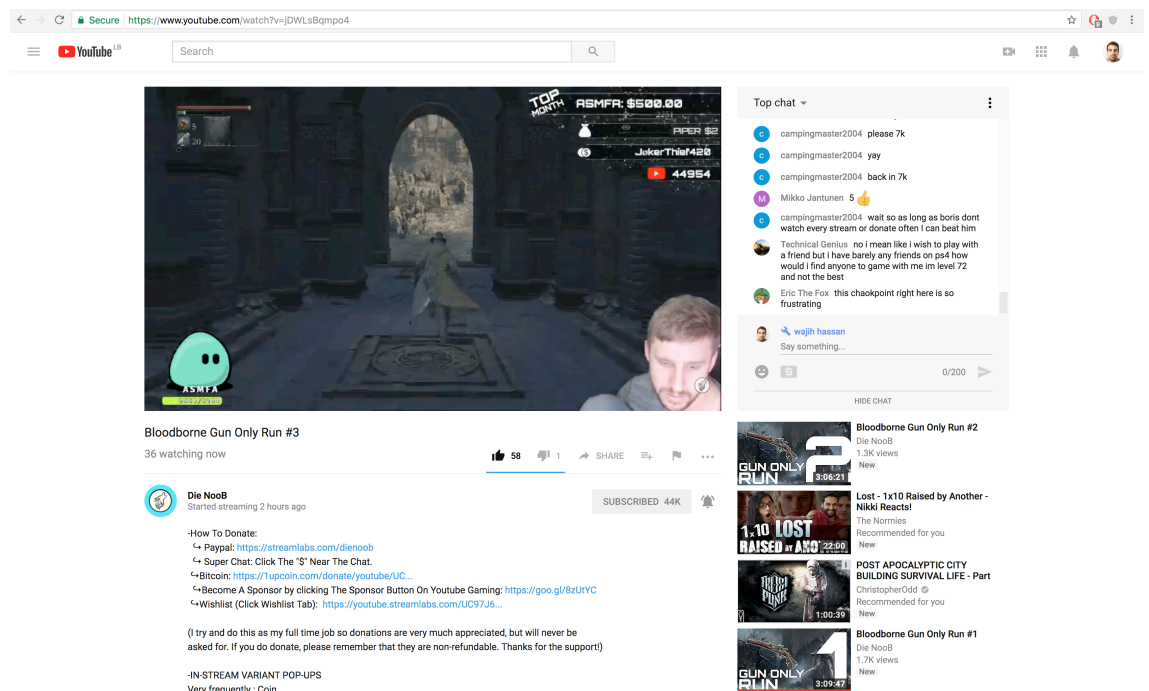
although subtitles in the game are primarily audio and the use of BioShock wiki site<sup>9</sup> was very helpful in extracting the exact phrases said in the game. Watching the online content such as videos and live-streams of the relative online gaming community, and engaging with the community by reading message boards between players on the Internet were also necessary. This included reading discussion threads about the content creators, live-streamers, the games, and community events in order to understand them clearly. Example of the online content about the video games where analyzed by watching the videos of the respective content creators and live-streamers while taking notes about what they said in relation the interest of this thesis. The gaming content was found on YouTube and Twitch and idea of what these platforms look like can be found in the following screen captures.



Screen capture 1.1: A recorded stream by epicnamebro of bloodborne event Return To Yharnam on twitch.

<sup>9</sup> [http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock\\_Audio\\_Diaries](http://bioshock.wikia.com/wiki/BioShock_Audio_Diaries)

Screen capture 1.1 resembles what a typical live-stream on Twitch looks like and starting from left to right of the screen. You can see how you have a section on the left side of the followed channels a viewer is following and then in the center is the main screen of the stream and game play which sometimes includes a camera section if the live-streamer wishes which lets his viewers see him while he plays the games (and not just hear his voice). The far left side is the chat window where viewers can talk and engage with the live-streamer or with each other as well as click on links that help them in case they wanted to donate money to the live-streamer.



Screen capture 1.2: A live-stream of bloodborne by Die Noob channel on YouTube.

In screen capture 1.2 you can see that YouTube shares a few of the same features of a Twitch live-stream. You have the main screen of the game play and a web camera so the viewers are able to see the streamer and right next to the gameplay there is the chat window. Below the gameplay you have some information about the channel and live-stream as well as helpful links set up by the streamer including donation links. To the right of the description and below the chat window there's a recommended

section for other videos related to the content the viewer might be interested in. The comments left behind on certain videos were also looked at as they reflected how many of the viewers and members thought about creators or ‘leaders’ of these communities.

### C. Theory/Literature Review

At the outset it will be important to clarify what is meant by capitalism and the system of commodity exchange. “A commodity is [...] a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.”<sup>10</sup> A commodity seems to be something simple and understood with ease, but its analysis by Marx shows it to be something that is truly peculiar and complex<sup>11</sup>, a social form that over determines social relations and mediates them. Since the secret to the commodity lies not in the content behind the form but rather in the form itself.<sup>12</sup>

*“The circulation of commodities is the starting-point of capital. The production of commodities, their circulation, and that more developed form of their circulation called commerce, these form the historical groundwork from which it rises. The modern history of capital dates from the creation in the 16th century of a world- embracing commerce and a world-embracing market. If we abstract from the material substance of the circulation of commodities, that is, from the exchange of the various use-values, and consider only the economic forms produced by this process of circulation, we find its final result to be money: this final product of the circulation of commodities is the first form in which capital appears”.*<sup>13</sup>

The exchange of commodities is the fetishistic relation upon which the capitalist system

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<sup>10</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 320.

<sup>11</sup> Marx, Karl. *The marx-engels reader*. Vol. 4. New York: Norton, 1972. P. 319.

<sup>12</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 329.

depends. In commodity exchange the universal equivalence of the commodity form disavows the abstract labor that is assumed to be the source of value, this disavowal puts to work an *as if* relation: we exchange commodities *as if* the commodity contains a substance of value that does not degenerate: “during the act of exchange, individuals proceed as if the commodity is not submitted to physical, material exchanges; as if it is excluded from the natural cycle of generation and corruption; although on the level of their 'consciousness' they 'know very well' that this is not the case..<sup>14</sup> A commodity cannot fulfill simultaneously two determinations: a particular good, and a general mediation at once—the value dimension of all commodities becomes externalized in one form of commodity, money, which acts as a universal equivalent, the duality of commodity as use value and value becomes externalized and appears in the form of the commodity on one hand and money on the other, as a result of this the commodity appears as a thingly object that is in turn socially mediated by money. Money appears as a universal equivalent and *not* a materialized externalization of an abstract dimension of the commodity and of labor. Commodity fetishism latches it self to the products of labor, the moment they are produced as commodities, and becomes inseparable from the production of commodities.<sup>15</sup>

Fetishism as a relation between people existed in pre-capitalist society under social relations of direct domination: fetishism existed in the social relations between people such as the relationship between a king and his subjects while in capitalist societies structured around commodity production fetishism is repressed only to return as a relation between things. As Slavoj Zizek has argued: “The place of fetishism has

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<sup>14</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, 1989) . P. 12

<sup>15</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 321.

just shifted from inter-subjective relations to relations ‘between things’”.<sup>16</sup> When it comes to the value of a commodity, we see this in two forms. The first being use-value which is characterized by the utility of the commodity. The second is the magnitude of value characterized by the production of commodities for the purpose of exchange.<sup>17</sup>

*“The utility of a thing makes it a use-value. But this utility is not a thing of air. Being limited by the physical properties of the commodity, it has no existence apart from that commodity. A commodity, such as iron, corn, or a diamond, is therefore, so far as it is a material a use-value, something useful. This property of a commodity is independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities. When treating of use-value, we always assume to be dealing with definite quantities, such as dozens of watches, yards of linen, or tons of iron. The use-values of commodities furnish the material for a special study, that of the commercial knowledge of commodities. Use-values become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth; whatever may be the social form of that wealth. In the form of society we are about to consider, they are, in addition, the material depositories of exchange-value”*<sup>18</sup>

Exchange value appears to be something unintentional and simply relative, and therefore an inherent value.<sup>19</sup> To further explain what is meant by exchange-value Marx gives us an example of a commodity for instance, a quarter of wheat which is then exchanged for x blacking, y silk, z gold, etc. Basically meaning that the quart of wheat was exchanged with any other commodity all having varying proportions. So instead of the wheat having one exchange-value it now has many, and since x blacking, y silk, or z gold each separately represent the exchange-value of a quarter of wheat then that implies that all these different commodities exchange-values are equal to one another.<sup>20</sup>

“Exchange value, generally, is only the mode of expression, the phenomenal

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<sup>16</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso, 1989. P. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 303-305.

<sup>18</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 303-304

<sup>19</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 304

<sup>20</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978): p.304

form, of something contained in it, yet distinguishable from it.”<sup>21</sup> A second implication from the example given is that the commodities must share something in common and “This common "something" cannot be either a geometrical, a chemical, or any other natural property of commodities. Such properties, claim our attention only in so far as they affect the utility of those commodities, make them use-values. But the exchange of commodities is evidently an act characterized by a total abstraction from use-value. Then one use-value is just as good as another, provided only it is present in sufficient quantity...As use-values, commodities are, above all, of different qualities, but as exchange-values they are merely different quantities, and consequently do not contain an atom of use-value.”<sup>22</sup>

So what becomes common among commodities if we were to leave out use-value? Marx tells us, “If we leave out of consideration the use-value of commodities, they have one common property left, that of being products of labor.”<sup>23</sup> But even as a product of labor by making an abstraction from its use-value we are at the same time making an abstraction from the material elements that make up the commodity, i.e. the labor that is in question is abstract labor (and not concrete labor). In the case of abstract labor, we are not dealing with a "real abstraction," by which we mean an abstraction that is carried out in the actual behavior of humans, regardless of whether they are aware of it. Abstract labor cannot be measured by hour, it is only validated as value through processes of reduction that go on in the exchange process: labor only counts

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<sup>21</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978): p.304

<sup>22</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978): p.305

<sup>23</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 305

when a use-value is produced for exchange—productivity is determined by all producers, socially-determined labor time as well, even qualities of labor activities are determined in value through exchange

*“Along with the useful qualities of the products themselves, we put out of sight both the useful character of the various kinds of labour embodied in them, and the concrete forms of that labour; there is nothing left but what is common to them all; all are reduced to one and the same sort of labour, human labour in the abstract.”*<sup>24</sup>

Through this stripping down of the commodity we notice how this abstract labor comes to exist when commodities are made for the purpose of exchange whose function is to valorizes value— in short, abstract labour is historically specific to capital. “Labour does not show itself except in the act of exchange.”<sup>25</sup>

This tells us that human labor-power is abstracted in the production of commodities, and it is embodied in them.<sup>26</sup> We can further understand labor-power through value itself since, “Value represents what of labour-power is contained in each object that carries value, but it can only represent it in commodity exchange, that is, for another value.”<sup>27</sup> This labour that is contained in the commodity form does not only produce the commodity as is but it also produces the labour *itself* as well as the worker

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<sup>24</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 305

<sup>25</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 321

<sup>26</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 305

<sup>27</sup> J.C. Milner, *Clartes de tout*, Paris: Verdier, 2011, 90. In Tomsic, Samo. *The Capitalist Unconscious: Marx and Lacan*. Verso Books, 2016.

as a commodity through the general proportion in which commodities are generally produced<sup>28</sup>.

Another important concept should be noted here is the constituted alienation instilled in commodity exchange. "The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and it becomes a power of its own confronting him; it means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien."<sup>29</sup> We could also say that the labourer is alienated from the product (the commodity) through the wage relation: the worker is making a product that he no longer owns and is compensated for his labour by the means of wage. Instead, It is the capitalist, the owner of the means of production who owns the produced commodity.

*"As a result, therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. What is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal."*<sup>30</sup>

But it is the ever-growing fantasy of man being a 'free' individual in the 'free' market able to engage in 'free' acts of exchange, which keeps such feelings of alienation at bay and pacifies the worker allowing the dominant ideology of capitalism to maintain and reproduce itself.

Now that we know how the exchange-values of commodities are equal to one another, and that the human labor implemented in the process is abstract labor, what

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<sup>28</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 71

<sup>29</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 72

<sup>30</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978). P. 74



does this mean for capital? “Capital remains the same, whether we put cotton in place of wool, rice in place of wheat or steamships in place of railways, provided only that the cotton, the rice, the steamships the body of capital-have the same exchange value, the same price as the wool, the wheat, the railways in which it was previously incorporated. The body of capital can change continually without the capital suffering the slightest alteration.”<sup>31</sup> Later we will notice how this is not only applicable to our ‘real’ world but also to the virtual worlds in video gaming. For now, we must continue to address the concepts of fantasy and ideology.

According to Zizek, “Ideology can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognizes its dependence on social reality to an action-orientated set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power.”<sup>32</sup> It is also a doctrine, a composition of ideas, beliefs, and concepts that convince us of its ‘truth’ while in fact serving an underlying power interest<sup>33</sup> such as commodity fetishism that is not imposed by certain ISA (Ideological State Apparatuses that designate the material existence of ideology in ideological practices, rituals and institutions<sup>34</sup>) but rather emerges spontaneously as a result of the extra-institutional activities of individuals<sup>35</sup>. The explanation of the opposition between the ISA and commodity fetishism is “ultimately the opposition between State and Market, between the external superior

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<sup>31</sup> Marx, Karl. "The Marx-Engels Reader, 2d ed. Edited by Robert C. Tucker." (1978): 208.

<sup>32</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 4.

<sup>33</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 18.

agency that organizes society ‘from above’ and society’s ‘spontaneous’ self-organization.”<sup>36</sup>

Althusser argues that the dominant ideology in society reproduces itself through the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA) which consist of several different parts of society such as the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.), and the cultural ISA<sup>37</sup>. Video games fit and blend into several of these ISA and therefore have a contributing factor in the reproduction of ideology moreover they also allow for ideology to appear spontaneously such as commodity fetishism does but this time in a virtually constructed game world rather than in our ‘real’ world. Video games might seem far from reality that people sometimes use as a means of escape but as Žižek mention in his book on the “The Plague of Fantasies” that “the subject who maintains his distance towards the ritual (that of the dominant ideology) is unaware of the fact that the ritual already dominates him from within.”<sup>38</sup>

Terry Eagleton (1991) defines ideology as: one, the material process of producing ideas, beliefs, and values in social life; two, a representation of the life experiences and conditions of a socially significant group; three, it emerges from the conflict of several self-promoting social powers disputing over the crucial replication of power in general; four, ideology maintains a social construction in ways that are opportune for the ruling class and it is not simply a matter of imposing the ideas from the higher power but is about procuring the cooperation and support of lower classes and groups. Five, ideology means ideas and beliefs, which aid to validate the interests

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<sup>36</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Žižek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Žižek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 110 – 111.

<sup>38</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The plague of fantasies*. Verso, 1997. P. 5.

of a dominant group or class precisely using methods of distortion and dissimulation. Finally, ideology uses false or misleading beliefs but these do not essentially come from the interests of the leading class rather from the material makeup of society as a whole.<sup>39</sup>

Ultimately, ideology is more than just imposed an illusion (the illusion being that that people are free agents in a free market who are engaging in free form of commodity exchange) but it is also able to communicate to its subjects a version of social reality that is real and familiar enough so that people won't just reject it.<sup>40</sup> Since "every ideological Universal – for example freedom, equality – is 'false' in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity. Freedom, for example: a universal notion comprising a number of species (freedom of speech and press, freedom of consciousness, freedom of commerce, political freedom, and so on) but also, by means of structural necessity, a specific freedom (that of the worker to sell freely his own labour on the market) which subverts this universal notion."<sup>41</sup>

Games have become known for the fun they create, their engaging and immersive qualities, and their requirement of the players' deep thinking and complex problem solving<sup>42</sup>. It is these immersive qualities that give people who engage in gaming an escape from reality, not an escape from socialization but it provides an opportunity to be part of an alternate reality. For fantasy does not simply realize a desire

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<sup>39</sup>Eagleton, Terry. "Ideology: an introduction (Vol. 9)." (1991).

<sup>40</sup>Eagleton, Terry. "Ideology: an introduction (Vol. 9)." (1991).

<sup>41</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso, 1989. P. 16.

<sup>42</sup> Squire, Kurt. "Changing the game: What happens when video games enter the classroom." *Innovate: Journal of online education* 1, no. 6 (2005).

Gee, James Paul. *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Macmillan, 2014.

in a hallucinatory way but it actually constitutes our desire and teaches us how to desire<sup>43</sup> much like what the capitalist fantasy of free market exchange induces a desire for commodities. These virtual fantasy worlds that people escape to through gaming actually mimic reality specifically when it comes to trading and exchanging virtual commodities in these game worlds.

Capitalism is structured around a set of beliefs and ideas of freedom and exchange of commodities based on the satisfaction of needs and desires of egoistic individuals, while commodity exchange serves another purpose, which is the valorization of value.<sup>44</sup> In the context of video gaming, are the players truly subjected to the fantasy of video games and hence immersed in the reproduction of dominant ideologies or both simultaneously? How are the virtual worlds that include people (who are the players and are represented in game by their avatars) and the commodities that are in the games analogous to commodity exchange in 'real' society?

This exchange of commodities in the virtual world will be analyzed in three different modes of exchange. The first of the three modes is when a virtual item is traded for real money and in turn this real money is then used to trade for another virtual item. The second mode is somewhat interrelated with the first but follows a slightly different approach, and that is when real money is directly used to purchase a virtual item that can then be traded for virtual money or items that are traded for "real money". The third mode is when the exchange of real money is not involved but the capitalist system of exchange is present in the virtual world. Video games often, if not all the time, require that players interact with other characters on the screen that

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<sup>43</sup> Althusser, Louis, and Slavoj Zizek. "Mapping Ideology." (1994). P. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Postone, Moishe. "Necessity, labor, and time: A reinterpretation of the Marxian critique of capitalism." *Social Research* (1978). P. 739-788.

represent either other “real” people who are also members of the game world or characters that are none playable that exist from the computer code and interact with the player character through the use of artificial intelligence.<sup>45</sup> The existence of a populated game world is part of the extent of immersion that entices players to stay within such a context, one that presumes a ‘player freedom’, which is mainly the case with all massive multiplayer online role playing games given that players are meant to achieve a sense of reality in the virtual world “Players choose a character, a so-called ‘avatar’ or digital representation of the online identity to explore the virtual world freely.”<sup>46</sup> They are “free” to roam and explore, interact, and trade items and this means they can buy and sell virtual items within the game world either for game currency that can be turned into ‘real’ currency or engage a simple exchange of virtual items, this exchange as we will see later might also be a part of a respective ‘real’ money transaction in reality. In virtual games participants trade game items with other people who need that particular item.<sup>47</sup>

Millions of people from all over the world submerge themselves in these virtual worlds every single day for the main reason that these games (massive multiplayer online role playing games) resemble a players’ almost unlimited freedom from commercial interferences<sup>48</sup> but since they are actually engaging in commodity exchange

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<sup>45</sup> Lim, Sohye, and Byron Reeves. "Computer agents versus avatars: Responses to interactive game characters controlled by a computer or other player." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 68, no. 1 (2010). P. 57-68.

<sup>46</sup> Harambam, Jaron, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman. "Game over? Negotiating modern capitalism in virtual game worlds." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011). P. 299-319.

<sup>47</sup> Lim, Sohye, and Byron Reeves. "Computer agents versus avatars: Responses to interactive game characters controlled by a computer or other player." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 68, no. 1 (2010). P. 57-68.

<sup>48</sup> Woodcock, Bruce Sterling. "An analysis of MMOG subscription growth." *mmogchart.com* (2008).

in these games then “this freedom is the very opposite of effective freedom: by selling his labour ‘freely’, the worker loses his freedom – the real content of this free act of sale is the worker’s enslavement to capital.”<sup>49</sup>

Massive multiplayer online role-playing games support millions of players from across the entire globe to simultaneously exist in a live virtual environment where many interactions and transactions can take place.<sup>50</sup> These interactions that take place within the virtual worlds of video gaming eventually and ultimately act as virtual marketplaces that make possible the exchange of virtual commodities.<sup>51</sup> Games such as World of Warcraft (which is a massive multiplayer online role playing game) give their players access to things that seem far from reality such as the mythical and enchanting<sup>52</sup>, but the act of exchange although virtual is nonetheless reproductive of capitalist exchange in the ‘real’ world.

There are many examples that show how the virtual and the real mix. One case is by making a business and profiting from the selling of virtual property<sup>53</sup> or by being a ‘gold farmer’ aiming mainly to collect and sell virtual items<sup>54</sup> or even by the auctioning

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<sup>49</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso, 1989. P. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Nakamura, Lisa. "Don't hate the player, hate the game: The racialization of labor in World of Warcraft." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009). P. 128-144.

<sup>51</sup> Harambam, Jaron, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman. "Game over? Negotiating modern capitalism in virtual game worlds." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011). P. 299-319.

<sup>52</sup> Harambam, Jaron, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman. "Game over? Negotiating modern capitalism in virtual game worlds." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011). P. 299-319.

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig De Peuter. *Digital play: The interaction of technology, culture, and marketing*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Anshe Chung Studios (2006) Anshe Chung Becomes First Virtual World Millionaire. (Referenced 27<sup>th</sup> of January, 2007). Online: <http://www.anshechung.com>

<sup>54</sup> TheObserver (2005). They play games for 10 hours - and earn £2.80 in a 'virtual sweatshop'. Online: <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1436411,00>

of game characters that you create.<sup>55</sup> The money involved in these cases is ‘real money’ and people generate income out of such interactions and transactions in cyberspace.<sup>56</sup>

Virtual goods have become available at real-world markets, people sell and buy magical helmets, enchanting swords, and even in-game world currencies over eBay and other virtual market places of the like. Even though in the user agreements such games prohibit the exchange of its content in the real world markets and consider such actions as illegal a lot of players still engage in such actions. Some even sell their avatars for large sums of money ranging from US\$100 to almost US\$ 11,000 depending on the time and material invested in creating the avatar.<sup>57</sup> This is noted in the work of Witheford and Peuter in their book ‘Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games’<sup>58</sup> they mention that certain companies have even taken measures to stopping such real world money trade transactions through the different methods of deleting player accounts (more than 89,000 accounts) or banning the online identities of these people in order to prevent them from creating new accounts. Yet such transactions still take place, players continue to engage in activities such as gold farming.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Washington Post Online (2005). Virtual Gaming Economy. (Referenced 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2007). Online: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2005/09/13/DI2005091301150.html>

<sup>56</sup> Manninen, Tony, and Tomi Kujanpää. "The value of virtual assets—the role of game characters in MMOGs." *International Journal of Business Science and Applied Management* 2, no. 1 (2007). P. 21-33.

<sup>57</sup> Harambam, Jaron, Stef Aupers, and Dick Houtman. "Game over? Negotiating modern capitalism in virtual game worlds." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 14, no. 3 (2011). P. 299-319.

<sup>58</sup> Dyer-Witheford, Nick, and Greig De Peuter. *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Vol. 29. U of Minnesota Press, 2009

<sup>59</sup> This means when players take the time and effort to receive certain awards of certain actions such as killing lots of enemies in one area in order to get more and more items that they would then sell online over the virtual markets.

This investment of time into farming for rare items would give some players an advantage based on the scarcity of the virtual item they possess and therefore would have more control over how much money to sell it for. These “farmers” produce and sell virtual goods such as weapons, garments, animals, and even their own leveled up avatars to other players for real world money across online domains such as IGE or eBay.<sup>60</sup> “The economies within these worlds demonstrate, like all markets, the emergence of basic laws of supply and demand for desirable “virtual” goods (i.e., items, in-world currencies, and characters) but also that these goods are desirable enough that they appear for sale on auction sites (e.g., eBay or IGE) where they can be purchased with the U.S. dollar and other conventional national currencies.”<sup>61</sup> The fact that these virtual goods are desirable and demanded by people demands an investigation; also whether the fetishism of commodity exchange can be found in the virtual worlds of video gaming.

*“Commoditization of virtual goods is happening whether developers want it or not. Neither buying nor selling is an isolated behavior, using eBay and specialized auction and purchase sites, especially for worlds that explicitly ban it. PlayerAuctions, a site that grew as a result of eBay’s ban on EverQuest items, boasts over 100,000 members.”*<sup>62</sup>

This reveals that real world capital can be created in the online virtual worlds of video games; it also creates a market for ‘real’ world currency for game items, game currency, characters (avatars) and people with no time to invest in creating and building up their characters in the virtual game worlds would resort to the purchase of such

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<sup>60</sup> Nakamura, Lisa. "Don't hate the player, hate the game: The racialization of labor in World of Warcraft." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 26, no. 2 (2009). P. 128-144.

<sup>61</sup> Malaby, Thomas. "Parlaying value capital in and beyond virtual worlds." *Games and culture* 1, no. 2 (2006). P. 141-162.

<sup>62</sup> Ondrejka, Cory. "Escaping the gilded cage: User created content and building the metaverse." *NYL Sch. L. Rev.* 49 (2004). P. 81.



virtual commodities in order to advance their characters.<sup>63</sup> EBaying has now become popular amongst players who engage in the real world trading of virtual items, and for now it seems as though the virtual markets run the same way as our real world markets do. The transactions occur directly between individual players or their online representations (avatars). Players are free to trade for real money any items they deem fit and tradable for they are free players in a free open virtual world.<sup>64</sup>

“Free” merchants engage in the “free” market of commodity exchange. For instance, in the cases when players sell their avatars, the value of the avatar is based on commodity fetishism brought into the game by valuing certain artifacts and virtual property such as, weapons, gold, armor. Even the amount of labor invested into leveling up the character and attributing certain skill makes the character more valuable than other virtual items.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, information exists that links ‘real’ money with that of money in the virtual worlds of video games, for example in Second Life, Linden dollars can be bought and converted into real money easily because an actual exchange rate linked to real world markets exists (one linden dollar is equal to around two hundred and seventy US dollars) and the exchange rate is controlled by Linden Labs depending on the supply and demand in the market. Another example is in Eve Online, where a user was able to net 700 billion of the game currency (ISK) that could easily be translated into \$119,000 if the game currency was sold on eBay.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ondrejka, Cory. "Escaping the gilded cage: User created content and building the metaverse." *NYL Sch. L. Rev.* 49 (2004). P. 81.

<sup>64</sup> Yamaguchi, Hiroshi. "An analysis of virtual currencies in online games." (2004).

<sup>65</sup> Manninen, Tony, and Tomi Kujanpää. "The value of virtual assets—the role of game characters in MMOGs." *International Journal of Business Science and Applied Management* 2, no. 1 (2007). P. 21-33.

<sup>66</sup> Papagiannidis, Savvas, Michael Bourlakis, and Feng Li. "Making real money in virtual worlds: MMORPGs and emerging business opportunities, challenges and ethical

“To describe the virtual worlds of digital games as hyper-real and simulacra has become almost cliché.” States Kingsepp and continues to explain that many of the games can be looked on as substitutes for the real world<sup>67</sup>. But being cliché is doesn’t mean it’s not true, and even though they might be regarded as substitutes they don’t need to be exactly like our ‘real’ world since “games are at the same time to real and not real enough.”<sup>68</sup> Despite the general understanding of games being a waste of time and that the accumulation of virtual items is not fruitful economy.<sup>69</sup> (Although we’ve actually seen as of now how there are examples mentioned previously where people make ‘real’ money from virtual items) but for the sake of reproduction of capitalism it doesn’t really matter if the accumulation is fruitful or not in a video game as long as the actual ritual of accumulation is taking place. “Games do not exist in isolation either as objects or as logics. Their players are inhabited by cultures of ritual and representation that come from growing up and taking part in a social world. Both games and players are situated within a culture, which employs, deploys, and represents ritual in many ways.”<sup>70</sup> And many video games do in fact employ a sense of ritual or at least some activities that are closely related to ritual particularly activities of object collection<sup>71</sup> and as we’ll see in the coming chapters these activities also take the form of commodity exchange, labour, ‘farming’ and ‘grinding’.

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implications in metaverses." *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 75, no. 5 (2008). P. 610-622.

<sup>67</sup> Kingsepp, Eva. "Fighting hyperreality with hyperreality: History and death in World War II digital games." *Games and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2007). P.366-375.

<sup>68</sup> Peović Vuković, Katarina. "Realism and virtuality: Carmageddon as contemporary simulacrum model." *Interactive Storytelling* (2010). P. 268-270.

<sup>69</sup> Peović Vuković, Katarina. "Realism and virtuality: Carmageddon as contemporary simulacrum model." *Interactive Storytelling* (2010). P. 268-270.

<sup>70</sup> Gazzard, Alison, and Alan Peacock. "Repetition and ritual logic in video games." *Games and Culture* 6, no. 6 (2011). P. 499-512.

<sup>71</sup> Gazzard, Alison, and Alan Peacock. "Repetition and ritual logic in video games." *Games and Culture* 6, no. 6 (2011). P. 499-512.

Video games could act as a simulacra and simulators of ideology which that promote specific sets of values linked with modern capitalism and they also provide a fantasy of free will limited by the rules and the gameplay.<sup>72</sup> According to Baudrillard, simulation is not about simply the mirror of reality but rather is it is “generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper-real.”<sup>73</sup> Hyper-reality is a process in which symbols are increasingly used to replace actual objects and experiences, and the icons and signs are more simplified and clearer mimics of reality as they are easy to understand and recognizable masking and replacing the actual experience and eventually becoming more ‘real’ than reality itself.<sup>74</sup> Baudrillard explains three orders of simulacra; the first order is naturalistic (natural) simulacra, which is based on image, imitation, and counterfeiting and they aim for an ideal institution (of a nature in God’s image). The second order is productionist (productive) simulacra, which is based on energy and force and the machine and the entire system of production materialize it with an aim for continuous expansion and worldwide application. The third order is simulation simulacra and it is based on information, the model, and cybernetic play and their aim is maximum operationality, hyper-reality, and total control.<sup>75</sup> Video games “attempt some kind of totalizing experience which demands our undivided attention, temporarily eclipsing all other worlds.”<sup>76</sup> Turkle suggests, “For many people, what is

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<sup>72</sup> Konstantinidis, George. "The Simulacrum according to Gilles Deleuze." (1987).

<sup>73</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, and Paul Foss. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext (e), 1983.

<sup>74</sup> Baudrillard, Jean. "The hyper-realism of simulation." *Jean Baudrillard* (1988).

<sup>75</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, and Arthur B. Evans. "Simulacra and Science Fiction (Simulacres et science-fiction)." *Science Fiction Studies* (1991). P. 309-313.

<sup>76</sup> Skirrow, Gillian. 1986. "Hellvision: An Analysis of Video Games." P. 115-142 in *High theory/Low Culture: Analyzing Popular Television and Film*, edited by Colin McCabe. New York: St. Martin's Press. In Gottschalk, Simon. "Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction." *Symbolic Interaction* 18, no. 1 (1995). P. 1-18.

being pursued in the video-game is not just a score but an altered state.”<sup>77</sup> Even “the avatars in video games act as simulacra which challenge our common sense assumption and essential self identity.”<sup>78</sup>

Avatars in video games might only be a virtual representation of the player in the game world, but that’s not all they are. They are a representation of Lacan’s mirror-phase<sup>79</sup> as a way of player identification in the full sense in which the players’ subjectivity only comes into recognition through the very misrecognition of themselves in the avatar. Once they recognize that they are not really the avatar in the virtual game world is the same time when they realize they are the players in the ‘real’ world. This recognition of the subject in the other is not only between the real player controlling the avatar and the avatar but also on another level of recognition between the player’s avatar and other avatars in the game world so the player can even recognize himself or herself through their own avatar recognizing their own subjectivity through the other avatars representing other players in the virtual game world who are at the exact same time going through this entire process of recognizing themselves as subjects in this virtual world and simultaneously as subjects in the ‘real’ world. For Althusser, “the subject is what makes ideology works.”<sup>80</sup>

This recognition of subjectivity is what is necessary and sufficient to be an

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<sup>77</sup> Turkle, Sherry. 1984. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* New York: Simon and Schuster. In Gottschalk, Simon. "Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction." *Symbolic Interaction* 18, no. 1 (1995). P. 1-18.

<sup>78</sup> Cabañes, Eurídice. *Identity and Simulacrum: Thank you Mario, but your Identity is in another castle*. Paper submitted to the 6th International Conference on the Philosophy of Computer Games. Madrid, Spain, January 29th -31st 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Slavoj, Žižek. "Mapping Ideology." (1997).

<sup>80</sup> Dolar, Mladen. "Beyond interpellation." *Qui parle* (1993). P. 75-96.

ideological notion for Althusser but for Lacan it is the emergence of the subject at the point of misrecognition.<sup>81</sup> Both cases are true and can be found in the case of video games and their virtual worlds. We come back here to what “Žizek proposes as a theory of ideology, in the Lacanian view, based precisely on this point: “the last support of the ideological effect... is the nonsensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment.”<sup>82</sup>

Enjoyment is the most important factor when it comes to video games. It is what drives the player to continue playing and without it the player would put down the video game and wouldn't pick it up again, but enjoyment in video gaming doesn't necessarily mean instant enjoyment. There are lots of games that require the player to go put in a lot of time and effort in order to finally find satisfaction and enjoyment by overcoming certain things in the games or objectives (such as the souls/borne games that will be discussed in coming chapters). “In capitalist societies, enjoyment is no longer forbidden but imposed.”<sup>83</sup> Enjoyment in video gaming might slightly differ than the enjoyment (jouissance) in the Lacanian sense of the word, but as Zupancic puts it, “all enjoyment already presupposes the Other, regardless of whether we ‘get it’ with the help of the ‘real Other’ (another person) or not.”<sup>84</sup> The other could be the game itself or it could be the other people who also play the game; the community of players inside the virtual game worlds and outside of them simply as other players or as content creators or live streamers as there is even enjoyment in not only playing the games but also being a part of global online gaming communities that not only makes it more and more enjoyable

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<sup>81</sup> Dolar, Mladen. "Beyond interpellation." *Qui parle* (1993). P.75-96.

<sup>82</sup> Žizek, Slavoj. *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso, 1989. P. 125-129. In Dolar, Mladen. "Beyond interpellation." *Qui parle* (1993). P. 75-96.

<sup>83</sup> Tomšič, Samo, and Andreja Zevnik, eds. *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics*. Routledge, 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Zupancič, Alenka. "SEXUAL IS POLITICAL?." *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (2015). P. 86.

but also makes it 'real' or rather hyper-real and makes more concrete for

“Jouissance... provides the density of the subject's reality.”<sup>85</sup>

Players today don't need to play a video game to enjoy it instead they could just watch someone else playing it and still enjoy the game. The online gaming community does not only exist on discussion threads on websites such as Reddit and GameFAQs but also on platforms such as Twitch and YouTube. Twitch and YouTube are currently the largest websites where players can create gaming content or live stream gameplay for other people on these social platforms to view. It gets much more complicated than this when capitalist concepts and community leadership start to get involved.

A game is designed and published and made available to the public for purchase all within our current socio-economic structure of capitalism. Like any other commodity if a video game is desired then it can be exchanged and purchased for whichever currency of whatever country a player is a part of and then the player can now enjoy the game he or she purchased on their gaming console or personal computer. Pervious and even currently the game is discussed amongst other players in discussion threads, but today players can become content creators and live streamers thanks to websites such as Twitch and YouTube. This is when the community aspect behind a particular video game really starts to develop. When players over a period of time create videos of their own experiences with the game and post them on YouTube channels and other players or just viewers can comment and talk about the videos, the player who posted the videos, their experiences in the game as well or when those players live stream their gameplay on Twitch and people can watch it live and chat with the rest of the viewers

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<sup>85</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The plague of fantasies*. Verso, 1997. P. 60.

as well as the live streamer.

At some point the player who's creating content and/or live-streaming their gameplay begins to retain a rather significant following of viewers and other players that care about what this person thinks, says, and what their opinions are about the game they are playing but also about the community itself and most importantly they listen to the players opinions on matters not just specific to gaming but perhaps to actual important social matters. This content creator and/or live streamer becomes a person of note, of interest, and of influence to the gaming community they're a part of. This person can easily have his opinions heard by thousands, hundreds of thousands, and sometimes even millions of people just because of their influence from their content in the gaming community. They become what I believe are online gaming community leaders, and when they speak and voice their opinions on either gaming or social matters their followers and community listen.

Later in the process this player might choose to become a fulltime content creator or live streamer. This means that they make their entire living from putting out content for people to watch and discuss. They set up Patreon<sup>86</sup> pages, and paypal<sup>87</sup> or just get direct money from monthly subscriptions or donations on Twitch or the same on YouTube but they're called 'sponsors'. So their followers and subscribers can have several different methods of financially supporting their favored community content creator or live streamer and make it possible for them to be able to do this as a full time career. The content creator is no longer laboring to produce for their self in this case but

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<sup>86</sup> A membership platform that makes it easy for artists and creators to get paid (<https://www.patreon.com/>).

<sup>87</sup> A website that people can use to give money to others or to make online purchases (<https://www.paypal.com/lb/home>)

rather is now paid a wage for what he does. It started of at first, as a creative endeavor has become a full time paid job. This is of course not always the case with all content creators or live streamers who are considered to be people of influence in their respective gaming community, many of them do have full time jobs and do not depend on the support of their followers, but still this does not change the fact that they still retain a certain influence in the community and a position of leadership among the many members of the online gaming community. The hyper-reality is not only that ‘real’ money is being made because of people making content about gaming or that the player can sometimes sit back and enjoy someone else playing the game over a live-streaming platform, but rather it is because sometimes when a content creator or live-streamer says something it might have a direct effect on not only the gaming community but also on society and the potential for change through such a community is there and we need only to correctly tap into and utilize it.



## CHAPTER II

### SKYRIM – PHARAOH

#### A. Skyrim

Some have studied Skyrim when it came to examining the roles of gender in video games such as the authors Mikki H. Phan, Jo R. Jardina, Sloane Hoyle, and Barbara S. Chaparro<sup>88</sup> by looking at Skyrim to being a role playing fantasy game that is generally one of the genres male players are attracted to. Andrew Kuo, Jacob L. Hiler, and Richard J. Lutz have studied Skyrim in their paper on video game consumption in contrast to more traditional forms of entertainment such as their ability to provide immersion, agency, and transformation during the experience in their paper, “From Super Mario to Skyrim: A framework for the evolution of video game consumption.”<sup>89</sup> Others have included Skyrim in their quantitative data on their research into streamer popularity based on the video games they play and how much of an audience the games get<sup>90</sup> Skyrim was even used in research by Zeely Sylvia, Teresa K. King, and Brendan

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<sup>88</sup> Phan, Mikki H., Jo R. Jardina, Sloane Hoyle, and Barbara S. Chaparro. "Examining the role of gender in video game usage, preference, and behavior." In *Proceedings of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society Annual Meeting*, vol. 56, no. 1, pp. 1496-1500. Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012.

<sup>89</sup> Kuo, Andrew, Jacob L. Hiler, and Richard J. Lutz. "From super mario to skyrim: A framework for the evolution of video game consumption." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 16, no. 2 (2017): 101-120.

<sup>90</sup> Kaytoue, Mehdi, Arlei Silva, Loïc Cerf, Wagner Meira Jr, and Chedy Raïssi. "Watch me playing, i am a professional: a first study on video game live streaming." In *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on World Wide Web*, pp. 1181-1188. ACM, 2012.

J. Morse<sup>91</sup> to analyze the effect of the video game play on the male body image, they had participants in their research and the game the participants played was Skyrim. But none have looked into Skyrim as an immersive fantasy world that implicitly reproduces capitalist ideology or have studied it on two separate player files in an experimental sense to try and find out how the game leads players into commodity exchange.

Skyrim is published and developed by Bethesda soft works and Bethesda Game Studios respectively. The virtual game world is huge, expansive, and complex with many different features, characters, and fantasy world items but the thing that all characters except of the player's avatar are created, controlled, and coded by an artificial intelligence sophisticated enough to run an entire virtual world where events take place even if the player doesn't physically exist in the same space as the rest of the characters (i.e. the characters regardless of the existence of the player will still follow their codes and open their shops and do their daily jobs and routines). In every city that the player character visits in this large open virtual fantasy world there exists a market place filled with different A.I (artificial intelligence) controlled characters that exist for the player to interact with, and buy and sell goods and products.

The character not only gains access to items in the game simply by finding them through exploration but rather the player is able to invest in skills that enable his character to use blacksmith forges, alchemy sets, and even enchantment worktables. When players have access to such tools they are able to use raw materials they found, bought, or 'physically mined' in game to created different weapons, armor, enchanted armor or weapons (this includes making them potent with magic powers such as, fire,

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<sup>91</sup> Sylvia, Zeely, Teresa K. King, and Brendan J. Morse. "Virtual ideals: The effect of video game play on male body image." *Computers in Human Behavior* 37 (2014): 183-188.

ice, lighting, stamina regeneration, extra health and the likes). Players then can produce such virtual items freely given they have the raw materials and the correct level of skill and labor of their characters to create content and then sell it to the A.I controlled characters in the virtual world's market place.

In order to study the virtual world of Skyrim, the use of participant observation was crucial to fully understand how it functions and how it ties in with capitalism. Two separate save files were used to play the game, the first file or 'character' was created for the sole purpose of becoming extremely wealthy as to engage with capitalist accumulation and to see exactly how the different commodities in the land of Skyrim vary in terms of value and what can be done in the game to make items more valuable when it comes to selling them for more in-game currency (which is known as Septims or gold coins). The second character that was created on a separate save file, and this character would avoid any currencies of exchange and the merchants and traders in order to see how many times the game makes it a point to direct the players to commodity exchange.

Now, since The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is a vast open world role playing game, the player after the first few minutes of the tutorial section is then free to roam around and do whatever quests he happens upon, but as with many video games there is one main quest that tells the player his place in this world and what his purpose is. So the analysis of what happens in the game will be based on following the completing the main quest of the game, and in order to know how the game generally progresses when someone else is playing it, a case of one of the most recommended play-through of Skyrim entitled "let's play Skyrim again" and is divided into five chapters, one playlist

of videos per chapter, made by ‘Gopher’ over on YouTube<sup>92</sup> was analyzed for its content. The YouTube channel ‘Gopher’ was chosen because of certain community discussion links that suggest him as well as others for a full play-through of Skyrim, but ‘Gopher’ was the most prevalent among the suggestions<sup>93</sup>.

Gopher starts off his play-through as all players do captured and being carried off on a carriage to be executed but is then saved by a dragon and escapes. The Elder Scrolls game series is known for always starting of the player as a prisoner that escapes granting the player a sense of starting a whole new life with the freedom to be whoever they want to be and to do whatever they wish to do in this fantasy world. In Skyrim after the player is set free by the dragon and upon completing the game’s tutorial section, the player is now free to roam the expansive land known as Skyrim, but he is also given a main objective (this objective is made clear to the player with an indicator on the map and compass in the game so as he knows where to go) that he must seek out in order to learn more of the main story and what his purpose is in this game.

The first main quest indicator leads the player into a nearby town called “Riverwood” so Gopher heads there, and upon reaching the village the player interacts with “Sven” who gives him a side quest to solve a love triangle issue with an NPC (None Playable Character which means A.I) called “Camilla Valerius” who just so

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<sup>92</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC1CSCMwaDubQ4rcYCpX40Eg>

<sup>93</sup>

[https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/432anc/the\\_absolute\\_best\\_skyrim\\_lets\\_play\\_on\\_youtube\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/432anc/the_absolute_best_skyrim_lets_play_on_youtube_a/)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/4q7vbj/best\\_skyrim\\_lets\\_play\\_or\\_play\\_through/](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/4q7vbj/best_skyrim_lets_play_or_play_through/)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2qm7m5/best\\_lets\\_play\\_to\\_watch/](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2qm7m5/best_lets_play_to_watch/)

[https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2ibfim/funniestmost\\_entertaining\\_skyrim\\_lets\\_plays/](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2ibfim/funniestmost_entertaining_skyrim_lets_plays/)

<https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615805-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/67451460>

<https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/69674363>

<https://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/615805-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/67084006>

happens to be the trader's sister who is stationed in the "Riverwood trader" and as the player walks in a discussion about the golden claw starts to take place and the player is eventually sent to bring back to the trader. This is not the first time the trader is mentioned by other A.I in the same location: for the player to progress in the game she/he needs to speak to someone called "Gertrude" and she mentions "Lucan over in the Riverwood Trader says that thieves broke into his store" everyone that Gopher has talked to for now has mentioned something about the trader.

Gopher here decides to head to the trader's house but stops by the blacksmith that happens to be right next to the trader and he says the following "I'm gonna do some crafting and selling," and then he sells some of the things he had picked up on the way to Riverwood to the blacksmith like armor and weapons. He then moves on to see if he wants to buy anything from the blacksmith. Buys a shield and when wanted to buy a leather helmet he was out of gold at this point and didn't have enough and so moved back to trying to sell some of the things he has and after choosing some items to sell he gets some gold and then goes on to try and buy the leather helmet once more but again not enough gold to which he says, "really, a leather helmet costs that much?" then reads the value, "260, really? Really?" he then doesn't buy the helmet (no gold). Already here we can see the whole process of commodity exchange. Gopher heads directly over to Riverwood trader because he has some other things he can sell to this trader that he couldn't sell to the blacksmith. Sell "magicka potions" since he's "not going to be using them" and then he says, "that gets me some gold." Sells stuff that he "has no use for" because he wants the gold to be able to get things that he actually does want. After selling some of the more valuable items he has such as the enchanted hood and cloak

(they're more valuable because they're enchanted) with a couple for rings sold as well he says, "nice, now I've got some gold, maybe go back and get that decent helmet".

Following the completion of the trading process he asks the trader if something happened, keeping in mind this is the same trader all the previous npcs were talking about. And now the player is given the quest to go and retrieve the golden claw. Gopher soon arrives to Whiterun the first major hold or city in the game and upon arriving a conversation between the blacksmith and a soldier directs his attention to the location of the blacksmith where he buys a bow. He goes to the jarl and is eventually given the quest that leads him to the golden claw that the Riverwood trader asked for (in case he didn't directly go to that location before since the player is free to do any quest he desires, but all quests till now lead to the same location in order to progress the main story). But while at the jarl the game makes him talk to the wizard to progress the quest, but as a side quest the wizard tells him to take these "salts" to a specific person around the market area, and that person is in another shop this time where the player can buy and sell potions. Gopher heads back to blacksmith so he could use the forge to make some arrows, but he is lacking one of the materials (firewood) he directly turns back to the blacksmith to see if she has any for sale – she doesn't, but she does have arrows (value 8 gold) and the player says that they're expensive, but buys some anyway. Then he goes to make his armor better, he needs leather...buys some from the blacksmith. (Instead of going out and hunting any animal to take their pelts to make leather).

While on his way to the quest location he picks up a pouch of gold coins and says "money! This is what we need". After completing the quest, Gopher returns the claw back to the Riverwood trader and continues to sell many of the things he's picked up for gold that he then uses to buy things he needs such as healing potions and goes

back to Whiterun, where he sells more items; potions in specific (why positions in specific? Because that particular person values potions more than other items) this shows that even in Skyrim the divisions of labor is apparent and different people value different items in varying ways. He also visits the general goods store, and finally after all the trading, he goes to the jarl to return the quest item he was sent to retrieve and progresses further into the main story and simultaneously receives his next quest objective but before he goes out of the city again to visit the greybeards who will clarify what his purpose is in the story of the game and what he needs to do. Up until the end of the main story quest of the game Gopher does generally the same thing, he completes quests, goes back to the markets and sells more items, and at the same time stops by the conveniently located blacksmiths to forge new items he could use as well as sell, and the more items he crafts the better he is at making them thus increasing their value when sold. This trend continues until the end of his play-through and the only things different in between are the different fantasy adventures he goes on.

This has been Gopher's experience with Skyrim, my own experiences in Skyrim has yielded more valuable information rather than just a general conception of how the game functions. As previously mentioned, I had two different files, the merchant file, and the 'avoiding gold and exchange' file. Starting with the merchant file the main story progresses in the same way we've seen with Gopher, but I made it point to see exactly what effects the values of the items when exchanged. I'll begin with the merchant character file, things go at the start like with any other player (such as with Gopher) but before I reach Riverwood I go on a small side path into a near by mine where I could pick up different items to sell as well as a pick axe, a tool needed in Skyrim for mining raw materials that help with crafting, such as iron, and then head over to Riverwood.

The game's leveling system is based on skill points and actually performing the action that you want to be better at, for instance if the player focuses on using a bow the higher his skill is in archery. For my merchant character I chose to focus on "blacksmithing" in order to be able to make items from raw materials and being able to use more valuable raw materials. I also focused on "speech" that helps when buying and selling items, as well as "enchanting" because the enchanting skill would allow the player to enchant the items that makes them more valuable. At smithing level 15 (base level) and speech level at 20 (base level for the 'Breton' race, which is the fantasy race I chose my character to belong to), I made an iron dagger that was valued at 10 gold in my inventory but when I went to sell it to the Riverwood trader, he valued it as 3 gold, and after selling it I tried buying it back but it's value had increased to 30 gold. Because of how much I was involved with trade and exchange my speech level increased and I was able to invest in a "prices are 10% better" skill and now the dagger can be sold for 4 gold instead of 3 gold to the trader, and bought back for 28 gold instead of 30 gold.

There are even more ways of making the iron dagger more valuable, such as using more of the same iron ingots (the raw materials) on the dagger at the forge to make it a 'fine' iron dagger, the dagger itself is still made out of iron, nothing has changed except for sharpening it into a 'fine' dagger that does a little more damage. Enchanting is by far the best way to increase the value of an item, I was able to figure this out when I took the same iron dagger and enchanted it with frost damage (at base enchanting level). Now the dagger has a value of 358 gold, can be sold for 70 gold, and bought back for 464 gold. The raw materials are essentially free if the player actually goes out and with a little time and labor the player can hunt down animals for pelts that are turned into leather and leather strips for crafting and he can mine for the necessary



raw materials using a pick axe at the ore veins that can be found in the game or the player can just buy the raw materials from blacksmiths, craft his own items, enchant them, and still make a profit but not as much as if he was to get the raw materials himself.

The more I crafted items the better I became at blacksmithing which meant I could start crafting higher tier weapons and armor from rarer and more valuable raw materials, so instead of using iron I would use ebony or dragon bone, and the way I would go about getting dragon bone is by going out into the vast land of Skyrim and slay dragons which is a nice fantasy break from working on ways to increase my profits all day, but since I'm a mere merchant who can't battle dragons I had to pay mercenaries for their services to accompany me and fight the dragons for me. The more I sold and bought items from shop keepers or npcs in the markets, the better my speech skills became and I was able to start selling my items for more and buying them for less. The better I became at enchanting the stronger my enchantments on items became and the more profit they yielded when exchanged, and even in enchanting there are game mechanics that effect the strength of the enchantment other than the level and skill of the player's character, things that are used in the enchanting process called 'soul gems' which need to be filled with captured souls of creatures in order for them to work, and the more time and effort put into capturing a large creatures soul into the gem the more potent and effective the enchantment will be thus the more valuable the item becomes.

Alienation is also found in Skyrim, for example by working in the lumber mills or the mining camps. The player character labors in the mines or at the mill and produces much of the commodities such as ore and firewood but receives a wage as

payment and is automatically stripped of everything he has produced. Therefore the player in this case is alienated from what he has produced as the main source of these commodities such as the lumber or the mines are owned by a npc representing the owner of the means of production.

I started off the second file as all players do again and I chose to make a character that was an 'Argorian' which essentially means I picked the race that looked like lizards just for the fantasy's sake because why would lizards need gold and commodity exchange? Once I Completed the tutorial area, I got to Riverwood and intentionally ignored the entire quest with the merchant who sends you off to retrieve his gold claw. Instead I headed over to 'Whiterun' the first major city to talk to the Jarl and proceed with the main story of the game, and like every time the jarl has me speak to this court wizard who sends me off in search of an item he needs, and the location he sends me off to is not surprisingly 'Bleak Falls Burrow' which is the same location that merchant I intentionally ignored would have me go to retrieve his 'Golden Claw'.

So what the game did here is that it redirected me to the location that has the item that the merchant wants. In order to continue the main story I have to go that location, so I did, and with my trusty bow I fought my way through the area trying to find the item the Jarl and his wizard need. I finally come across a man trapped in a huge spiders web that is physically blocking the way to progress, I had to cut him down from the web, and then the game asks you to kill him because he'd run off with the key items you need. When I did so, and searched his body for the key, it turned out that the key is the Golden Claw, again here the game has forced me to get the Golden Claw and use it in order to progress the main quest. The Golden Claw is not even removable from the player's inventory unless taken back to the merchant in Riverwood, but after using it to

as the key it is intended to be and opening the puzzle door that would lead me to the jarl's item (which turns out to be a slab of stone) I didn't return the Golden Claw to the merchant, instead I kept it with me so I don't interact with the merchant despite the fact that I can't take it out of my limited inventory space now.

After getting back to the jarl and his wizard and handing over the item they needed, I was tasked with killing the dragon that was causing chaos near by, fortunately this character was much more skilled with a bow than the merchant character who was more interested in profit on my last save file, but before I headed off to face the dragon, the jarl rewarded me for helping out with retrieving the item and he told me that I could now purchase property in the city which costs 5000 gold, but seeing as I'm not using gold on this character then I will be making no such purchases, but for players that want to make enough gold to buy the house the jarl's steward who handles the money transactions can give the player tasks to complete in order to earn more gold. I then faced the dragon, went back to Whiterun but this time the moment I walked into Whiterun the game presented me with two npcs who are looking for someone in the city and offering a good sum of gold for information, the reason I mention this side quest here is because the game throws it you're your face when coming back to Whiterun the npcs even lock you into dialogue which stops you from walking, but I quickly ignore this side quest and head on over to the jarl to tell him the dragon is dead and discover I'm the 'dragonborn' and so I'm instructed to go speak to the greybeards and progress the main story.

The greybeards sent me off to retrieve a horn as a test, and the horn is located in an ancient Nordic ruin far away from city of Whiterun, but before going off to explore the ruin I needed to stock back up on my arrows after using most of them to slay the

dragon, and seeing as how I have no gold I couldn't just buy the arrows from the blacksmith, instead I went out putting in the time and effort to mine some iron ore, smelt them down to make ingots, and then use them along with some firewood I had to physically chop at a nearby chopping block in order to make my arrows, this crafting process might be the same I used in the merchant character file to make and sell items, but on this file the value of the arrows I made is purely use value as I will be needing them on my journey. Now the quickest way to the get is to use the carriage transport system, but in order to do that I needed to pay the carriage, and since I have no gold I couldn't pay for such a service and therefore I had to walk what is a hefty distance in order to get to my destination.

The rest of the main quest in my case was comprised of having to walk everywhere since I'm unable to use the carriage, in some cases when I needed access for example to a magical college when in search for information on a particular needed item, I was hindered by a mage standing outside the college who said that I needed to be tested if I had the magical potential to go into the college, and the test was that she asked me to perform a particular spell, now being an archer and not a mage type character this meant I hadn't learnt that spell before and couldn't possibly cast it. I had the option of speaking to the mage and she simply offered to sell me the spell, this is what I found interesting that spells are also treated as commodities, now of course since I had no gold to pay for it I ended up having to convince the mage that I'm the 'dragonborn' and this was part of my destiny in the game and that eventually got me access but the game here does basically give you the chance to buy your way into the college.

This theme is prevalent in other scenarios of the same kind like with another faction of people in the game who are thieves and who also possessed information I needed. For instance simply walking into the thieves guild and asking an npc for some needed information, the npc would not give up the information unless I either paid him off (which again I could not do because I had no gold) or I could brawl him until he was too weak and just gives me the information, which as an alternative to paying him is rather a violent approach than simply exchanging gold for information, but in the cases when I'm accepting exchange and gold there happens to be conveniently places merchant a few steps away from the person that I needed to pay so I could just sell a few items to gain some gold.

A final note about Skyrim is that whenever I was traveling around from one area and city to another, there always was a market place and area located in the cities, filled with different types of stores that valued different items, some shops favored fashionable clothing, others like blacksmiths favored weapons and armor, the general stores, the jewelers, the food and drink traders, even some merchants referred to as 'fencers' who favored stolen goods so even if you were a petty thief in the game there are still people who'd buy what you're selling. It's remarkable how many times the game throws commodity exchange into your face and you'd never give it a second thought.

## **B. Pharaoh**

Ethan Watrall who wrote about digital archeology published academic literature surrounding Pharaoh and how interactive entertainment could impact the public's perception of archeology was one of the few sources available as research surrounding

this game<sup>94</sup>. It also makes sense given the nature of game and the setting it grounds itself in that being ancient Egypt. But none seem to have pointed out the links between a prominent capitalist system in game and capitalism in the ‘real’ world. Others who have written about this game did so through a blog or article pieces about the game. Angela R Cox who wrote in her article, “ I asked my students what they thought of the historical setting of the game, and they suggested that the game would be valuable for teaching Ancient Egyptian history.”<sup>95</sup> In this case Pharaoh was studied from an educative perspective, and still did not mention capitalist ideals. Eurogamer<sup>96</sup> wrote about Pharaoh but nothing in terms of significant research, it was more of a piece about the game urging players to try it out. The lack of material found on topics such as capitalism and ideology in a game that is completely based on such a system for it to work is what drove me to include my take and look into the game.

Pharaoh was created and developed by Impressions Games, and published by Sierra Entertainment in 1999. Pharaoh is a strategic city-building game set in Egypt roughly 2900 to 700 BC. Upon entering the game and starting a new game, the player is taken through a tutorial at first explaining to him the basics of the game. Mission after mission the game grows more difficult and the player gains access to many different tabs on his screen that control and give him access to things that he has to build and maintain in the city that he is constructing. In order to win the different missions the

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<sup>94</sup> Watrall, Ethan. "Digital pharaoh: Archaeology, public education and interactive entertainment." *Public Archaeology*2, no. 3 (2002): 163-169.

<sup>95</sup> R. Cox, Angela. "The Virtue of Specificity in Pharaoh." (2013). From: <http://www.playthepast.org/?p=4275>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/pharaoh>

player must reach a certain required rating in all of the four most important factors that determine whether he wins or loses.

These factors are culture, prosperity, monument, and kingdom. The creation of music schools, jugglers, educational facilities, access to mortuaries, dentists, physicians, and all things of this like raise culture. The building of complex architectural marvels specific to Egypt such as pyramids raises monument rating. The protection of your city, people, and allied kingdoms govern the rating of the kingdom, and finally the amount of money gained and spent while building the city impacts the prosperity rating. All things in this city building game are dependent on having sufficient Deben (the in game currency) much like the many aspects of capitalist society.

So how would a player go about making money in this virtual world? There are different ways of course, the easiest is when you have the capability to build gold mines and mine gold that are then taken to the player's city palace to be converted into Deben that then player in turn uses to build his city and purchase the essential supplies needed. The player purchases supplies he needs from other cities in the kingdom that were either established by him or by the artificial intelligence in the game. So when the players needs a 1000 blocks of plain stone for example to construct a monument then if he doesn't have the queries then he needs to buy them from the other cities through the import and export trading section of the game therefore in order to be able to import them he would need to be able to pay for them. All is well until a mission comes along that doesn't provide the player with the gold mines that enable him to have a direct flow of money that he needs, when this happens the player would then need to think critically in order to achieve the required inflow of money for his city. A good way of doing this is to use the other raw materials that he would assign labor too and would then be

extracted from the game world such are farming for barley or assigning workers to the clay pits.

Now that the player is producing raw materials such as clay and barley he may choose to find a city to export them too and this would bring him money that he could use or he may choose to actually use these raw materials to make beer from the barley and pottery from the clay. The labor plus the raw materials would then lead to the production of new more expensive commodities in this case the beer and pottery that the player can then export for even a higher price and this would fetch him more and more money even if they are not really needed by the city to that extent. This entire game is based on such engagements of the player, it is truly capitalism at its finest and yet all this takes place within the virtual world that does not even involve real money exchange, but rather the entire system of capitalism is present and dominant and the main basis and structure of the game.

My own experience with Pharaoh provides a more detailed look into the aspects of capitalist society. It starts off with an opening cinematic explaining the content and historical period in which the game is set, after that the game asks the player (myself in this case) to choose a family name, whichever name I want of course, but it also has a list of suggested ancient Egyptian family names as to provide a sense of immersion<sup>97</sup>. The game is split into five different time periods in the history of ancient Egypt and they are the pre-dynastic, the archaic, the old kingdom, the middle kingdom, and the new kingdom. Each of these periods in the game is made up of several missions that the player has to complete, and each of these missions start with a written and narrated

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<sup>97</sup> The degree of a player's involvement and attachment to the virtual game world (This concept in gaming will be defined in the chapter on theory that includes not only capitalist theory but also gaming and hyper reality).



passage that gives you the introduction of the area that you're going to be building your city in, the context, and the objectives that need to be met in order to proceed. For example the very first mission's objectives are to build 6 meager shanties and to create an area of house to watch immigrants arrive into the city.

When you officially start with the gameplay you can see the terrain on which the city is to be built, on the top and right sides of the screen you can see the menu and HUD<sup>98</sup>, and in the top center of the screen you always have the amount of money the city currently has represented in Deben as the universal equivalent in Pharaoh and next to it the amount of people in the city. You start with providing your people with their basic needs such as their shelter by building houses for them to start immigrating into the city and water by providing wells near the housing area. After that you are introduced to food, how to get it by building a hunting lodge, store it inside a granary, and distribute it through a bazar. These buildings such as the lodge, the granary, and the bazar all require a certain number of employees to function properly so as long as there are sufficient people in the city then places like these will function correctly and this is how the game introduces the idea of labor. When the houses are provided with their basic needs they start to visually evolve as in they get larger and more visually pleasing as a sign of prosperity and prosperity is affected by different factors such as the types of food, the surrounding culture, the desirable environment, and more. The game at this point gives you access to overseers, which are found inside the HUD, and the overseers provide you with statistical data on how the different sectors of the city are doing and through those you can make decisions of what to do to better the city. In order to be able to fund your city so that you can keep paying for the different labor and to build

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<sup>98</sup> Head-up display or status bar, which is part of the game's user interface.

and general enhancements, your city needs a source of income, which is when you're introduced to gold mines, the process of mining gold is simple build the mines, find workers to mine in them, and make sure to have a city palace as the gold ingots are delivered to the palace and then converted into Deben. Having police houses close to the palace protects the city funds from being stolen; a good amount of jobs keeps the population happy and not inclined to steal.

Soon after grasping the concept of a constant cash flow into the city and that money is always needed, the game introduces you to religion and making sure you build enough temples for the gods and places for people to worship as well as some entertainment such as booths, venues, and music. Up next, agriculture as a source of food instead of just hunting lodges. Besides food and water your people would start wanting other goods (commodities) such as pottery. Pottery is made from clay that is extracted from clay pits (clay pits are a form of raw materials) after the clay is extracted it is taken to the potter who is paid a wage as other types of labor in your city and makes pottery from the clay that is distributed to the existing population and all surplus is stored in the storage yards. Having successfully made some pottery you are officially introduced to industry since pottery is the first tradable commodity.

With every mission the objectives for the player to complete get more and more challenging, for instance once the player is done with the pre-dynastic period and proceeds into the Archaic period the objectives of how much population that needs to be maintain increases as well as the minimum level of housing prosperity along with other objectives such as producing a specific commodity such as beer and the minimum ratings of the main pillars of society which are culture, prosperity, monument, and kingdom. The more commodities your people have the bigger and more lavish they

evolve and another favorable commodity is beer, which is made from barley that could be farmed and then used by the brewery to produce beer. At this point you are able to produce not one but two valued commodities it is time to provide the people with education, to do that you must make sure to build schools that need papyrus to function.

Papyrus is made from reeds, and reeds are gathered and taken to the papyrus makers that distribute them to the schools while surplus is kept in the storage yards. With the excess of papyrus the game gives the player a pop-up message on screen that reads "Now that you've managed to educate some of your people you might want to generate additional revenue by selling any surplus papyrus you have to neighboring cities. You'll also need to import some bricks from Perwadjyt in order to build the sacred mastaba tomb. When you're ready click on the world map icon here to see what other cities there are in the known world, and to begin setting up trade." After the player clicks on the world map icon they'd be able to see which cities buy and sell which items to start trading with them. In this case the player needs to buy bricks to be able to complete the mastaba monument but so that the city doesn't lose money it needs to sell the excess materials or commodities it has and the overseer of commerce helps with this by listing the different prices of the commodities and how much money can be made from them. It is not wise to simply sell the excess reeds since they only generate 23 Deben per 100 pieces but rather the player must sell the excess papyrus since papyrus sells for 165 Deben per 100 pieces. Papyrus when stripped down is the same as reeds but it is the abstract value added to it from the labor required to make it by the papyrus maker that leads to this difference in value when sold.

This is true of all commodities in Pharaoh; the game makes a turn into war, which is a nice break from just managing a city. In order to have soldiers you need a

recruiter and a weapons smith. Soldiers come in two different types the archers and the infantry, the archers are much weaker than the infantry but do not require an investment of copper and weapons, but as the game becomes more difficult the only way to win wars is using infantry soldiers that can only be recruited when the weapon smith has enough copper to make their weapons available, if the city cannot mine copper directly then it needs to import it at cost of 240 Deben per 100 pieces but in order to keep making money the city then sells the surplus weapons made from the copper for 275 Deben per weapon and ultimately makes a profit. At the end of the archaic period, the seventh mission really demonstrates the importance and necessity of commodity exchange as can be seen by the table in table 2.1.

Status	Material	Buyers pay (Db)	Sellers receive (Db)	Number of units
Import	Straw	21	16	Per 100
Import	Clay	38	29	Per 100
Export	Bricks	150	120	Per 100
Export	Barley	48	37	Per 100
Export	Beer	185	140	Per 100
Export	Linen	210	160	Per 100
Import	Wood	225	170	Per 100
Export	Papyrus	200	165	Per 100

Table 2.1: In game value representations of the different materials being exchanged

Both straw and clay are needed to make bricks, therefore importing straw and clay for a total of 59 Deben is profitable since the bricks made from them are sold for 120 Deben.

At the start of the period of the Old Kingdom, in the ‘Selima Oasis’ mission the player is introduced to the finer things in terms of commodities such as luxury goods of ivory and ebony. These goods are greatly desired by the wealthier class of citizens and the way to make them is through extracting gems as the raw materials from the gem stone mines or importing them if the mines are not available to the player. The gems are then taken to the jeweler who then converts them into luxury goods. Throughout this mission and the rest of the game as well the player will start to encounter pop-up messages that inform the player of a price increase or decrease depending on the in-game market economy, in my case the pop-up said the following concerning the price of reeds, “Because of reduced supplies throughout the world, the price of reeds has risen. Importing this good is now more costly, but higher profits can be made from exporting it.” But seeing how my only source of raw material in this mission was wood the following table 1.2 explains the ensuing trade activities.

Status	Material	Buyers pay (Db)	Sellers receive (Db)	Number of units
Import	Weapons	325	275	Per Weapon
Import	Barely	48	37	Per 100
Export	Beer	185	140	Per 100
Import	Luxury Goods	310	150	Per 100
Export	Wood	225	200	Per 100
Import	Reeds	31	23	Per 100
Export	Papyrus	200	165	Per 100

Table 2.2: In game value representations of the different materials being exchanged

When the player is capable of understanding and applying concepts of commodity exchange, labor, value, and profit through the game then the player's city would thrive financially allowing that player to be able to build the necessary monuments as well as providing all the people's needs and desires and defend the city when necessary. The player does not need to be aware of the sociological definitions of the different capitalist functions in play, but rather he or she needs only to apply them and this reproduction of capitalist ideology without the need to fully understand what it is, is what Pharaoh is doing. Instead of a large medieval fantasy world that Skyrim provides as an escape from reality yet as discussed prior recreates capitalist ideals in the fantasy provided by the game, Pharaoh does exactly the same only it is a city building strategy game based on a historical time period rather than medieval fiction.

GamerZakh is a YouTube channel<sup>99</sup> mainly known for its in depth and excessive content based on city building games. He tackles Pharaoh from start to finish going through each and every mission<sup>100</sup>. After seeing GamerZakh's play-through of Pharaoh I noticed how a player especially one who can reach out to a vast audience such as this one actually says things to directly imply the importance of money and trade as a way to get through the game as if the game is just about trade and making money rather than building an ancient and glorious kingdom. When he's getting through the few starting missions he mentions things such as "The first thing I set up is money making" as he's referring to setting up the gold mines as a direct source of money. While stockpiling pottery for example he explains how over production is always a good thing and that as long as you have storage yards you can store and sell the surplus later.

By mission five of the play-through when he doesn't have a direct source of money such as the gold mines he claims the following "I don't think there's anything we can do to earn money" but that's when he resorts to trade with other cities as he continuously opens trade routes to sell surplus papyrus while of course intentionally creating more papyrus to maintain trade exports. When he started making money he began to import some bricks so that he could build his mastaba while reminding the viewers that "just need to export more to import" and "we need to earn a lot more money". Finally he reached his prosperity target but yet is still talking about earning more money through trade, eventually after he's done with the mission he admits that it was taking longer than it needs to because he simply kept going into debt. The implication and conclusion derived from this is that even if you achieved what you set

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<sup>99</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/GamerZakh>

<sup>100</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=haV3XVsX000&list=PLYVqUDxY6COjVChX23Ucfs2cYM7N7DH-1>

out to achieve but remain in debt then the game does not grant you a victory until you are no longer in debt and making profits.

Mission six provides him with gold mines as well that he always seems to regard as a main source of income seeing how they are considered to be raw materials extracted directly from the land available. In this mission he also had copper mines available so he was mining and trading copper that he was exporting for a good some of money as he exclaims when a trader bought some of his copper, “wow, that’s a lot of money.” When he successfully completes this mission and starts with the seventh he directly sets up papyrus production to start exporting and once more income started to flow into the city he set up production of linen as a way to increase exports so he may be able to import bricks and not fall into debt such as what happened before. Mission eight; his exports and income were so high that he was just importing beer instead to taking the time to make it.

When introduced to the finer things in mission nine, which are the luxury goods, at some point he mentions that there are a lot of commodities he could sell but first he must wait for more and more income and then move on to sell more items and complete the mission. With every passing mission it seems more important to first secure trade and finances before being able to do anything else in order to avoid going into extreme debt making the mission extremely tedious and impossible to complete. The game gives you all the different things one might think of being able to do in building an ancient city during the time of pharaohs, yet everything on a player's mind is having enough money and being able to trade properly to be able to do anything. This is not player freedom, rather it seems like players have to make the most out of capitalist functions



and conform to it's dominant reality to be able to do what they want in the city that they're creating.

GamerZakh starts mission eleven with some very nice exclamations that are really reflective of what we've been noticing about money and trade in this game. He says the following, "Gold, perfect!" "First off let's see what we can do with out exports to make money", "I love having gold on the map", he also jokes about how gold is free money since he's just taking it directly out of the earth and doesn't need to go through the whole production process to make a commodity and then export it to earn Deben. More things he continues to mention while playing are, "I can import clay to export the pottery I make" and "we are making a surplus of pottery now and are selling it for more money."<sup>101</sup> by the time he gets to the thirteenth mission the word 'commodity' is being directly used by the game in the mission briefing, and after that and at the start again GamerZakh says, "let's take a look at our exports."

The entire process of every mission feels exactly the same with starting by checking what he is able to produce and export because if he fails at that then he fails the entire mission and cannot proceed. Mission fifteen he as per usual starts by checking which commodities he's able to sell and notices that he can't produce the raw materials directly from the land he's in and thus has to import the raw materials and export the products to make money which leads me to the following questions, why doesn't the game give us what we need? Why does it force us to engage with trade? Why can't trade be part of the player's freedom of choice to use trade or not and not only to be 'free' in choosing which commodities to export or import? If the game provided us with

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<sup>101</sup> Whenever the GamerZakh says we it's because he's doing this for an audience and not because he's actually playing along with other players, but just to include the presence of the viewers as well.

a real choice on always having the needed raw materials to supply our city using commodities in terms of their use value rather than always having to exchange commodities giving them an abstract value that makes us need the Deben as a universal equivalent to get other goods for our city rather than making everything from the land and not engaging with exchange at all.

The rest of missions in this game are essentially the same thing, once the player are capable to grasping concepts of capitalist exchange through the game mechanics and always making a profit and not going into debt then that player would be successful at completing the rest of the objectives. The only thing that the game does to make it more interesting to the player is that his people would demand more types of goods or by making the combat and military missions more challenging for instance expecting the player to engage in a heavy war related mission while also maintaining a rich and prosperous city, but the core of the game never changes and it always remains to be commodity exchange.

## CHAPTER III

### BIOSHOCK

Others have done some research and have looked into BioShock and it is important to mention their work on the topic of capitalism in BioShock. The author Van Den Berg<sup>102</sup> explains how BioShock could provide an answer to resistance to capitalism as it resists dominant the neoliberal model by being a representation of Ayn Rand's construct of a dystopian capitalist fantasy but at the same time recycles ideology surrounding late capitalism. Krogulec<sup>103</sup> is also concerned with the links between Ayn Rand and BioShock and talks about how objectivist philosophy is the main concern in criticizing BioShock and draws several parallels between the game and 'Atlas Shrugged'<sup>104</sup> such as Galt's Gulch being represented by Rapture and how they're both supposed to be a hidden capitalist utopia that isn't controlled by politics, religion or ideology. Speaking of Galt's Gulch Packer instead of drawing parallels between BioShock and Ayn Rand's philosophy he instead makes it a point in his "The battle for Galt's Gulch: BioShock as critique of Objectivism"<sup>105</sup> that there are anti-Objectivist messages in the game seeing how everything is presented to the player as a ruin of a once promising utopia. Aldred and Greenspan<sup>106</sup> discuss the dystopian turn BioShock

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<sup>102</sup> Van den Berg, Thijs. "Playing at Resistance to Capitalism: BioShock as the Reification of Neoliberal Ideals." *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 12, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>103</sup> Krogulec, Jakub. "Popular culture's take on modern philosophy: Video game Bioshock as a criticism of Ayn Rand's objectivism." *Literatura i Kultura Popularna* 19 (2013). P. 79-91.

<sup>104</sup> Rand, Ayn. *Atlas shrugged*. Penguin, 2005.

<sup>105</sup> Packer, Joseph. "The battle for galt's gulch: bioshock as critique of objectivism." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 3 (2010): 209-224.

<sup>106</sup> Aldred, Jessica, and Brian Greenspan. "A man chooses, a slave obeys: BioShock and the dystopian logic of convergence." *Games and Culture* 6, no. 5 (2011). P. 479-496.

takes in terms of game world building and how at the same time it critiques as well as celebrates utopian notions of technological progress and free will.

Some have studied BioShock in regards to player freedom and in particular the illusion of freedom given to players such as in Tulloch's "A man chooses, a slave obeys: agency, interactivity and freedom in video gaming."<sup>107</sup> Adam Ruch<sup>108</sup> makes both points of capitalism as well as discusses concepts of freedom in BioShock and summarizes Rapture through the vending machines found in the game and states,

*"Rapture may be best summarized by the vending machine that sells genetic mutagens and high-explosive ammunition like candy bars. These are not mere game-mechanical devices; both are plausibly explained in the story of uncontrolled capitalism combined with unimpeded scientific experimentation, and a civil war. They are unlike the less plausible ammo and health packs found scattered throughout other game worlds, seemingly for no reason at all."*<sup>109</sup>

An interesting look on how the creators viewed player agency and freedom Levine outlines his take on this subject matter during an interview with Dan Shu in Electronic Gaming Monthly,

*"You know, there is a notion of free will in games—but you don't really have a lot of free will in games. You get quests. Somebody tells you to go do this thing, and if you want to succeed in the game, we very naturally give up free will [to do so]...In retrospect, you are a little puppet in videogames. I said, "Well, let's turn that into the narrative." Because I'd always rather piss off the gamer than the character. I'd always rather insult the gamer directly. If you have a villain, make it personal. Make the gamer feel like the villain's bitch, not the character. When we came up with this notion, that you can sort of have the villain manipulating the player, to a degree that when the player finally realizes it, he's already been manipulated for quite a long time, and then sort of realizes that this is what happens in every game, but you don't even think about it...I thought it was a nice little way to comment, not just on BioShock, but to make gamers think about their experience of free will when they play games."*<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Tulloch, Rowan. "A man chooses, a slave obeys: Agency, interactivity and freedom in video gaming." *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 1 (2010). P. 27-38.

<sup>108</sup> Ruch, Adam. "Interpretations of freedom and control in Bioshock." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 1 (2010). P. 84-91.

<sup>109</sup> Ruch, Adam. "Interpretations of freedom and control in Bioshock." *Journal of Gaming and Virtual Worlds* 2, no. 1 (2010). P. 86.

<sup>110</sup> Shu, Dan. "BioShock: Going Deep with the Game's Creator." *Electronic Gaming Monthly* 221 (2007). P. 44-46.

BioShock is a first person shooter that was developed by 2K Boston (later becoming Irrational Games) and 2K Australia. It was published by 2K Games and released during August 2007 initially then it was re-released with the BioShock: The Collection that included a re-mastered version of the original BioShock as well as two other BioShock games in the series. The re-mastered version of BioShock didn't change anything from the original version except for visual and performance enhancements. The research dealt with BioShock on the original version, as it is the first of the games that is most relevant to the research at hand. Set in 1990 the protagonist (controlled by the player) Jack is a passenger on an airplane that crash lands close to a lighthouse that contains a bathysphere that takes him down to the underwater city of Rapture. Rapture was intended to be a utopia until the discovery of ADAM, a genetic material that gave people superhuman powers.

The following is a detailed description of my experience while completing BioShock. The plane crashes into the water and there's nowhere else to go except for the daunting lighthouse nearby and when I tried swimming away from the lighthouse the oil on the surface of the water ignited creating a raging fire that forced me to head towards the lighthouse. Upon entering the room is pitch black and after a few steps in the lights turn on revealing a large statue in the middle holding a red banner that reads "No gods or kings. Only man." And the plaque at the bottom said, " 'In what country is there a place for people like me' – Andrew Ryan." The lights lead ahead to a room with stairs going down the sides and the bathysphere in the center. While descending the stairs to enter the bathysphere there are three large metal plates hung on the walls each depicting one of the following: art, industry, and science, these are seemingly the three foundational pillars upon which Andrew Ryan has built his utopia.

After entering the bathysphere, it begins to slowly go down further into the ocean and a visual recording made by Andrew Ryan plays out in front of the player character that says, "I am Andrew Ryan, and I'm here to ask you a question. Is a man not entitled to the sweat of his brow? 'No!' says the man in Washington, 'It belongs to the poor.' 'No!' says the man in the Vatican, 'It belongs to God.' 'No!' says the man in Moscow, 'It belongs to everyone.' I rejected those answers; instead, I chose something different. I chose the impossible. I chose... Rapture, a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, Where the great would not be constrained by the small! And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well." After this introduction by Andrew Ryan the bathysphere had reached its intended destination and the player is contacted by a man called Atlas over a shortwave radio inside the bathysphere and Atlas says, "Would you kindly pick up that shortwave radio?" after that the player has to pick up the radio in order to proceed with the game. So after picking up the radio and taking the first few steps into rapture I noticed many different signs scattered around the floor, the kind of signs usually seen at protests and some of them read 'Rapture is dead', 'we're not your property', and 'Ryan doesn't own us' hinting at the fact that this entire city is no longer the utopia it was intended to be.

After traversing this small section Atlas contacts the player again through the radio asking, "would you kindly find a crowbar or something?" and indeed the player must pick up a near by crowbar to progress the game and break into a new section that introduces what plasmids. Plasmids are injected into the body to change rewrite someone's genetic code in order to give them certain abilities and another radio message from Atlas explains, "Plasmids changed everything. They destroyed our

bodies, our minds. We couldn't handle it. Best friends butchering one another, babies strangled in cribs. The whole city went to hell." After finding a revolver and continuing along with the game I came across a few dollars scattered below a phone booth and like with many of the items or usable objects, the game gives the option to select a 'what is this' pop up so that it could explain whichever item the player doesn't directly understand how to use. So I decided to do that with the dollars and got the following informative text that read, " Money is used primarily to purchase items of vending machines, but it can also be used to automatically succeed at hacking, get health from health stations, and turn off security alarms at security shutdown panels. There may be other uses for money as well."

When approaching a segment of the game where the player is moving on a few rafters above a stage that overlooks a little girl that seems to be harvesting a corpse, Atlas again says, "would you kindly lower that weapon for a minute?" Here the character in the game lowers his weapons even if the player controlling him with the actual controller doesn't give the command probably so that no player who ever plays this game attempts to hurt the little girl who is a type of npc crucial to the game play. Atlas now explains the importance of the little girl, "You think that's a child down there? Don't be fooled. She's a Little Sister now. Somebody went and turn a sweet baby girl into a monster. Whatever you thought about right and wrong on the surface, well, that don't count for much down in Rapture. Those Little Sisters, they carry ADAM, the genetic material that keeps the wheels of Rapture turning. Everybody wants it; everybody needs it."

At this point in the game, I finally came across one of those vending machines described in the informative text about money and it's uses in this game. After clicking

on the vending machine to have a look at the different items available for purchase you also get a prompt about what you need to do if you want to hack it to get discounted prices and more items. In order to actually succeed at hacking the vending machine the player must complete a puzzle-like mini game in which he needs to create a path using pipes so that a liquid can flow from one end to the determined location. Once that is completed the hack is successful but instead of spending time and effort that is greatly dependent on the skill of the player being able to complete the mini puzzle game, the player can 'buy it out' if he has enough money. Buying out the vending machine automatically hacks the machine successfully for a certain price.

Once the player reaches an area known as the medical pavilion an audio diary by someone called Steinman, who is the most important surgeon in Rapture, says, "Ryan and ADAM, ADAM and Ryan... All those years of study, and was I ever truly a surgeon before I met them? How we plinked away with our scalpels and toy morality. Yes, we could lop a boil here, and shave down a beak there, but... but could we really change anything? No. But ADAM gives us the means to do it. And Ryan frees us from the phony ethics that held us back. Change your look, change your sex, and change your race. It's your to change, nobody else's." Another audio note left to the player also by Steinman says, "ADAM presents new problems to the professional. As your tools improve, so do your standards. There was a time, I was happy enough to take off a wart or two, or turn a real circus freak into something you can show in daylight. But that was then, when we took what we got, but with ADAM... the flesh becomes clay. What excuse do we have not to sculpt, and sculpt, and sculpt, until the job is done?" The medical pavilion is what I believe to be the 'science' pillar as previously mentioned there are two other pillars that Rapture seems to have been founded on; 'art' and



‘industry’. The discovery and the use of the genetic material known as ADAM in each of these sectors of Rapture is what had led to Andrew Ryan’s utopian image of Rapture rapidly descend into the current dystopia the player is exploring.

The main enemy type that the player fights off during his exploration of Rapture are known as ‘splicers’ as in the people of Rapture who got too ‘spliced-up’ because of using ADAM to alter themselves severely have eventually lost their minds and their bodies became totally dependent on ADAM to remain alive. Steinman, the surgeon, was using ADAM in order to make all his patients look good, we know this from the audio tapes as well as sections in the game when the player comes across a ghost of a previous citizen in Rapture saying, “you promised me pretty Steinman, you promised me pretty, now look at me, now look at me!” The people of Rapture as well as the elites such as Steinman sought after ADAM. ADAM was the raw material used in the creation of the plasmids that gave people different powers depending on the plasmids they got and they also needed it to survive as their bodies become dependent on it.

Plasmids were even used as a commodity in the form of a marketing incentive in the game as the player can find a poster that reads, “Free Plasmids at Danny Dental – for a limited time get a free plasmid by Ryan Industries at Danny Dental with any root canal!” As the player continues through the medical section of the game, he finds more and more audio notes, this time from Andrew Ryan on the topic of vandalism and it states, “It has been brought to my attention that some citizens have discovered ways to... ‘Hack’ the vending machines. I should not need to remind each and every citizen of Rapture that free enterprise is the foundation upon which our society has been established. Parasites will be punished.” This audio note was found near two different vending machines and when I attempted to hack them I realized the different level of

difficulty of each so I decided to try and buy them out and as aforementioned the higher the hacking difficulty the more expensive it is to buy out as if saying that the more labor I'm going to out into hacking the machine then that means it will cost me more if I wanted to use my money to automatically succeed in the hack and not go through all the trouble. The high difficulty machine costs 128 dollars to hack while the machine with low difficulty only costs 10 dollars in this case. On a side note, the machines even say, "Welcome to the circus of values" every time the player clicks on them.

After progressing through the Medical Pavilion the player finally encounter Dr. Steinman himself, who's now "been driven to insanity by the ADAM-assisted search for perfect beauty"<sup>111</sup> He attacks the player and the player is forced to kill him in order to proceed with the game. Soon after the player again encounters a Little Sister and this time her usual protector the Big Daddy is already dead and the Little Sister who harvests the ADAM is up for grabs as the radio turn on and Atlas says, "here's a little one, here's your chance to get some ADAM." Upon approaching the Little Sister the player is face with two choices. The choices are either to 'Rescue' or 'Harvest' the Littler Sister, now picking any of the choices will result in acquiring ADAM. Harvesting her will yield maximum ADAM but she will not survive the process while rescuing her will yield less ADAM but Tenenbaum, the woman responsible for creating the Little Sisters in the first place, promises to make it worth your while later in the game. Atlas urges the player to harvest the Little Sister but the ultimate choice is for the player to make but Atlas takes this opportunity to say, "you need all the ADAM you can get to survive." A final audio diary left by Steinman gives us even more details about

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<sup>111</sup> Funk, Wolfgang, Florian Groß, and Irmtraud Huber, eds. *The aesthetics of authenticity: medial constructions of the real*. transcript Verlag, 2014.

the Little Sisters as it says, “Not only are those little girls veritable ADAM factories, they’re nearly indestructible. They regenerate any wounded flesh with stem versions of the dead cells. But their relationship with the implanted slugs is symbiotic... if you harvest the slug, the host will die. ‘So you see it’s not like killing’ Tenenbaum said, ‘it’s more like removing a terminal patient from life support’.” From this audio note the player finds out that the Little Sisters were made by implanting the little girls with some sort of slug seemingly and probably found somewhere at the bottom of the ocean given rapture’s location.

ADAM can be used by the player to purchase gene upgrades at the ‘Gatherer’s Garden’ which is essentially another vending machine that the player can use to purchase plasmids and since ADAM is the material from which plasmids are made it only makes sense that this is how the game treats ADAM for the player...as a means of exchange. The player can use ADAM to have his pick from the many different gene upgrades and plasmids found inside the gatherer’s garden machine, but it is essential and necessary to spend ADAM at those machines so that the player can continue further into the game. The choice the player has here is an illusion, without spending ADAM on plasmids the player cannot go to essential areas in the game to continue and finish it and the only ‘free’ choice he has is not whether to engage in or not engage in the system of exchange but rather only to chose which commodities satisfy his needs or fetishes for example in my case with purchasing plasmids I found that I needed something like the plasmid that gave me the ability of flame so that I could proceed to other areas in the game and complete it eventually, but I also found several other plasmids that are not a must but rather more of a fetish as they provided me with different strategies with the combat. I did not need to purchase the plasmid that enabled me to freeze my target solid

for instance but I wanted to. I wanted to spend the extra ADAM I had left to get that ability as it made the style of combat for me more satisfying while playing the game.

The next few areas that the player encounters in the game is where most of the 'Industry' section of Rapture is created and the underlying yet prominent theme in place. But before going into detail about that, it is worth mentioning that every time the player encounters a Little Sister after the first time he got to either harvest or rescue, she'd be accompanied by a still living Big Daddy serving as her protector and so the player would have to defeat the Big Daddy first then he'd get the opportunity to harvest or rescue the Little Sister. Taking down a Big Daddy is especially difficult for a new player to do as the process usually forces the player to use up most of his bullets and resources fighting it since the Big Daddy is heavily armored and made to withstand most attacks in order to be able to protect the Little Sister while she harvests ADAM.

After a lot of time and labor is spent in dealing with the Big Daddy the player is not only rewarded ADAM from the Little Sister but when searched the Big Daddy's corpse always has a lot of money on it, in my case it was usually over a hundred dollars (148 dollars) to be exact from the first Big Daddy I had to take down myself and this amount of money is generally enough to stock up on a few more resources from the vending machines. In this case, the player has spend time, effort, and labor in order to get some ADAM from the Little Sister as well as a good sum of money from the Big Daddy so that he then could exchange both ADAM and money for commodities at their respective vending machines.

Neptune's Bounty the next major area in the game is where the player really starts to understand the general dynamic between Andrew Ryan and another character known as Freddie Fontaine and the general structure of industry within Rapture. One of

the first audio diaries the player could find is of an interrogation when Sullivan, a man hired by Andrew Ryan, was trying to find out from a man called Timmy where exactly is Fontaine and his crew. The second audio diary is by Andrew Ryan and it says, “Something must be done about Fontaine. While I was buying building and fish futures, he was cornering the market on genotypes and nucleotide sequences. Rapture is transforming before my eyes. The Great Chain is pulling away from me. Perhaps it’s time to give it a tug.”

Later on in the area known as Arcadia, the player comes across an audio diary from Andrew Ryan that explains what the Great Chain is and it states, “I believe in no God, no invisible man in the sky. But there is something more powerful than each of us, a combination of our efforts, a Great Chain of industry that unites us. But it is only when we struggle in our own interest that chain pulls society in the right direction. The chain is too powerful and too mysterious for any government to guide. Any man who tells you different has his hand in your pocket, or a pistol to your neck.” Continuing with the Neptune’s Bounty area an audio diary from Tenenbaum describes how she saw one of Fontaine’s smugglers playing catch but this surprised her since that smuggler’s hands were previously crippled during the war but the other day he was bitten by this sea slug while unloading the barge and the next morning he was able to move his fingers again. From this the player gathers that Fontaine is a smuggler of goods into Rapture and that the sea slug is the source of the discovery of ADAM and its capabilities. Another audio diary from Tenenbaum specifically about discovering ADAM says, ”This little sea slug has come along and glued together all the crazy ideas I’ve had since the war... it doesn’t just heal damaged cells, it... resurrects them... I can bend the double helix... black can be reborn white, tall, short, weak, strong... But the

slugs alone are not enough... I'll need money... and one other thing..." This other thing that she is referring to is the little girl and this entire statement really reinforced the very first thing we hear from Andrew Ryan that in Rapture the scientist is not bound by petty mortality that would have arguably stopped Tenenbaum from creating the Little Sisters in the first place by using the sea slug and the ADAM in stead of telling the player now that he should be recusing them she would have been able to put a stop to the constant use of ADAM before Rapture's downfall since rapture was supposed to be the capitalist utopia where people's self interest guides society in the right direction then Tenenbaum had no reason to stop her research.

Rapture started leaking given its location underwater and when the person in charge tells Andrew Ryan that they need to build rapture as if it was a bathtub to correctly deal with the water issues, Ryan's response gives us a nice insight about what he meant for Rapture to be since he says in response to the bathtub idea, "We're not gonna build no bathtub... we're gonna build Eden." After a little while when getting into the Smuggler's Hideout section in the game an audio diary from Peach Wilkins a member of Andrew Ryan's crew describes what was the current scenario is like when working for him, "We all come down here, figured we'd all be part of Ryan's great chain. Turns out Ryan's chain is made of gold, and ours are the sort with a big iron ball around your ankle. He's up in Fort Frolic banging fashion models... we're down in this dump yanking guts outta fish. Fontaine's promising something better. He's like one-of-us, you know, he's worked a day in his life. He says meet him at his fish-packing joint at 11. I'll go, bring a couple of guys. Hey, it's not like things could get a lot worse." Later another audio diary from Peach Wilkins confirms that Fontaine has ADAM and

everybody wants it and that Ryan is only good at talking which wearing nice suits and that everyone of these people are capable of seeing what's going to happen later on.

Now we enter Arcadia, yet another section in Rapture filled with greenery and trees and it is in here where the player can find a diary explaining how ADAM was being mass produced with the intention to be sold later on and it is Tenenbaum who says in his audio diary, "The augmentation procedure is a success. The slugs alone could not provide enough ADAM for serious work. But combined with the host... now we have something. The slug is embedded in the lining of the host's stomach and after the host feeds we induce regurgitation, and then we have twenty, thirty times yield of usable ADAM. The problem now is the shortage of hosts. Fontaine says, 'patience Tenenbaum. Soon the first home for little sisters will be open, and that problem will be solved...'" From this it is obvious how ADAM is being produced and the slugs are the source, and the little sisters are the means of production, and it because of this that people in Rapture start to realize who will start being in control. The entire war between Ryan and Fontaine would not have occurred before the discovery of ADAM given how Rapture was functioning normally with everyone following their own self-interest. After that finding an audio diary from Julie Langford uncovers for of the core capitalist ideals of Andrew Ryan as the audio diary explains Langford's thoughts on the closing of Arcadia as it plays, "Today Arcadia was closed off to all but paying customers. The man hires me to build a forest at the bottom of the ocean, and then turns a walk in the woods into a luxury. Ryan asked, 'Should a farmer not be able to sell his food?' 'Is a potter not entitled to a profit from his pots?' I started to argue with the man and then I remembered who signed my checks. Only thing worse than a hypocrite is an unemployed one."

Another audio diary from Andrew Ryan reveals more insights into the ideology in Rapture as he explains, “There has been tremendous pressure to regulate this Plasmid business. There have been side effects: blindness, insanity, death. But what use is our ideology if it is not tested? The market does not respond like an infant, shrieking at the first of displeasure. The market is patient, and we must be too.” Again the market is not regulated by anything and no products are taken out of the market because of any dangers they might have on the citizen since morality doesn’t hold anyone back from progress. Later an audio diary from Ryan to Gregory reinforces the general idea as Ryan tells Gregory the following, “Gregory, don’t come whining to me about market forces. And don’t expect me to punish citizens for showing a little initiative. If you don’t like what Fontaine is doing, well, I suggest you find a way to offer a better product.” As if the solution to what was happening in Rapture was to find better products.

Even in Arcadia, the forest and main oxygen source of Rapture, the main reason why Julie Langford was able to grow and maintain Arcadia was because of ADAM when she decides to finally use it from what the player could gather while listening to one of the last audio diaries found in Arcadia, “Who says you can’t teach an old hound ne tricks? This batty plant woman spends four years coming up with ways to defoliate trees in the Pacific to scare out the Japs, and now, here I am, down at the bottom of the Atlantic, trying to figure out how to do the same thing in reverse. ADAM, ADAM, ADAM... It’s bathtub gin, times the atom bomb, times Eve with the serpent. Let’s go see what it can do.”

The fact that the trees in Arcadia were a success this prompted a purely capitalist decision and plan of action to occur which was basically selling oxygen, after all this is



Rapture and as Ryan might put it... should the one who made the source of the oxygen not be entitled to a profit from one's produce? The player learns about the plans to sell oxygen from yet another audio diary from Langford as she suggests, "Now I'm a woman of science, but I'm also a woman who's not afraid of turning a buck or two. Ryan said if I could boost profits in Arcadia, part of the up would ride on my hip. So I get to thinking, we're paying for oxygen when we got photosynthesizing trees... Hell, we can even sell the extra to the rest of the city and undercut the other guys. Ryan will like that for sure – Fontaine's people have move into the O2 biz tooth and claw." We also learn that she wasn't the first one to sell oxygen. Everything in rapture is about creating products with no moral boundaries as to what they could lead to and then selling them for a profit in Rapture's market and all this self interest based on pure capitalist intentions will prompt the 'Great Chain' to move society in the right direction.

When going through the Farmer's Market section of the game, which is relatively short, only two audio diaries contain useful information. One that explains how desperate Ryan has become during this war against Fontaine since the player learns that Ryan's team was working on modifying the structure of the Plasmid products to have them make the user vulnerable to mental suggestion i.e. mind control. Through pheromones the minds of the citizens of rapture could be controlled and free will would be given up. This to Ryan is abhorrent since to him free will is the cornerstone of Rapture, however he continues to concede that they are at a time of war and if Atlas (who is Fontaine) was to get his hand on such technology he would use it against them too and so desperate times call for desperate measures. The other audio diary is by Tenenbaum who was finally able to specifically explain how ADAM worked and why it was so useful as a material in business products. She says, "ADAM acts like a benign

cancer, destroying native cells and replacing them with unstable stem versions. While this very instability is what gives it its amazing properties, it is also what causes the cosmetic and mental damage. You need more and more ADAM just to keep back the tide. From a medical standpoint, this is catastrophic. From a business standpoint, well... Fontaine sees the possibilities.”

After completing the Farmer’s Market section, the player enters Fort Frolic and just as the name suggests it’s the section of Rapture filled with cocktail lounges and the like for people’s entertainment. Not much is learned about the ideology of Rapture or how ADAM as a needed commodity comes into the general downfall of Rapture, but there are a few things the player is able to figure out through some of the audio diaries found in this section. For instance, Sander Cohen the main antagonist in this section of the game says that Rapture is going to hell because of the doubters as in the people who started and continue to doubt what Andrew Ryan’s vision is leading to because of the blood in the streets and because sometimes people disappear or having the little sisters around and that it wouldn’t eventually lead to a better society and utopia that Andrew Ryan promises, the utopia that is guided by totally self interest in capitalist structure. Other audio diaries suggested how Sander Cohen simply tidies up after Andrew Ryan’s corrupt policies cause a mess.

Once the Farmer’s Market is completed, the player reaches Hephaestus the section that is home to the Hephaestus Power Facility, which is that main power production source for Rapture designed by Andrew Ryan. An audio diary by McDonagh explains Ryan’s first move to spark the war between him and Fontaine since Andrew Ryan bought out Fontaine’s Futuristics and claims that it’s better for the city this way and that he’ll break it up later on. In another audio diary he also expresses that

if he must then he will kill Andrew Ryan in order to stop the war and save Rapture. Here the idea of Rapture being a utopia is no longer linked to the existence of Ryan himself, it seems that the ideology in some way has reached the citizens of Rapture as a dominant idea of society independent of having Andrew Ryan around. A phrase from another of McDonagh's audio diaries describes how bodies are rotting in the streets of Rapture but citizens are still rounding up the block wait for Plasmids. Eventually Ryan started to use Plasmids as weapons to build an arms race, the side with the better and tougher Plasmids would decide the fate of Rapture.

Ryan says, "To build a city at the bottom of the sea! Insanity. But where else could we be free from the clutching hand of the Parasites? Where else could we build an economy that they would not try to control, a society that would not try to destroy? It was not impossible to build Rapture at the bottom of the sea. It was impossible to build it anywhere else." But when you think about it Ryan has become in some way the parasite when he took ownership of Fontaine Futuristics claiming it was for the good of the city, is that not what happens in the real world that Ryan is doing the impossible to avoid. He claims the governments to the Parasites and he intended Rapture to be "a city where the artist would not fear the censor, where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality, where the great would not be constrained by the small! And with the sweat of your brow, Rapture can become your city as well." His pursuit of power, taking over the place where Plasmids are made, Plasmids that could not have been a commodity possible without the discovery of ADAM and its introduction into Rapture. Ryan's perspectives are more evident in the following audio diary, "Is there blood in the streets? Of course, have some chosen to destroy themselves with careless splicing<sup>112</sup>?

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<sup>112</sup> When citizens use too many plasmids and ADAM.

Undeniable. But I will make no proclamations; I will dictate no laws, the Great Chain moves slowly, but with wisdom. It is our impatience that invites in the Parasite of big government. And once you've invited it in, it will never stop feeding on the body of the city.”

When making his way to Andrew Ryan's headquarters the player ends up in a room where possibly the most shocking discovery is made in game. A large board filled with pictures of previous characters in the game the player learnt about linked across the board and the phrase 'would you kindly' written in red ink across the board. It turns out that a mind control experiment was successful and that the subjects to the experiment would have to do whatever they're told to as long as the phrase 'would you kindly' is used. In this section of the game the player is also told that he is the son of Andrew Ryan who regarded him as a disappointment since Andrew Ryan believed in free will and free will was taken away from the player every time the phrase would you kindly comes into play.

Going back to the start of the game, and noticing how many times this phrase was used by Atlas over the short wave radio. First when Atlas asks Jack (the protagonist that the player plays as), "Would you kindly pick up that short wave radio?" Second, right before Jack is supposed to pick up the wrench, "Would you kindly find a crowbar or something?" Third, when the player sees the first little sister in the game, Atlas says, "Careful now... would you kindly lower that weapon for a moment?" Fourth, when progressing to a different area in the game after the Neptune's Bounty section "Head over to Fontaine's Fisheries when you're ready, would you kindly?" Fifth time is when the player is supposed to craft an item to maintain oxygen in Rapture, "would you kindly get this thing crafted already. Air's only getting thinner down here." Sixth,

“Would you kindly leg on over to the sphere and get on down to Hephaestus?” It was again used to take the player to the next location in the game. The seventh time was when Atlas asks Jack, “Now, would you kindly head to Ryan’s office and kill the son of a bitch?”

Finally the player meets Andrew Ryan in the flesh at his office, Andrew Ryan explains how Atlas was using Jack all this time using the mind control phrase and toys with the player asking him to “Sit, would you kindly?” and to run and so on to make his point that the player truly did not have any free will whenever that phrase was used and during this time makes a speech about how ‘A man chooses and a slave obeys’. Eventually Ryan using the would you kindly phrase asks the player to kill him and after that Atlas contacts the player and finally makes him reveal that he is in fact Freddie Fontaine, Ryan’s enemy in the war for Rapture as he was using the player all along to achieve complete control. Eventually the game ends with the player finally overcoming the mind control effect and having a final battle with Fontaine who’s become a genetically altered monster (the final boss of the game) because of his extreme use of ADAM and the way the player defeats him is by literally removing the ADAM out of his system.

The player had no choice in many of the core decisions in the game in fact the only choices the player made was the time he decides to take while exploring, listening to the audio tapes, fighting enemies, and choosing which weapons and plasmids to use. The weapons are necessary to complete the game and overcome the enemies but the choice of which weapon to use and upgrade and purchase ammo for is entirely up to the player. The plasmids are necessary to access areas essential to progress through the game but choosing which plasmids to purchase and upgrade is also entirely up to the

player. The choice is in the different commodities made available to the player through the exchange of money or ADAM but not in the general ideology that Rapture is based on. We have the choice of many commodities yet not outside the realm of commodity exchange and capitalist ideology.

Rapture should have been a utopia but was corrupted by the very same ideology Andrew Ryan thought was too regulated by the parasites in our world and that to him self interest is the only way for society to thrive if it wasn't hindered by morality. Capitalism regulated in our world is capitalism and unregulated in Rapture is still capitalism. If Rapture was supposed to be a utopia or 'Eden' according to Andrew Ryan then why was it founded on the core ideology of Capitalism and commodity exchange? Because apparently even in video games our society cannot escape the reality of capitalist structure even if the setting is a complete new fantasy to explore.

ChristopherOdd a content creator on YouTube and current live streamer on Twitch also tackled BioShock. I chose his play through of BioShock since his general approach to heavy plot and story-based games is very detailed and clear for viewers to follow as well as this is what his channel is known for. ChristopherOdd starts his journey into BioShock as any other player would, but for someone with a mass following on both YouTube and Twitch then one can only assume that people care about this person says and how he approaches the game. A quick look into Reddit <sup>113</sup>shows how his channel has been suggested as one to watch when it comes to BioShock. His first few comments at the start of the game when he finds the Plasmids really describe what a video game attempts doing when it comes to creating an entirely

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<sup>113</sup>[https://www.reddit.com/r/Bioshock/comments/1pxueq/decent\\_bioshock\\_lets\\_plays/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Bioshock/comments/1pxueq/decent_bioshock_lets_plays/)  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/letsplay/comments/25bqa1/im\\_looking\\_for\\_a\\_bioshock\\_2\\_lets\\_play\\_to\\_watch/](https://www.reddit.com/r/letsplay/comments/25bqa1/im_looking_for_a_bioshock_2_lets_play_to_watch/)

different world since he says, “What kind of magical world is this?” and when scrolling through the different Plasmid options, “All sorts of different ones too.” It’s phrases like these that reinforce a games fantasy and in the case of the second quote it’s the variety of commodities available since Rapture is run purely on Capitalist ideology.

He later discovers that Plasmids aren’t the only choices of commodities he gets as he’s trying out different consumable items in the game such as cigarettes that affect the player differently. He says things like, “I don’t know what’s going on exactly, but I really want to find out” which is exactly the sort of curiosity the dystopian state of Rapture wanted to elicit from the player as to encourage him to dig deeper into story. When searching a Big Daddy, the enemy we previously discussed as to always have a significant amount of money on it since it takes a lot of effort from the player to defeat it and consumes a lot of ammo, ChristopherOdd exclaims, “Ooo lots of money.” And when he talks about Andrew Ryan he comments, “So this man has created his own little dystopia here” and we know full well that Rapture was intended to be a utopia, but since the game was successful with getting the dystopian feeling across to the player in this case ChristopherOdd through the online community surround him and his viewers of that video then ChristopherOdd’s comment on the dystopian nature of Rapture was not only a thought of his own but rather a thought that would be heard by thousands of his followers.

After a few parts into the game he comments, “I need to get to the vending machines to get some eve, and armor piercing rounds.” He mentions this directly after having to take down a Big Daddy, and since he gets that significant amount of money from the Big Daddy that makes it possible for him to go spend it on stocking up on some supplies. In this case as with many of the cases in BioShock the player has to

engage in commodity exchange in order to be able to acquire what he needs and survive through the game while completing the objectives. He also makes a quick quip about the prices in the vending machines, “Things are at a premium in this game, ammo and everything.” And as we’ve learned before the machines can be hacked with a little more effort for time and labor invested by the player and a successful hack of the machine lowers its prices. While hacking a torrent he remarks, “I’ll buy it out, just for the hassle.” When short on money the vending machines say phrases such as, “come back when you get some money buddy.” While ChristopherOdd is commenting, “I just need to find a jackpot of money.” When he’s using the research camera item in the game, which reveals enemy weakness when their picture is captured, he runs low on film and directly decides to buy the film from vending machines. Health packs, which are essential for the player’s survival are accessed by spending money at the vending machines if the player doesn’t want to go through the trouble for exploring every single nook and cranny where a health kit could be either found or not. Concerning the vending machines he also comments, “Spend all our hard earned cash on it.”

He later remarks about the fact that Rapture is underwater and how to him this is very bizarre and later on when he discovers that people started to sell oxygen in rapture as a commodity he exclaims, “Now they’re selling oxygen! That has me concerned in numerous ways.” From this particular quote it is clear how in this player’s case the idea of unregulated capitalism doesn’t sit well. At some point he tried explaining to himself what he thinks is going on “I’m looking at ADAM as this hardcore drug, it started out where it was healing people, Tenenbaum found out that the slug healed some guy on the dock, and then she took these slugs and figured out how to get more ADAM from these slugs, and that’s where the little girls came from they found out if you had them in



someone's stomach they would build up faster, but because Ryan has this lack of direction in this place, he kinda has everyone doing what they want, there was no rationing of this ADAM and people were able to abuse it, and yes it worked out for a well while, and people were able to repair, be healthy, and kinda fix some of their imperfections, and they started using it too much and the ADAM started deforming people (they need more ADAM to maintain the changes they had made) and so people got addicted to this shit, because of that the hospitals didn't need to do anything because ADAM fixed everything, so the hospitals started to give people incentives to come to the hospitals such as what happened with the dental clinics, they were offering a plasmid with dental care"

After he's done with this explanation of his thoughts on rapture to himself as well as to his viewers an hour or so later he says, "I'm sucked into Rapture, I don't want this to end." A phrase any fantasy game would want to elicit from its players. At a certain point when he finds himself with both money and ADAM to spend ChristopherOdd states the following, "I've got a lot of money, I should stock up" and, "I have so much money, which is completely contradictory to what I've said in the first 6 to 7 hours of this game." After this he started to purchase different plasmids. Later when he was totally full on health and eve he was able to purchase other items that he wanted and comments, "I'm buying things to just buy things." Having a full wallet and lots of money in Rapture not only means that ChristopherOdd could buy different items and plasmids but also he's capable of buying out machines instead of hacking them as he states, "I have enough money now, how much cheaper can it get?" talking about making the prices in the vending machines after hacking them or buying them out in this case. After the big reveal with Frank Fontaine taking over Rapture from Andrew

Ryan and the big would you kindly reveal that the player was mind controlled by that phrase ChristopherOdd comments, “what do I need money for now? My life is f-ed. I’m being used and abused here, do I have other choices?” and then comments about how the whole thing was about Frank Fontaine turning Ryan Industries into Fontaine Futuristics and that the whole thing was a corporate take over. One quote by Frank Fontaine is, “I’ve got Rapture now! I’ve got the ADAM now.” This is a direct relation to owning means and the source of production in Rapture, which is the ADAM. A few last things that ChristopherOdd does before the end of the game is that he continually buys out vending machine, security cameras, and torrents instead of hacking them saving him the labor.

This has been ChristopherOdd’s experience with the game, which is public and viewed by many in the gaming community especially those in specific to the Odd community who are his subscribers and supports. There remains to be a few more things to be said about BioShock for instance about utopia in BioShock that turned into a ruin and as mentioned by Wark, “rather than a retreat from the world, showing in its positive creation of a new world what the actual one beyond its line lacks, utopia becomes something else.”<sup>114</sup> And when looked at closely a very obvious comparison can be made between Adam Smith and Andrew Ryan’s “Great Chain” this is clear from Zupancic’s words on Adam Smith’s ‘capital’ idea,

*“As elements of social order, individuals are driven by egotistic drives and pursuit of their self interest. But out of these purely egotistic pursuits grows a society of an optimal general welfare and justice. It is precisely by ruthlessly pursuing one’s own interest that one promotes the good of society as a whole.”*<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 106

<sup>115</sup> Zupancić, Alenka. "SEXUAL IS POLITICAL?." *Jacques Lacan: Between Psychoanalysis and Politics* (2015). P. 97.

## CHAPTER IV

### SOULS-BORNE AND THE ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY

“Gaming in 2017 is about more than just picking up a pad and playing your favorite game with friends. Sometimes you just want to kick back, put your controller down, and watch someone else do the hard work.”<sup>116</sup> Generally the person you are watching play the game is live streaming. What is live streaming? “Live streaming is quite simply, broadcasting content as it happens. That’s it! Millions of people around the world broadcast anything and everything live as it happens, and that includes gaming.”<sup>117</sup> Live streaming is the biggest thing to happen to gaming in years and it is through this platform some people gather a rather impressive following of viewers who are not only entertained by their content and commentary but also care and listen to what a particular streamer says. In February of 2005 when YouTube was founded, there wasn’t an easy way an easy way for gaming fans to share videos before YouTube, or even to find them. Gaming fans had to hope someone had the equipment to record videos – which was expensive and awkward to use back then – and a place to upload them.<sup>118</sup>

As evident by the immense amount of gaming content found on YouTube today then it’s safe to say that content creation for gaming has gotten easier with time. In June 2011 Twitch was launched. “The gaming side of Justin.tv has outgrown its original home and is separated into its own site, Twitch.tv. While Justin.tv let its users broadcast anything and everything (within reason), Twitch focuses on games and games alone.

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<sup>116</sup> Blake, Vikki et al. *Gaming Live*. New York: Scholastic Inc. September 2016. P. 7

<sup>117</sup> Blake, Vikki et al. *Gaming Live*. New York: Scholastic Inc. September 2016. P. 8

<sup>118</sup> Blake, Vikki et al. *Gaming Live*. New York: Scholastic Inc. September 2016. P. 11

Playthroughs of games and broadcasts of e-sports competitions proved particularly popular.”<sup>119</sup> This all might seem strictly virtual, but what makes it hyper-real is that it goes beyond the virtual and into the ‘real’ world through the biggest gaming conventions in the world such as E3, Legends of Gaming, Insomnia, Twitchcon, PAX, Gamescom, Vidcon, Streamcon, Buzzcon, and Summer in the City. Everyone in the gaming industry, the developers, publishers, streamers, content creators, viewers, and fans uses all these events. It solidifies their online reality as well as the gaming communities they belong to. The gamer today is no longer this stereotype of the teen living in the basement and secluded from society but rather the gamer today is part of a ‘real’ community being virtual or physical or both. When streamers and content creators go to these events and schedule meet ups with their fans a lot of things are discussed such as general questions to how these streamers started off their streaming careers and advice to prospective streamers and content creators. This after analysis from a sociological perspective comes hand in hand with some of Weber’s views on capitalism. “Today’s capitalism, then, which has come to dominance in economic life, creates and trains, by means of “economic selection,” the economic subjects – the entrepreneurs and workers – that it needs.”<sup>120</sup>

“Certainly, capitalism demands for its growth the presence of a surplus population that it can hire cheaply on the “labour market”.”<sup>121</sup> When it comes to gaming these conferences and events are the primetimes in which people who are not streamers or content creators might at least think about being a part of it, if not they are still

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<sup>119</sup> Blake, Vikki et al. *Gaming Live*. New York: Scholastic Inc. September 2016. P. 12

<sup>120</sup> Weber, Max. *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin, 2002. P. 13.

<sup>121</sup> Weber, Max. *The Protestant ethic and the "spirit" of capitalism and other writings*. Penguin, 2002. P. 17.

meeting these other people who doing that and the community grows. The more live streamers and content creators there are the bigger the fan base is then the more people are playing or even just watching more and more video games that inherently reproduce the ideological framework of capitalist society. The job of a fulltime streamer or content creator is very different that someone who works a normal job, but it is also very similar in several aspects. Suzy Lu<sup>122</sup> currently a full time content creator who sometimes live-streams does this for a living. Interviews done by the Gaming Live magazine with Suzy Lu reveals a general conception of what someone's life is like when doing content creation and live streaming as a full time job. Her 'day in the life' entails a schedule from 8 am till 11pm showing us that people who do this fulltime don't just make the content or live stream the game and make money just like that but there are many other things that go on behind the scenes from community interaction to editing content<sup>123</sup>. This is of course one example and other might do it differently but the end result is that they make a living of this being their full time job.

The money these people make come from various sources as previously discussed including some rather sizeable donations to the streamers or content creators by their fans so that they are able to do it fulltime (there are cases when it's not fulltime but fans still donate money to their preferred content creator or live streamer). Why? What makes the fans want to give out money to these people? Is it something about these people that makes their fans willing to contribute? In order to explain this the thesis resorts to Max Weber's views on personality and charismatic leadership in particular.

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<sup>122</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/SuzyLuGME>

<sup>123</sup> Blake, Vikki et al. Gaming Live. New York: Scholastic Inc. September 2016. P. 44-47.

Weber distinguishes between bureaucracy and charisma in particular in terms of structural organization as well as leadership. It is in the section of the sociology of charismatic authority where ties with the online gaming community starting to form. “In contrast to any kind of bureaucratic organization of offices, the charismatic structure knows nothing of a form or of an ordered procedure of appointment or dismissal. It knows no regulated ‘career,’ ‘advancement,’ ‘salary,’ or regulated and expert training of the holder of charisma.”<sup>124</sup> A career in live streaming or content creation only advances as long as the player continually proves themselves to the community, there is no stable salary rather the streamer or content creator largely depends on financial donations and support of their viewers even though Weber explains how charisma shuns the possession of money and pecuniary income he also states that this is not always the case<sup>125</sup>. For instance, when discussing the prophets of doom Sara Ferris explains the prophets did not preach for gain especially since people wouldn’t have paid to hear about their own deaths, but this highly charismatic vocation was performed without economic gain was what allowed them to preserve their charismatic character<sup>126</sup>.

When it comes to online gaming community leaders, especially for full timers, it is important to have a sustainable amount of income, but as previously mentioned it is not always the case that charisma shies away from money. Which is why when compared directly to a quality of online gaming community leaders “If they recognize him, he is their master – so long as he knows how to maintain recognition through ‘proving’ himself. But he does not derive his ‘right’ from their will, in the manner of an election. Rather, the reverse holds: it is the duty of those to whom he addresses his

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<sup>124</sup> Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge, 2009. P. 246.

<sup>125</sup> Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge, 2009. P. 247.

<sup>126</sup> Ferris, Sara R. *Max Weber’s theory of personality: individuation, politics and orientalism in the sociology of religion*. Brill, 2013. P. 118.

mission to recognize him as their charismatically qualified leader.”<sup>127</sup> And “the charismatic leader gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life.”<sup>128</sup> Or at least when it comes to the live streamer or content creator it is proving his know-how and skills to the community. Now of course some online gaming community leaders might eventually stop being perceived as a leader to the community because if it depends on his or her charismatic leadership then charismatic authority is by its very nature unstable<sup>129</sup>. To better understand the relationship the online gaming community, the live streamers, the content creators, and the leaders amongst them. The following case analysis of the souls/borne online gaming community and the games themselves was done.

Demon’s Souls developed by FromSoftware and published by Sony Computer Entertainment in 2009 was the first installment in the souls/borne series that have now become an entirely new and different gaming genre in the gaming industry. After Demon’s Souls, FromSoftware continued to develop Dark Souls 1, 2, and 3 that were published by Bandai Namco Entertainment in 2011, 2014, and 2016 respectively as well as the game Bloodborne published by Sony in 2015.

The souls/borne games are famous for being extremely challenging, convoluted, difficult, and rich in story and lore. These games came out during a time when games were beginning to be very mainstreamed and easy for players to grasp, but when it comes to the souls/borne games the players had to learn to adjust to a series of games that challenged them in more ways than one. They demand the player to be extremely patient when playing and players learned the hard way through dying over and over

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<sup>127</sup> Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge, 2009. P. 246 – 247.

<sup>128</sup> Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge, 2009. P. 249.

<sup>129</sup> Weber, Max. *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge, 2009. P. 248.

again in these games that ‘button mashing’<sup>130</sup> will not get them far in fact it failed them. These games also required the players to correctly manage different stats (health, stamina, strength, dexterity, intelligence, faith and so on.) that in some of these games, but not all of them, when their ‘souls’ are invested into these stats there’s no way of changing it and the games automatically and constantly save all player progress whether positive or negative so player had to adapt to taking decisions after much consideration to how this would affect their gameplay. These games never told players where to go using an in game compass that points to their objectives, instead players had to listen intently to the dialogue provided in the game by different npcs that might come across and there was no map to show them where they were going or where they have been, instead players had to remember almost every step of the way. Even the story in every game was hidden in all the different item descriptions and npc dialogues that players really had to dig into and figure out what it’s all about while searching for a sense of purpose at the same time. These games also have online features through which players can cooperate<sup>131</sup> or ‘invade’<sup>132</sup> others players. The only way players could communicate is through none verbal gestures that the souls/borne community has a general consensus on what these gestures mean in cooperative play or in player v/s player.

The first two of the souls/borne games (Demon’s Souls and Dark Souls) did not have a matchmaking system that friends’ who knew each other in ‘real’ life would use this forced the players to be complete strangers either helping each other out or challenging each other. It was back then when knowing what the gestures meant really

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<sup>130</sup> When players rapidly press random buttons on their controllers in hopes of achieving success.

<sup>131</sup> When a player cooperates with another player they aim to help make it through the area and defeat the boss in order to progress.

<sup>132</sup> When a player invades another player, the goal is to defeat the other player who is making it through the game.



matter and got players to actually be involved through the community to work together in order to understand what is going on. For instance one of the gestures is a bow gesture, apparently the community uses the bow gesture in order to indicate either a greeting during cooperative play or more importantly to indicate an honorable duel during player v/s player. The reason behind this is because when a player would invade another player the fight could take an excess amount of time since one healing item if used would regenerate the users hit points<sup>133</sup> and so to avoid all this the players would bow to each other indicating that they agree to the community rules to an honorable duel without using any healing items. Eventually the rest of the game developers included specific in game arenas so players could challenge one another based on the rules already agreed upon by the community, but that did not stop the players from continuing to use their dueling system outside of the arenas. What would happen is that players designate a good area or areas in the games that they would use to either duel or host fight clubs<sup>134</sup>.

The players of these games had to come together as an online gaming community in order to understand, discuss, entertain, compete, and co-operate. “Demon’s Souls demanded that its player master its complex armor and weapons systems, or face severe punishment – a design at odds with the industry-wide trend for simplification. It took gamers a few weeks to realize that this wasn’t a typical power fantasy so much as a test of mettle and patience. It also had a unique feature: players were able to leave messages for each other in the game world, scrawled on floors and walls. They could warn of nearby hazards – or trick players into death. It was a highly

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<sup>133</sup> It is only when all hit points are depleted that a player dies.

<sup>134</sup> Fight clubs are when the host player summons in several invading players so that the invading players duel each other instead of fighting the host.

prescient implementation of social mechanics into a single-player game, and one that dozens of developers have since copied. A vibrant community built up around the game, with experienced players writing guides and sharing their wisdom on forums.”<sup>135</sup>

Over the years several of these players took to content creation and live streaming, and some of them till today hold a revered position in the souls/borne community a position of leadership. The type of content created by these people in the souls/borne community can be categorized under the following labels; lore, walkthroughs and guides, speed-runs, player v/s player, comedy and creative, beyond gaming. Take for example VaatiVidya<sup>136</sup> a content creator on YouTube who has become the leader of the community in terms of lore and story analysis without his content it would have been incredibly difficult to grasp the complex stories in the souls/borne games. There are of course other channels that have committed to understanding the stories and lore of the games but VaatiVidya’s channel is the first exclusive soul/borne channel to reach over a million subscribers on YouTube; what this person says about anything that has to do with the underlying stories of the souls/borne games is taken as fact to many even though it’s entirely opinion granted backed up by in depth analysis of the games.

Another channel that holds a leadership position in this community is that of EpicNameBro<sup>137</sup> mainly because of his personal involvement with writing and translating the online guide for the games and for his connection to the developers themselves, furthermore he has created the most extensive and details dark souls one ‘let’s play’ and guide the community he also started streaming on Twitch. These to

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<sup>135</sup> Parkin, Simon. Bloodborne creator Hidetaka Miyasaki: ‘I didn’t have a dream. I wasn’t ambitious’. The Gaudrian. March 31, 2015.

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/VaatiVidya>

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/EpicNameBro>

channels greatly contributed to the community in terms of discussion and understanding the souls/borne games. Other channels have different focuses such as Peeve Peeverson<sup>138</sup> who is mainly known for his skill and prowess in player v/s player situations, but Peeve Peeverson was capable of doing more than that, he moved the souls/borne community on two main occasions. The first was the ‘return to the nexus’<sup>139</sup> event that encouraged souls/borne players to go back and play through Demon’s Souls and engage as much as they could in online activity in terms of cooperation and player v/s player so that that new as well as returning players could get the multiplayer experience even until today<sup>140</sup>. Players also used sites such as Reddit to communicate about the status of the online activity in Demon’s Souls and where they needed help or where they are willing to meet other players inside the world of Demon’s Souls to engage in player v/s player<sup>141</sup>. Because of Peeve’s ‘return to the nexus event’ the community was motivated enough to continue and apply this to the rest of the souls/borne games and the events are known as ‘return to Lordran’ for Dark Souls 1<sup>142</sup>, ‘return to Drangleic’ for Dark Souls 2<sup>143</sup>, and ‘return to Yharnam’ for Bloodborne<sup>144</sup> but Dark Souls 3 is still relatively an active game in terms of multiplayer and the

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<sup>138</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/PeevePeeverson> and <https://www.twitch.tv/peeve>

<sup>139</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Af5RpGU0Fxm>

<sup>140</sup> Unfortunately at the end of February of 2018 the online servers of Demon’s Souls were deactivated by the developers of the game, it is yet to be seen how this deactivation will effect the yearly ‘return to the nexus event’ since more research would have to be done at a later date during October of 2018 to see if players will still go back to playing the game separately with no online activity or if they would just stop playing during this event.

<sup>141</sup> <https://www.reddit.com/r/demonssouls/>

<sup>142</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/70ziaa/return\\_to\\_lordran\\_2017\\_information\\_and\\_how\\_to\\_be/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls/comments/70ziaa/return_to_lordran_2017_information_and_how_to_be/)

<sup>143</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/DarkSouls2/comments/7xbsqy/its\\_time\\_for\\_return\\_to\\_drangleic\\_coming\\_february/](https://www.reddit.com/r/DarkSouls2/comments/7xbsqy/its_time_for_return_to_drangleic_coming_february/) and <https://www.pcgamer.com/dark-souls-2-launches-return-to-drangleic-community-event/>

<sup>144</sup> [https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/5wx72f/return\\_to\\_yharnam\\_begins\\_march\\_10th\\_annual/](https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodborne/comments/5wx72f/return_to_yharnam_begins_march_10th_annual/)

community still hasn't dedicated a specific time for a return event since the game was the latest in the series, but there is no doubt that such an event will take place when the community feels like the online activity has died down.

The second thing that Peeve Peeverson did was that he motivated the community to join him in a player v/s player covenant of his own making known as the BloodShades<sup>145</sup>. Peeve created this covenant of players in order to combat the 'gankers'<sup>146</sup> in Dark Souls 3 and in his YouTube video on the BloodShades he explains the general goal of the covenant. This triggered the emergence of another player run covenant known as 'The Crusaders'<sup>147</sup> run by Oroboro<sup>148</sup> who is well known in the community also for player v/s player game play mainly as a Twitch streamer. Both these player run covenants have Discord<sup>149</sup> servers making it easier for players to interact, plan, and share their experiences together. Other channels such as lobosjr<sup>150</sup> are primarily known for the incredible level of skill making it possible for them to go through the games by restricting themselves to beating them under certain conditions for example only using a specific weapon (bow only, miracle only, sorcery only, fists only, no hits taken, speed-run<sup>151</sup> etc....) or by not investing into making their avatar stronger therefore making the game more challenging and the more a player is able to

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<sup>145</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6SCYfYK4pE> and <https://www.reddit.com/r/bloodshades/>

<sup>146</sup> Gankers are players that team up against one other player and make the odds consistently not fair.

<sup>147</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcx2NDG7TmM> and [https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/56zxqp/crusaders\\_the\\_counterbloodshade\\_covenant/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/56zxqp/crusaders_the_counterbloodshade_covenant/)

<sup>148</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC73Us1H9hvx\\_5oobyLDOyw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC73Us1H9hvx_5oobyLDOyw) and <https://www.twitch.tv/oroboro>

<sup>149</sup> Discord is a communication website and application that people can use to chat, and is very popular among gamers.

<sup>150</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/LobosjrGaming/featured> and <https://www.twitch.tv/lobosjr>

<sup>151</sup> Completing the games in the shortest amount of time possible.

successfully complete such challenges the more he or she solidifies their position in the community.

Some community leaders managed to turn a concept generally perceived as undesirable, unethical, and despised. This particular concept is ‘trolling’ which generally means that an Internet troll is someone who goes online to chat rooms; community forums and so on so elicit and provoke arguments. “It appears trolling is an act of intentionally provoking and/or antagonizing users in an online environment that creates an often desirable, sometimes predictable, outcome for the troll.”<sup>152</sup> Sure there might be trolls on many online forums or chat rooms, but what an in-game troll in a souls/borne game is a player that makes other’s online gaming experiences extremely uncomfortable or annoying that it gets them to either give up, disconnect, or send ‘hate mail’<sup>153</sup>. Fighter.PL<sup>154</sup> and Lost My Sanity<sup>155</sup> These channels managed to turn this concept into such an entertaining part of the souls/borne games through well-edited and good content created on their YouTube channels. The majority of souls/borne players who play online player v/s player know these ‘trolls’ and their alternate online personas such as Lost My Sanity’s “The Pale Man” or Fighter.PL’s nude avatar that only wears the in game head wear known as the ‘thrall hood’.

The souls/borne community goes beyond that just entertainment and content creator ParagonDS<sup>156</sup> made his mark on this community when he spoke up about mental

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<sup>152</sup> Griffiths, M. D. "Adolescent trolling in online environments: A brief overview." *Education and Health* 32, no. 3 (2014). P. 85.

<sup>153</sup> A private message to that conveys the emotional reaction of the person being trolled.

<sup>154</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/Fightertzysko>

<sup>155</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/user/nr3756>

<sup>156</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC4lscv3AWUHbhdIb-ors3kA>

health and dark souls<sup>157</sup>. He explains his experiences with mental health, depression, and anxiety and how these games and his involvement with the souls/borne community helped him cope through it. He even had a discord channel<sup>158</sup> dedicated for people with mental health issues to discuss their experiences with others in hopes of finding some sort of support. The souls/borne community not only contributes moral support but also on many occasions has contributed financially to charity particularly through the ‘souls-giving’ movement taking place as a yearly event since 2015 and a general idea of what it’s all about and the people involved can be seen in their main twitter<sup>159</sup> page including several of these community leader have managed to raise money for those in need. Even outside of this event Lobosjr once amassed an amount of \$56,000 for cancer research during one of his 24-hour live streams<sup>160</sup>. Gaming for charity is not only restricted to the souls/borne community but rather video gamers from all sorts of gaming communities have helped raise generous amounts of money for several different charity organizations including Extra Life, Child’s Play, Electronic Frontier Foundation, charity: water, and American Red Cross. In 2013 CNN wrote about the story behind Jeromy Adams and cancer patient Tori Enmon and their reaching out to the video gaming community for support<sup>161</sup>.

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<sup>157</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ExAT42tE4Qk> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIAQ95dRFeo> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVK-TLUbz\\_I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVK-TLUbz_I)

<sup>158</sup> Which at this time no longer exists, but ParagonDS references it in the videos on dark souls and mental health he’s made

<sup>159</sup> <https://twitter.com/souls giving>

<sup>160</sup> <https://imgur.com/a/c9uRK> and

[https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/6e1dwr/lobosjr\\_has\\_raised\\_56000\\_for\\_cancer\\_research/](https://www.reddit.com/r/darksouls3/comments/6e1dwr/lobosjr_has_raised_56000_for_cancer_research/)

<sup>161</sup> Dawson, Christopher. Playing video games to raise millions for charity. CNN. October 28, 2013.

All the souls/borne games (Demon's Souls, Dark Souls 1,2, and 3, and Bloodborne) are alike in certain aspects, which is why they're all very popular amongst the souls/borne community. Some of these aspects are the combat, game design, the way the story is told through vague dialogue, item descriptions, and the placement of where you find certain things in the game world, and maybe the most important game aspect that these games share is the feeling of satisfaction from finally overcoming a particular challenge this could also be linked to pleasure and enjoyment that comes from success after attempting so hard to achieve it. The challenge could be the main area boss fight, or traversing the different areas themselves and finally reaching a place of respite. It could also be finally figuring out the correct path to go through after hours of searching trying to figure out what the next objective is since everything is rather convoluted or perhaps it was defeating an online player who invaded your world for the first time. This might be painful either physically from too much time laboring away or emotionally having to face so much defeat and disappointment but, "The full acceptance of the pain itself as inherent to the excess of pleasure which is jouissance."<sup>162</sup> It seems like this is what the souls/borne games is basing their 'feeling of satisfaction' system on and having pain directly related to pleasure.

There are many circumstances in these games that elicit this type of feeling in the player that all the time he or she spent trying to do something was worth while and the many deaths have finally accumulated into an actual learning experience that the player was finally able to benefit from. 'Bloodborne' as a game title is different to all the others that have 'souls' in them differs that the others instead of the medieval setting it has more of a Victorian/Georgian aesthetic to it and a general Lovecraftian horror

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<sup>162</sup> Žižek, Slavoj. *The plague of fantasies*. Verso, 1997. P. 41.

feel. Besides that the game generally follows the same combat concepts (even though Bloodborne is faster paced and perceived to be more aggressive). The two things that remain constant and key to the success of all these games are the following; first, the ability for them to provide this feeling of great satisfaction and achievement after a long time of trying and failing and second, the online community behind them.

The more important and common aspect in the souls/borne games in relevance to the thesis is the approach to the universal equivalent in these games. The currency equivalent in these games is 'Souls' for the games Demon's Souls, Dark Souls 1, 2, and 3 and 'Blood Echoes' for Bloodborne. Every item you pick up in these games, every item you create, and every enemy you defeat has a value to them represented by souls/echoes. All the games function the same you traverse through an open area exploring, talking to npcs, and fighting enemies that stand in your way. Enemies give the player their souls/echoes that is accumulated at the bottom right of screen in all these games. The player holds on to this currency and slowly bit by bit through the area the player accumulates a good amount of souls/echoes that can be used to either buy items from npcs or the player could use these souls/echoes to level up and invest said souls/echoes into their character making them better at whatever they invested in such as strength, dexterity, health, and many other options so that they could shape and build their character in whichever way they want. Every time the player invests into leveling up their character the next level requires more and more souls/echoes making it more difficult for the player to level up and making it so that the player needs to hold on to their souls/echoes and continue to accumulate them until they reach the amount needed to level up.



One fascinating game mechanic the souls/borne games share is that when the player dies they leave a stain in the spot that they died, and this stain contains all their accumulated souls/echoes until they come back and pick them up again, but if they die on the way back without picking up their accumulated souls/echoes they will lose them all and there's no way of getting them back unless they go through the entire area again or simply just forget them and proceed this deprives the players from purchasing more useful items or leveling up. This teaches the players to ultimately get better but there's another gaming mechanic that could help getting more souls/echoes that also applies to the souls/borne games and that is 'Farming'. In the souls/borne context farming is not done for people to make real life profit but rather to accumulate more and more currency for leveling up or for stocking up on items, but the concept remains the same even if the currency is not profitable in real life the players still want it and need it.

'Farming' in these games is possible because of another game mechanic that makes all the enemies come back to life after the player uses a place of respite<sup>163</sup> that serves as a check point in some sense and replenishes some of their items to help with their journey but also gets all the enemies to come to life again and the player has to get better and better by fighting them over and over until they have no need of using the respite area again but instead push forward and explore more having gained confidence in their abilities to overcome the enemies in the area. Every time the player kills the enemies they will earn the souls/echoes from them and every time the player rests at the place of respite the enemies come back and so the player can again defeat the enemies for more and more souls/echoes; this is what is known as 'farming' in the souls/borne community and games. This of course means that the players have to put in their time

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<sup>163</sup> This place could be a bonfire, a lamp; an arch stone depends on the game. Dark Souls 1,2 and 3 all have bonfires and so it is most commonly perceived as a bonfire.

and labor if they want to farm for souls/echoes and their time and labor is earning them this currency that they could then spend in game.

Every area in these games always leads at some point to an area boss. An area boss is usually the final challenge before the player can progress and it's a much harder fight than anything the player got used to while going through and exploring the area. The player then tries and tries again to defeat the boss and after doing so is rewarded with a boss soul that they player could use to gain many more souls or they could exchange the item or use it in creating a unique weapon that is also generally valued at a higher amount of souls if it was to be sold to an npc in the game. The thing is that bosses do not come back if the player rests at the place of respite and so bosses could not be 'farmed'. There is one way for players to farm the bosses actually and that is through co-operative play. The player could be summoned into the world of other player who have no yet defeated the area boss and they could all help in that task and if successful the players are all rewarded with souls/echoes and in a sense the player was summoned in to help was compensated for their time and labor for doing the same area and boss again while helping someone else.

There are even in game items in all these souls/borne games that increase the amount of souls/echoes the player gets every time they defeat an enemy making these items the perfect equipment when it comes to 'farming' and so in some way the game either inadvertently or not promotes the continuous and ever growing need to accumulate more and more currency. The covetous silver serpent ring in dark souls 1,2 and 3 (covetous commonly means having or showing a great desire to possess something belong to someone else and in these games is generally coveting the souls and power of others) and the item description reads "A silver ring depicting a snake that

could have been, but never was, a dragon. Fallen foes yield more souls. Snakes are known as creatures of great avarice... perhaps it is time for some old-fashioned greed.”<sup>164</sup> Another item of the like can be found in Demon’s Souls called ‘Ring of Avarice’ (avarice is commonly known to mean extreme greed for wealth or material gain) and its in game description reads, “A luxurious gold ring fitted with a large jewel. It allows its wearer to obtain more souls when slaying enemies. It was a symbol of wealth and debauchery.”<sup>165</sup> The Bloodborne item equivalent to these is the ‘Moon Rune’ that lets the player gain more blood echoes when defeating enemies.

All this game mechanics might seem a complex to someone who hasn’t played it or even to someone playing it for the first time, but they’re made much easier when there’s an entire community of players online either in the games themselves or on the internet forums and social media popular among gamers such as YouTube and Twitch. The community leaders are mainly the ones to look out for as they expose players to the games and to the community itself. They also act as the glue that holds the community together providing much needed information, entertainment, inspiration, and gathering the community members together for causes beyond gaming. People came together because of games that were complex, challenging, and unlike any of the games in the market and people stayed together, created content, shared their experiences, and benefited others on social, moral, and financial levels because they all felt part of something greater than each of themselves individually; an online gaming community; the souls/borne gaming community.

Now imagine that the games didn’t have any capitalist aspects to them, and that the games had something new or different to the socioeconomic capitalist structure we

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<sup>164</sup> In game item description of the covetous silver serpent ring in dark souls 3.

<sup>165</sup> In game item description of the ring of avarice in demon’s souls.

know. What if a community such as this, with leaders of compelling charismatic qualities and members so dedicated to a cause beyond than just achieving their individual goals was based and brought together because of a video game that challenges everything we know about society today? Instead of simply reproducing the dominant ideologies in our society such as capitalism.

## CHAPTER V

### END GAME

#### **A. Limitations**

One of the strongest limitations to this thesis is that the topic of video games and the online gaming community is constantly changing on a daily basis, as new content is created everyday. New live streamers stream every day and the gaming events, panels, and conferences are just too many to be able to cover without an entire research team. So limits to only observing one gaming community specifically that of the souls/borne community had to put in place, while there are more communities revolving around the rest of the games in this study which are the Skyrim community, the Pharaoh community, and the BioShock community.

Another limitation is that it would have been fruitful to interview the creators and the team members behind the games themselves, this would have provided much insight into the creation process and what sort of thoughts run in their heads while making the games. Whether they are aware of the capitalist implications in their work or are they also taking it for granted as the dominant socioeconomic standard in society and in the games they make.

An additional limitation is that it would have been beneficial to create a survey in order to exactly understand how the online gaming community members themselves think about the content creators and live streamers that they follow and support. These sorts of limitations are mainly because of the chosen methods of research although the method used in this thesis remains to be the most adequate in terms of fully

understanding what these games are like, and how the online gaming communities function.

Quantitative data about subscriber count on YouTube or number of followers on Twitch might have been helpful but the thing is with these types of gaming community sites it won't actually reflect whether or not that person is very active or very influential to the community. But having the quantitative data cross-referenced and analyzed could have further helped to serve as a way of backing up the qualitative findings. All these could be implemented in future studies when it is easier to reach people in the gaming industry or it is possible to conduct quantitative research for more analyses.

## **B. Future Research**

With the amount of technology involved in video games they've become an immersive and life-changing platform through which people can create, explore, experience, share, and work in. Video games can be updated, patched, and changed making them highly adaptable to people's opinions. If a sword in Dark Souls is considered too powerful making it unfair for players online then the developers simply patch in a fix for this issue. If a visual flaw where graphics haven't rendered properly in the massive fantasy world of Skyrim makes it difficult for players to be totally immersed in the virtual world then it could be also be patched and fixed. Changes in today's video games are a simple download and installation away so one day a game might look like one thing and the next day if the creators really wanted to the game could be something totally different.

So a video game that reproduces capitalism could have some of its capitalist aspects taken out in a way that doesn't entirely stop the game from functioning but does

in fact hinder the players from doing what they're used to or from engaging with a system that is always something taken for granted. This could lead to different things taking place for instance the players could voice their complaints to the game creators, or they could stop playing the game entirely which means they rejected what happened to the game and how it changed, or they could create modifications to the game code and bring back the old system if they are able to which means they went back to the old system that they're used to, or they could actually stick around and accept that this is how it will now be, or they could find a way around the changes as a community. The same could occur if the changes made to the game were not about removing capitalist aspects but rather adding something new or something experimental.

For future research a video game could be designed and developed that doesn't reproduce capitalism but rather explores alternatives or solutions to issues in capitalism itself. Perhaps instead of having a game so different might make players uncomfortable in grasping the general concept of how its virtual world functions and therefore it might be a better idea to progressively introduce concepts foreign to the player into the game in hopes of being able to study the players reactions to such changes. Utilizing the gaming communities for spreading the game and having players more involved would also help especially later when it is time to assess the impact of the game and whether or not players would actually be interested in something in the game to be implemented in the 'real' world.

### C. Conclusion

There is more to gaming today than there ever was to gaming in the past or other forms of entertainment. Today many use video gaming as a platform to much more than just entertainment. Video games could be a means of establishing social relationships either online in the virtual worlds or physically in the ‘real’ world, games could also be a canvas for the artist or designer, they could be simulations of reality or a training exercise for development, and games themselves can move people enough to bring them together in the form of a community. There is so much that a video game can do or lead to, and it feels like the surface of such potential is only being scratched.

We must dig deeper into the prospects of what the gaming world can offer and what we can offer to it as to help it grow, adapt, and change. What questions do we have that aren’t currently answered? We should direct these questions to the games themselves. Video games and the gaming community allow for the ‘what if’ questions to some extent maybe today but with the continuous, rapid, and even drastic advancements in technology video games may some day our questions might be answered and our problems in society could be solved.

Look to video gaming for answers, look to the games for creativity and alternatives, look to the gamers for passion and belief in a world that helps them be who they are. Look to the gaming communities for solidarity and growth. Finally, open your eyes to see the potential of video games, your minds to think of what they could help do for society and social change, and open your hearts to accept them. “So by all means necessary, be a gamer, but be a gamer who thinks – and acts – with a view to realizing the real potentials of the game.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer theory*. Harvard University Press, 2009. P. 25.



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