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## Playful Capitalism, or Play as an Instrument of Capital

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# Abstract

This article applies Gray and Suri's concept of Ghost Work and Ekbia and Nardi's concept of Heteromation to the analysis of Quick, Draw!, a game-like product developed by Google. The article argues that digital capitalism uses the act of playing as an instrument to make exploitative labor practices feel more engaging, while camouflaging their being work.

# Introduction

Digital technologies have caused an acceleration in the evolution and propagation of mutant forms of capitalism, from platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) to surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). From a philosophical perspective, the Information Age (Floridi, 2014) is characterized by a process of re-ontologization (Floridi, 2015) in which the nature of the world is changed so that artificial systems can perform operations and therefore be considered to have agency. Some political philosophers and media scholars have identified this ontological change from the analog to the digital as central to understanding new forms of capitalism that emerge to extract value from labor in the digital age (Fuchs, 2019).

In this context, digital commodities such as videogames have been studied as examples of new instruments and manifestations of capitalism and its ideology (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009; Hammar et al., 2019). The economics of videogame production have also been widely studied as examples of digital capitalism (Joseph, 2018; Parker et al., 2017). The material turn in game studies (Apperley & Jayemane, 2012) also called for a closer look at the role of digital games in contemporary capitalism.

This article continues this line of inquiry, broadening the research field from videogames to the activity of digital playing, understood as the activity of playing mediated by software. These forms of digital playing, from gamified services (Bogost, 2015; Deterding, 2012; Deterding et al., 2011; Huotari & Hamari, 2012; Lieberoth, 2015; Nelson, 2012) to playful interfaces (Deterding, 2016; Ferrara, 2012) can be used as illustrations of the different forms that the activity of playing takes in digital capitalism.

This paper will question the role of playing in digital capitalism, taking as a starting hypothesis that the activity of playing is being coopted by capitalism to create new forms of value extraction and exploitation. In the western world, playing is often considered to be a force for liberation and self-expression (DeKoven, 2013; Henricks, 2016). This article analyzes the use of this activity as an instrument for extractive practices in digital capitalism.

Drawing on the theory of play and agency by Nguyen (Nguyen, 2020), this article focuses on the relation between agency, software, and capitalism, in the context of playable forms of engagement with digital technologies. The starting point is Fisher's concept of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009). In order to make capitalism more palatable, corporations have resorted to forms of playful engagement to emotionally and economically engaged users. Playful labor (Kücklich, 2005) is used as a way of emotionally engaging users with platforms to exploit them. The article will propose the case study of *Quick, Draw!*, a game-like software produced by Google that was used to amass data to train machine learning models. This form of playful heteromation (Ekbia & Nardi, 2017) is an example of the role of play in digital capitalism.

The article will identify the ways in which capitalism is appropriating play to further exploitation and labor extraction in the digital world. However, the argument will not end in despair. As Haraway has noted (Haraway, 2019): "Through playful engagement with each other, we get a hint of what can still be and learn how to make it stronger". Drawing again on Lugones and Nguyen (2020), as well as on readings of Marx on the act of playing (Henricks, 2006) and the playful forms of engagement that happen in work (Roy, 1959), the article will conclude with a sketch of a future in which play can become an emancipatory practice in digital capitalism.

# Playing and Agency

Classic accounts of play tend to draw the distinction between the ludic and work with arguments about lack of productivity and the intrinsic purpose of play (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 1971; Suits, 1978). In these accounts, play is described as an activity that has no other purpose than the activity itself, that produces nothing of value, and that is done for its own sake. The validity of these arguments has been questioned (Ehrmann et al., 1968; Stenros, 2015), but it should be acknowledged as being critical to the

colloquial understanding of playing in our culture: to play is not to work, they are opposites.

With this understanding of play in mind, the characterization of the activity has traditionally focused on the elements that make it a separate, non-productive way of engaging with the world, ignoring forms of labor that are intrinsically related to play. In other words: the act of playing is not separate from the world, there is no magic circle, and the ludic can always be studied in the context of politics, social life, culture, and ethics (Consalvo, 2009; K. L. Gray, 2014; Taylor, 2018).

In this article, the activity of playing is understood as not being separated from the world. Playing is not in opposition to work either, but instead is understood here as a modality of agency. According to Hendricks (2016), "playing is said to be a pattern of involvement with the world" (Kindle location 461). Similarly, Sicart's considers playing a mode of being in the world (M. Sicart, 2014), a way of thinking that (Stenros, 2015) is enriched by a Goffmanian understanding of the social practice of playing. More specifically, this article adopts and extends Nguyen's (2020) work to claim that play is a form of agency that can be inscribed in particular technologies and media. Nguyen (2020) argues that games are the aesthetic form of agency because "they are a method for inscribing forms of agency into artifactual vessels" (p.1). In Nguyen's work on gamification, forms of gamification that allow for value capture and reduction are criticized, as they are understood as a form of modification of agency and values that might as well be considered unethical.

Drawing on these two ideas, the activity of playing can be considered a specific form of agency that can be inscribed and communicated in games as well as in other playable media. Playable media is any media that is designed to afford a form of playful engagement and interaction (Deterding, 2015). In the aforementioned literature on videogames and imperialism (Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter, 2009), it can be noted that the way agency is inscribed in certain videogames forces players to enact the rhetoric of empire and colonialism.

The role of play as an instrument of capitalism is not limited to videogames. Because play is a type of agency that can be inscribed in media, capitalists can use the activity of playing to promote the engagement with exploitative forms of technology. Beyond propaganda and labor exploitation in the videogame industry, there are more forms of predatory capitalism making use of the agency of play. For example, Nguyen argues that gamification can lead to value capture, understood as a phenomenon that happens when:

> 1. Our values are, at first, rich and subtle.

> 2. We encounter simplified (often quantified) versions of those values.

> 3. Those simplified versions take the place of our richer values in our reasoning and motivation.

> 4. Our lives get worse (ibid p. 201).

Gamification can make those who engage with it act on simplified versions of values, which are not only often quantified as but also designed to encourage the values of extractive predatory capitalism (Bogost, 2015). When health becomes quantified, when values become statistics and it is possible to compete for friendships and attention, the user becomes the product, and the data produced in that system of values becomes a commodity (Grosser, 2014; Zuboff, 2019). Nguyen (2020) argues that gamification can be a form of value capture that drives on the pleasures of a particular form of competitive play. This article extends this argument to propose that play can be used as an instrument not only for capitalist value capture, but also for value extraction through labor dressed up as play.

More specifically: play-driven gamification software can be used to increase productivity while promising workers more "fun" types of engagement with work. Networking on LinkedIn can be seen as a competitive, agonistic game (Huizinga, 1971) in which every contact is a point in a forever growing competition. Sports applications gamify health not because they care about their users, but because this is an efficient way of gathering data that can be packaged and resold, making the user a playful product (Lupton, 2016; Moore & Robinson, 2015; Till, 2014; Whitson, 2013). The value of fun, the liberating and educational possibilities of play (DeKoven, 2013; Piaget, 1997) are co-opted in narrow forms of competitive play that reward quantifiable and commodifiable actions. If videogames can be the propaganda instruments of imperialism, the appropriation of play by capitalism can make all forms of playable media instruments for exploitation.

This appropriation draws on the corruption of play (Caillois, 2001) as form of agency. Capitalism adopts the capacity of play to engage pleasurably with the world. The concept of play behind this appropriation draws on the classic theories of western play as a voluntary activity that allows for an appropriation of the world for its own sake. As Henricks puts it, "in play people are oriented towards satisfaction arising from their performance in the event. They desire experiences of completion, which serve as the behavior's principal rationale. And they purse those satisfactions by actively manipulating the circumstances before them" (Henricks, 2016, Kindle Location 834). Play is also a form of agency related to order, more specifically to the imposition, acceptance, and relation to order in the world (Huizinga, 1971). Games provide this order explicitly thorough rules. Playable media does so by encouraging certain behaviors and rewarding them (Gaver, 2009). Capitalism draws on a form of play that encourages a play-driven relation to rules that facilitate pleasurable experiences while facilitating the extractive processes of capitalism. Labor and commodification become parts of ludic experiences.

This article focuses exclusively on the agency of play in the context of digital interactions within capitalism. Platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) or surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) both draw on the revolution that digital technologies have brought to post-industrial societies (Floridi, 2014; Pasquale, 2015). Software shapes and is shaped by the cultural and social environment in which it is developed, and that narrative (Vertesi & Ribes, 2019) is particularly interesting when it comes to an analysis of software, capital, and play. As Sicart has pointed out (M. Sicart, 2018; M. A. Sicart, 2020), play and software both change the nature of the world, and that is one of the reasons why there are so many ways of playing with software, from videogames to digital toys and gadgets.

To understand the role of play in platform capitalism, this article presents the following arguments: for software to change the nature of the world, it requires its precise rules and processes to be followed and related to by all other agents around it, like humans (Floridi, 2011). One way of accepting rules as a form of order in the world is through play. If software becomes a plaything, then its rules are easier to accept. Play facilitates a rule-bound mode of agency. Contemporary forms of capitalism appropriate that form of relating to the rules of software to profit from pleasurable engagement.

Play is a way of relating to rules. Play also requires that the rules that bind agents are accepted voluntarily. Play makes rules valid in a particular point in time, but does not care about the meaning and impact of the rules beyond the activity. The rules of a game are only relevant in the playing of the game, they are only serious in the playing of the game, they are only true in the playing of the game. When digital forms of capitalism turns interactions with software into forms of play, it does so to prevent critical engagement with the infrastructures and apparatuses of oppression required to extract profit (Benjamin, 2019; Eubanks, 2019). This particular instantiation of the ludic can be called playful capitalism.

## Playful Capitalism

So far in this article I have used the concept "digital capitalism" as an umbrella notion that

encompasses platform capitalism, surveillance capitalism, data capitalism, and other forms of capitalism that are inextricable from the pervasive use of software in society (Fuchs, 2019). Without wanting to introduce new terminology, in this section I want to outline the main characteristics of "playful capitalism", understood as the type or modality of capitalism that utilizes play as an instrument to perpetuate its logics of value extraction and exploitation. These characteristics will help situate the appropriation and instrumentalization of play in the axis of interests of capitalism.

The starting point for playful capitalism is Mark Fisher's concept of capitalist realism (Fisher, 2009). This concept describes the social and cultural situation in which capitalism is seen as the only possible economic and political system. In post-fordist societies, alternatives to capitalism are unthinkable, and therefore cultural, social, and political manifestations all take for granted capital as the foundation for society. In his words, "Capitalism is what is left when believes have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics" (p. 4).

In this atmosphere, Fisher identifies the phenomenon of *reflexive impotence* as defining the attitude of subjects to capital: "they know things are bad, but more than that, they know they can't do anything about it. But that 'knowledge', that reflexivity, is not a passive observation of an already existing state of affairs. It is a self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 21). Under capitalist realism, there is a surrender, an acknowledgement of the impossibility of an alternative (or, better, the impossibility of not just imagining but also enacting an alternative), and a certain desire for that alternative not to exist: "Capitalist realism [...] entails subordinating oneself to a reality that is infinitely plastic, capable of reconfiguring itself at any moment" (p. 54).

This form of capitalism draws on control, but a type of control that is accepted in the surrender of its subjects to the inescapable logic of capital: "what needs to be kept in mind is *both* that capitalism is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our co-operation" (p. 14). For capitalist realism to exist, the participation of its subject is imperative. "Control only works if you are complicit with it" (p. 22), and therefore a challenge of capitalist realist technologies is to turn devices of and for control into pleasurable instruments for this complicit behavior.

That is the instrumental role of playing in a capitalist realist atmosphere: to turn control and participation into something pleasurable. Capital turns play into an instrument that camouflages the co-operation with its logics, the reflexive impotence, into a false sense of choice. Because play has been traditionally argued as being a voluntary activity based on a voluntary acceptance of rules, instrumentalizing play for the complicity with capital makes it feel like a voluntary action, like a choice where there was no choice.

Fisher is aware that data collection is an essential element of the capitalist world he is describing. *Capitalist Realism* reflects upon "machineries of self-surveillance" (p. 79) that create and feed the control mechanisms that bind people to capital. Fisher's work is profoundly related to Srnicek's analysis of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017), which he defines as the instantiation of "advanced capitalism [that] came to be centered upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data" (p. 39). Zuboff's notion of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) is akin to platform capitalism: data is extracted from users and commodified. While Zuboff's arguments draw from political theory about democracy, a Foucaultian understanding of power and its structures, and a regulation-driven perspective on privacy, Srnicek's perspective is more concerned with the effects of platform capitalism and its wars for control of resources. This discourse, driven by a rhetoric of manifesto, draws parallels with colonialist critiques, arguing that "far from being mere owners of information, these companies are becoming owners of the infrastructures of society" (p.92). In other words, platforms become empires, which allows me to adopt Srnicek's theory in the context of play. The games of empire are not anymore just "videogames": they are all forms of playable media that platforms use for extracting data.

Digital platforms benefit from data not just as a raw material they can refine and sell, but also in a broader range of functions: "they educate and give competitive advantage to algorithms, they enable the coordination and outsourcing of workers, they allow for the optimization and flexibility of productive processes; they make possible the transformation of low-margin goods into high-margin services; and data analysis is itself generative of data, in a virtuous cycle" (pp. 41-42). That is, the extraction of data is essential for the functioning of platform capitalism, even when it's not just data itself that becomes a product. In the context of playful capitalism, this is critical because "platforms must deploy a range of tactics to ensure that more and more users come on board" (p. 46), and because data extraction must also foster co-operation and complicity with the system to strengthen the notion that there is no alternative to capital.

It is in this context that play is used as an instrument of capital. Play as a form of agency is a tempting instrument for platforms to continue their data extraction through instruments of control that declare the inevitability of capitalism. Play allows for a voluntary acceptance of rules that limits the horizon of reflection, that is situated in the here and now of the play activity, and that rewards that submission with transient, often quantifiable pleasures. Fisher already identified that this system "can be characterized without hyperbole as 'market Stalinism'. What late capitalism repeats from Stalinism is just this valuing of symbols of achievement over actual achievement" (Fisher, 2009, p. 42). The technologies of playful capitalism that allow for value capture and data extraction will use play as a way of rewarding compliance with the platform empire missions of data extraction.

Corporations/platforms that benefit from massive data extraction and processing are pioneers in using gamification and other forms of playable media to exert control over their workers. There is an acknowledgement both from platforms and workers, that labor under these conditions is repetitive, dehumanizing, and tedious. Adding games and other forms of competitive play is supposed to make the tedium of work less burdening. One well known case of data-driven gamification of labor in a platform corporation is that of Amazon warehouses (Statt, 2021; Vincent, 2019).

Amazon is a platform the integrates physical products and a vast infrastructural control over the Internet thanks to its Amazon Web Services products. Amazon is one of the engines of platform capitalism, using data extraction and processing across their physical and digital products to increase revenue. Amazon's usage of data is not restricted to mining their costumers to recommend them products or to resell their data: it is also an instrument for the control of their workers in physical warehouses. Amazon's Prime services, that guarantee deliveries within hours of an order in certain parts of the world, depend on the precision of their warehouse workers filling the orders. The labor conditions of these workers are highly exploitative, with the company allowing them for few breaks and not allowing them to unionize, for example (for a literary approach to Amazon's exploitative work, see Geissler, 2018. An analysis of the exploitative practices can be found in Delfanti, 2021).

Amazon's general policy is to deny accusations of exploitation. However, the company acknowledges that work in their warehouses is tedious and monotonous, and at the same time it needs to be extremely precise to meet the exacting demands of the organization. For these reasons, Amazon started deploying games as instruments to promote efficiency and keep workers engaged. Workers in some Amazon warehouses were encouraged to play some games that would make them compete with others and with themselves in fulfilling their tasks. The rewards for performing well in these games are of course not connected to the economic profit of the corporation. Workers who thrive in these games get tokens of appreciation, amazon-branded gear and, occasionally, electronics (Statt, 2021). Worker exploitation reaches thus a new low: workers are not only forced to work in impossible conditions, they are also encouraged to have "fun" by playing games and competing with each other, but the rewards are not even valuable compensations for the profit their labor generates for the platform.

The idea of finding pleasure in work through play evokes Roy's "banana time" article (Roy, 1959),

but crucially ignores one of the conclusions of that piece. Roy (1959) argued that the creation of social structures in work helped make it more bearable. By structuring the gamification of labor in the warehouse through the use of agonistic, competitive games that have scores and reward individual performance, Amazon also undermines the possibility of collective action, as workers may see each other as competitors and not comrades.

The games played in these warehouses, according to the journalistic reports, are nostalgic reinterpretations of videogames classics, but with a design connected to the fulfilling of their tasks. Nostalgia and gaming are used as interfaces that camouflage the ruthlessness of the data-driven exploitation of workers in Amazon's warehouses. Gamification has been studied widely (Deterding, 2012; Deterding et al., 2011; Lieberoth, 2015; Walz & Deterding, 2015), and it seems to be considered by corporations as a valid instrument for making work more "fun". Amazon's use of these instruments illustrates how (competitive) games, play, and platform capitalism work so well together: Amazon's lifeblood is the data that articulates its businesses. Workers are part of these data streams, and if they are treated as data points, parts of computational processes, a more efficient extraction of value from their labor will be possible. In order to ameliorate this dehumanizing project, and to provide their workers with an illusion of freedom and agency, Amazon uses games as interfaces. A platform's workings become a game, and interacting with its data driven nature becomes a form of play. There is no alternative to the kind of exploitation that Amazon or the other platforms demand – there are only ways of making that exploitation moderately less painful, slightly more entertainment, just a bit more playful.

In the context of platform capitalist realism, play technologies become instruments for control, for data extraction and for algorithmic work. Gamification of labor exploitation provides an obvious example of the appropriation of play by predatory platforms. But playful capitalism is more pervasive and more insidious than this explicit forms of play. In the next section I will present a detailed example of playful capitalism that furthers this argument to the domain of Machine Learning.

## Play as Heteromatic Ghost Work

As new forms of exploitative labor emerge, and as new ways of profiting from people take shape, platforms develop original applications of play to seduce "users" into submitting to its premises.

Artificial Intelligence has become over the first decades of the XXI Century one of the star products of platform capitalism. The development of Machine Learning techniques that allows for the development of systems that can learn on their own, and the availability of massive amounts of data to train those systems thanks to the digitization of society, has created new products and possibilities for economic gains. These Machine Learning systems are only as good as the data they are fed with is, and therefore platforms have become even more hungry in their acquisition of data from users, as that will improve the accuracy of systems designed to eventually rule out workers, from taxi drivers to low level computer programmers.

The data these systems require needs a laborious process of cleaning and preparing. This has led to the creation of a new type of exploitative work – that of the human-in-the-loop who cleans and tags massive amounts of repetitive data so algorithms can be better trained. Gray and Suri (M. L. Gray & Suri, 2019) have defined this phenomenon as "ghost work": "By design, ghost work attempts to strip a job down to its bare necessities: an assignment and a payday. Designers of on-demand labor platforms assume "users" work independently and autonomously. To them, workers are one piece of the bigger puzzle of how to offer goods and services quickly and efficiently to consumers. Digital labor is a means of collecting data to feed into an algorithm or producing content that is good enough, fast enough to meet an urgent deadline." (ibid, p. 122).

In this study of Amazon Mechanical Turk workers, Gray and Suri reveal how the very idea of

Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) helps abstract away the human labor involved in the processing of the data required by these artificial intelligence systems (p. 5). Without ghost work, that is, without the exploitation of humans in the algorithmic look abstracted away by engineers in their systems and by users in the consumption of products, the promises of Machine Learning cannot take place.

Ghost work is a type of exploitative labor that falls under what Ekbia and Nardi (Ekbia & Nardi, 2017) have defined as heteromation: "Heteromation extracts economic value from *uncompesatend* or *low-wage labor*, inciting participation through an intricate set of mechanisms comprised of social and emotional rewards, monetary compensation, and coercion. Generating this value doesn't cost much capital, yet it summons intelligent human labor from the masses across global networks of billions of nodes" (pp. 24-25). Digital capitalism promises software-driven automatic systems that will make work easier and more efficient. However, those systems have become "a critical means by which control and consent are produced and managed" (p. 14).

Ekbia and Nardi describe instances in which digital systems extract "economic value from *uncompensated* or *low-wage labor*, inciting participation through an intricate set of mechanisms comprised of social and emotional rewards, monetary compensation, and coercion. Digital capital profits from the labor of gamers, of social media participants, of content creators in platforms like YouTube, of citizen scientists, extracting economic value without rewarding or even acknowledging their labor.

Platform capitalism thrives thanks to heteromatic ghost work: low-wage repetitive work that is abstracted away, hidden behind the alleged benefits of the software systems that it powers: "the person and the person's labor disappear; only the output – the computation- is present, revealing once again the marginal character of persons performing heteromatic labor" (p. 114). In order to make this dehumanizing work more endearing, designers of these platforms resort to playfulness to abstract the very nature of heteromatic ghost work. Their argument would be that it cannot be work if you are playing, even if "playing" is just performing repetitive labor. Ekbia and Nardi identify the "play" in social media as a form of labor (pp. 49 – 50), as well as the need for stimulation through entertainment these platforms require (pp. 167-168). In these cases, play is used as an instrument to hide the nature of heteromatic ghost work.

Let's look more closely at an example of heteromation through play. In May 2017, Google launched a web-based game called *Quick, Draw!* (*Quick, Draw! By Google Creative Lab | Experiments with Google*, 2017) The release was first only noticed within the community of AI researchers, but it soon took off and became an overnight viral sensation. The premise of the game is simple: players receive a prompt commanding them to draw something under 20 seconds, for example a bicycle. While players clumsily doodle on their computers, the game is trying to guess what the object being drawn is. A round consists of 6 challenges, and once the round is over, players can see their results, and even inquire on how the neural network powering the game figured out from the doodle what the challenge was.

*Quick, draw!* is an impressive piece of game design and technology. The neural network that powers the game is capable of recognizing a vast number of objects within few seconds, and playing this game is actually quite entertaining. The speed with which the drawings are recognized feels magical, furthering the enchantment discourse (Campolo & Crawford, 2020) that is so prevalent around AI and Machine Learning. *Quick, draw!* is a part of what Google has called A.I. Experiments (https://experiments. withgoogle.com/collection/ai), quirky explorations of what contemporary Artificial Intelligence can do, exemplified through different types of playful and playable media.

While these AI experiments are fascinating and show the creative promises of computational technology, they also serve another purpose – one that is intertwined with the platform capitalist goals of Google. As I have presented earlier in the article, Machine Learning systems are enormously data hungry, requiring correctly tagged data in order to properly perform their function. Tagging the data is a laborious manual operation that is prone to conscious and unconscious errors (Eubanks, 2019; Noble, 2018; O'Neil, 2017). This is the task often given to mechanical turkers and other forms of heteromatic ghost workers.

But there are other ways of labelling data to create valuable datasets.

Some time after the release of *Quick, draw!*, Google made public the dataset extracted from the game (https://github.com/googlecreativelab/quickdraw-dataset). While the ethos of releasing the data to the public for free deserves some commendation, the dataset itself shows how the apparently harmless game was used to classify and tag doodle data. This process is labor, camouflaged as play. Without properly labelled datasets, Machine Learning is useless. But a well-structured dataset can be priceless – a dataset that for example would power systems that help recognize drawings hastily made with computers. The path to product of this doodle dataset is clear, as it can power note-taking productivity software, for example.

Players of *Quick, draw!* were not just "playing", they were performing ghost work. Without their playful engagement with this neural network, the system itself would not exist, and the dataset that can power commercial products would not exist. This is a form of heteromatic ghost work that uses play interactions to make the processes of making platform capitalist products possible a question of game-like enjoyment. There is nothing ethically wrong in playing *Quick, draw!*, but it should be explicit that this game is more than just "a game", it is a platform for labor extraction.

Gamification wants to make work pleasurable. Forms of heteromatic ghost work like *Quick, draw!* make playable media into labor extraction practices. In this way, they are a more insidious instrumentalization of play, a form of "ghost play" that hides extraction labor practices under the appearance of games and other playable media. *Quick, draw!* is almost naively blatant about this, but the use of playable media to gather data that can be commercialized by platforms is extended everywhere. Videogames profile users while they play, being able to provide their products for free since it's the data that's valuable (Nieborg, 2021). Social media platforms are not just gamified, but draw on lessons from games and play design to make their products more engaging (David & Cambre, 2016; Garda & Karhulahti, 2021). In the age of data platforms, playable media has become another extractive technology for the profit of the corporation.

Play makes platforms pleasurable, and makes workers of all players. The case of *Quick, draw!* illustrates a way in which play is used as an instrument of capital. This should not be however the dismal conclusion of this article's reflections. There is more to play and playable media than being an instrument for capitalist realism, and there are reasons to end this piece with a note of hope.

## Final remarks

In *The Utopia of Rules*, David Graeber writes: "Games allow us our only real experience of a situation where all this ambiguity is swept away. Everyone knows exactly what the rules are. And not only that, people actually do follow them. And by following them, it is even possible to win! This—along with the fact that unlike in real life, one has submitted oneself to the rules completely voluntarily—is the source of the pleasure. Games, then, are a kind of utopia of rules". (Graeber, 2016, p. 191). These are the games, and the play, that platform capitalism instrumentalizes; a form of engaging with platforms that eliminates ambiguity, rewards actions, and calls for voluntary submission in exchange of pleasure.

Graeber takes then the argument in a different direction: "What ultimately lies behind the appeal of bureaucracy is fear of play" (*ibid*, p. 193). Graeber argues that play is freedom, and that freedom is often at odds with order, rules, and submission to production. Play in this way stands against the rigidness of control and the threats of violence of modern bureaucracies. Drawing on the same tradition of play that informs Schechner's dark play (Schechner, 1988), Graeber defends play as a counterbalance to the forms of order of contemporary capitalism, echoing the anarchist tradition in play studies (Black, n.d.; Cantine, 1947; de Acosta, 2008; Ogo & Dejerk, 2008; Simons, n.d.).

This article draws hope from a different place. Argentinian philosopher María Lugones wrote a piece on play and playfulness that provides a new vocabulary to think about play. Lugones dispatches

briefly the classic, dominant tradition of play studies: "The agonistic traveler is a conqueror, an imperialist. Huizinga, in his classic book on play, interprets Western civilization as play […] Western civilization has been interpreted by a white western man as play in the agonistic sense of play. Huizinga reviews western law, art, and many other aspects of western culture and sees agon in all of them. Agonistic playfulness leads those who attempt to travel to another 'world' with this attitude to failure […] so, the agonistic attitude, the playful attitude given western man's construction of playfulness, is not a healthy, loving attitude to have in travelling across worlds" (Lugones, 1987, pp. 15-16).

For Lugones, the destructive playfulness of western white men is that of order and competition. In the context of this article, it is that play which is used to extract labor and submit people to algorithmic systems. Lugones provides us with an alternative, though: "The playfulness that gives meaning to our activity includes uncertainty, but in this case the uncertainty is an *openness to surprise*. This is a particular metaphysical attitude that does not expect the world to be neatly packaged, ruly. Rules may fail to explain what we are doing […] we may not have rules, and when we do have rules, there are no rules that are to us sacred" (*ibid*, p. 16).

A key element in Lugones' philosophy is the capacity to travel across worlds that are inhabited by others, "a way of identifying with them […] because by travelling to their 'world' we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (*ibid*, p. 17). That loving world travelling requires a form of playfulness that is dominated by curiosity, laughter, "openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or reconstruction of the 'worlds' we inhabit playfully" (ibid, p. 17).

There is a form of play, then, that may not be able to be reduced to an instrument of capital. A form of play that acknowledges the existence of other worlds we can travel to and attempt to understand ourselves and others. Platform capitalism presents technological development as a desired imperative, one in which we are individually mined for data, and playfully encouraged to produce more data and to work for the platform. There are no other words in the capitalist realism of platforms.

Lugones' play encourages us to look beyond the logic of quantified pleasures of digital capitalistic playfulness, and to find others in worlds where rules are unimportant, where what matters is the relation to those others, the loving travel to those worlds. In an interview with *Logic* magazine (Haraway, 2019), Donna Haraway gives play a central role in finding new possibilism: "through playful engagement with each other, we get a hint about what can still be and learn how to make it stronger". Platform capitalism thrives in reducing the horizon of humanity to the reality of inescapable capital. Play gives a way of meeting others, of learning and identifying their worlds, of acting together breaking the rules that are given and making other rules. Play is not just the proposal of alternative ideas: play is the acting on other ideas, the acting with others, the assertion of what can be. This form of world-travelling play thrives in the possible, breaks the grim realism of capital, and gives possible spaces for other worlds to come to be.

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