The desert of the ideal: neoliberalism, technomasculinity and the precarious dream of working with video games

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Abstract

This review addresses the book *A Precarious Game: The Illusion of Dream Jobs in the Video Game Industry*, by Ergin Bulut, released in English in 2020. It is a study on the inner workings of the video game industry, based on an ethnographic immersion in an american company, to which Bulut gives the pseudonym *Desire*. The author examines the kinds of work that sustain the company, that starts in the independent market, but is soon acquired by a larger corporation. The scope of the analysis extends beyond the walls of *Desire*: it reverberates in the domestic environments of workers and in gender inequality; in the necessity of outsourcing precarious work to countries in the Global South; and in the perpetuation of values of fun and escapism, based on white technomasculinity and on neoliberal competitive individualism.

Keywords

The field of game studies, during much of its infancy, traced an imaginary line in its territory: its priority would be to approach narratives, mechanics, conceptual and categorical questions that related to games as artifacts (or as a practice). Beyond this line, a series of phenomena remained largely ignored, material elements that acted (and act) as causes and/or consequences of the existence of the video game industry. More recently, however, these phenomena have crossed this imaginary threshold. This is the case of studies on the explicitly political dimension of games, expressed by gender issues, such as those raised by #GamerGate[1] (Shaw, 2012; Mortensen, 2016); race, such as those found in the close relationship between gamers and the alt-right[2] supremacist movement (Russworm, 2019; Trammell, 2020); and, especially since the influential Games of Empire (2009), the association between game studies and research methods and agendas related to labor, economics and social justice (Roberts, 2018; Mitchell, 2018; Woodcock, 2020).

These contributions stand out from the vast literature centered on the ontology and categorization of games, turning instead to the material conditions surrounding the conception, production, distribution, and consumption of these fictional, symbolic, and computational contents. After all, isn't it impossible to propose that the daily dynamics inside corporations, the lives of workers who depend on them and the concrete work process to which they are submitted would not influence the content of the games we play? How can one suppose that ideological vectors, coming from capitalists, workers and even amateurs would not infect this space, conditioning its productive output? It is exactly in this controversy that the book *A precarious game: The illusion of dream jobs in the video game industry*, by Ergin Bulut, is positioned.

The main mission of Bulut's work is to unravel the logic hidden in the bowels of the video game industry, specifically in the labor dynamics traced in a relatively successful game studio, to which he gives the pseudonym Desire. The dream of working with games, like every idealization, is a diffuse projection, in which a creative and fulfilling craft – maybe even a fun one - is imagined. Behind this illusion, the research reveals mechanisms for restraining the agency of developers, structures of domestication of the worker and the spillover of harmful effects that travel beyond the work environment, reaching the mental health of individuals and their personal lives. Finally, Bulut reveals how this machine fits into an assembly line on a global scale, which finds itself hostage to the unstable fluctuations of financial capital and which depends on the even more precarious work of companies in the Global South.

In the first chapter, Bulut sets the foundations to think   about game production as a ludopolitical[3] phenomenon. His goal is to cross the abstract limit that understands production as an economic activity of pure exchange, unearthing the cultural and social layers that condition this production. More than that, Bulut explores how the construction of videogames itself is necessarily linked to the cultivation of feelings, affections and ideas, that is, to an immaterial work (Lazzarato, 1996). The aspiration to carry out such work involves not only monetary (material) gains, but it operates as a generative dimension of the gamer

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[1] The #GamerGate subject is explored in detail, for example, in the work of Torill Mortensen (2016), but, in short, it was a coordinated movement marked by attacks and hate speech set in the context of gamer culture and directed against minorities, especially women, between 2014 and 2015.

[2] The American alternative right, as a neo-Nazi and supremacist movement, emerges throughout the 2010s and draws several connections with gamer culture and with the election of Donald Trump.

[3] The author uses the same term found in the book "Ludopolitics", by Liam Mitchell. In an endnote, however, Bulut draws attention to the distinct applications that both authors make of the same word: Mitchell focuses on the technocultural characteristics of game consumption, while Bulut focuses his analysis on the ethnographic examination of the productive and labor relations of the industry. However, we propose that a reading of either appropriations, in a global ludopolitical combination, is not only possible but necessary.

identity in these workers - an identity that, for Bulut, cannot be separated from the predominance of white men in Desire, a condition that presents them with the privilege of dreaming. The dream, however, when it comes true, acts only as a coating for exploration:

> Capitalism has always produced inequalities, but the field of video game production presents a distinct form of inequality, since the affect of love and social glamor make it a highly desirable job where work looks and feels more like play. The love and glamor of game production is so strong that developers – both aspiring and actual – can barely see and acknowledge the inequalities involved in making games. Inequalities are made invisible because play, as a central activity to humanity, implies freedom. (Bulut, 2020, p. 30)

These inequalities support the ideal of working at play, which requires that certain more precarious stages of work be exported to studios in the Global South, a common practice adopted by Desire and companies of similar size. Even within the company base, there are minor inequalities, such as the contrast between directorships and testers (a theme detailed in the sixth chapter of the book). In this sense, in the second chapter, Bulut focuses on the acquisition of Desire by a large distributor, Digital Creatives. The acquisition brings funding and comfort to developers, but on the other hand it imposes bureaucratic constraints and marketing requirements. Bulut aligns himself within a Marxist perspective, inspired by authors such as Harry Braverman (1974) and Bill Ryan (1992), who disprove the notion that the emergence of computerized and digitized white-collar work would mean the end of alienation. On the contrary, the case in point suggests that the way in which surplus value is exploited finds its ideal operation precisely after the acquisition of Desire by an overarching company, which operates globally.

Incredibly, financial stability (which is supposed to be the culmination of the dream of a group of game designers that started from the bottom) calls into question several other mechanisms necessary for the original internal dynamics of Desire. Among them is the phenomenon of technomasculinity (Johnson, 2018), a set of codes based on white masculinity and, in this case, on the meritocratic myth of the "self-made" game developer. Acquisition makes the environment stable, but undermines this ideal, since even though they are still armed with creative freedom, the power over the means of production and financial decisions is further removed from the workers, even those in decisive positions. Thus, in the third chapter, Ergin Bulut demonstrates the external effects caused by the acquisition, specifically in the role played by Desire's repositioning in the revitalization of an island in the American Midwest. It becomes increasingly clear the supporting character of workers amid an economic scheme whose scale surpasses their agency.

In the fourth chapter, which is based on interviews with workers, the book addresses the processing and measurement of immaterial labor, an inherent part of the production of games - a corporate demand whose practical consequences come disguised as actions designed to promote well-being in the work environment. Thus, the company becomes kind of a playground, and workers are encouraged to establish affective and communicative bonds with each other. Finally, the work schedule is made flexible, which in practice means that any moment can be used to rest - but on the other hand any moment can suddenly demand work. The workers go through an adaptation phase, trying to attend the need to become "creative", which involves creating a subjectivity based on proactivity, cruel optimism (Berlant, 2007) and love for work. However, this subjectivity is not - and this is a crucial point of Ergin Bulut's research - a forced result of an imposition that comes from the upper corporate layers and from big Capital. On the contrary, it is actively built by workers themselves, even inside their homes.

The fifth chapter delves into this very space, examining the impacts of technomasculinity inherent in the work of game developers on their marital and domestic relationships. Bulut interviews the wives of workers, in order to demonstrate the affective work of women and how their performance in the domestic environment supports the affective work of the developers in the studio. The flexibilization of working hours mentioned above is only possible at the expense of disturbances in couples' private lives, which

leads to the intensification of women's work: taking care of the children during crunch periods, cooking for their husbands and co-workers and even bringing food to the company in periods of intense work. For Bulut, "These activities reduce the costs that would have otherwise been undertaken by the studio. Such activities also ideologically reproduce the heterosexual family. Perhaps most importantly, these reproductive activities normalize the technomasculine work ethic and discourses of passion in the video game industry" (Bulut, 2020, p. 106).

In the sixth chapter, Bulut focuses on the playbour of testers, its ideological dimension, also based on cruel optimism, which sells its repetitive and boring testing activities as a gateway to break into an affective industry. Although the precariousness of labor is a fact even for directors in higher positions in Desire - since the company's submission to the rules of the financial market brings with it constant instability - the case of testers is especially serious. In addition to the exhausting nature of their activity and the unpredictability of work hours, their situation in the company is always uncertain, and the QA (quality assurance) department to which they belong is the first to suffer cuts in times of crisis. As the weakest and least qualified members of this food chain, they are always the first to be devoured.

Finally, in the seventh and last chapter, the author reports his findings based on following meetings and events that take place during an economic crisis of the publisher Digital Creatives, which had previously acquired Desire. The corporation's bad financial situation, even if Desire was doing fine, led to budget cuts and layoffs, initially in the QA sector, but soon in the creative sector, Desire's core team of developers. Thus, Bulut proposes a reflection on how precariousness at higher levels of labor, rather than being ignored, should motivate a reflection on its meaning in the full range of the production chain. In other words, when precarious labor dynamics affect creative directors and developers, it reverberates in testers, in foreign workers from the Global South and, finally, reveals the inherent instability of the production system in which this circuit is inserted.

Ergin Bulut ends his work by addressing the important issue of unionization of professionals in the area, which is viewed in a biased way by developers. Bulut detects that the workers seem to individualize the negative repercussions of the unfair hierarchy that bankrupts Digital Creatives and puts all Desire's workers in a critical situation. Workers ignore the global and collective dimensions intrinsic to the failure of their undertaking. Despite that, the author emphasizes that such ideological barriers are contested by recent unionization initiatives, such as the one brought about by the Game Workers Unite[4] movement, a sign that resistance to neoliberal logic finds some fuel in the face of contradictions that are expressed with increasing power in the world of work.

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[4] Game Workers Unite is a collective organization of video game industry workers that aims to collectivize and organize labor in the area, with specific divisions for several countries, including Brazil.

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